Mixed Migration Centre

Mixed Migration Review 2024

Highlights • Interviews • Essays • Data

Migration politics, migration narratives and public opinions in 2024 – the year of elections

Front cover photo credit:

The front cover is a collage of images used throughout this MMR to convey the sense of multiple election events occurring across the world during 2024 and subject to our reporting, analysis and commentary. Individual images are credited where they are represented.

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Contents

This review was compiled between early April and 6 November 2024. Although some sections of this review specifically reference Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election (5 November), other sections were written – or interviews conducted – prior to the election, and are included as they were originally written.

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Section 4: Resisting or normalising the extreme?

Photo credit: Matias Lynch / Shutterstock

Argentina: Javier Gerardo Milei has been serving as the president of Argentina since December 2023. Milei is known for his flamboyant personality, distinctive style and strong media presence. He has been described politically as a right-wing populist and right-wing libertarian, who supports laissez-faire economics but is not anti-migrant. Indeed, Argentina has been welcoming of Venezuelan refugees and, in September 2024, the National Directorate of Migration decided to facilitate the regularisation and residence of Venezuelan nationals in Argentina, as well as those expected to arrive in the remaining months of the year (90 days).

Foreword

The year 2024 has been host to many elections worldwide. More than 100 countries from around the world, home to nearly half of the global population, have been electing their representatives.

When hardline migration issues take centre stage, it rarely leads to positive outcomes for refugees and migrants, who are among the most marginalised and maligned populations.

Their prominence in the political debate often translates into alarmist predictions of unmanageable movements and strong narratives of crisis and threats. These frequently include promises of closed borders, deportations, reduced arrivals and the cutting down on the rights of people seeking safety and protection.

Politicians, candidates and political parties around the world have engaged in deliberate and orchestrated hate speech campaigns targeting refugees and migrants, who are made to be the scapegoats for the economic crisis, rising crime, unemployment and social tension. These unfounded perceptions are then regularly reinforced both by mainstream media and online news sources, leading to detrimental consequences for refugees and migrants.

For example, in anticipation of the presidential elections in Tunisia and with an eye on accelerating the ongoing negotiations with the EU and Italy for financial support to 'tackle migration', a violent episode of hate speech in early 2023 against sub-Saharan migrants[1] led to immediate acts of violence, generalised discrimination, evictions from homes and loss of livelihoods. Abuses of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees have continued throughout the election year, with reported arbitrary arrests, evictions and deportations into desert areas on the Libyan and Algerian borders.

The consequences of the politicisation of asylum and migration were equally devastating for Rohingya refugees escaping violence in Myanmar by sea and arriving on the shores of Aceh, Indonesia. In advance of the presidential elections early in the year and following an increase in sea arrivals in late 2023, a well-choreographed online smear campaign[2], portraying Rohingya as 'ungrateful, a drain on resources and a danger to local people',[3] incited violence against Rohingya refugees and resulted in physical attacks, pushbacks and forced relocations.

Migration was also a salient topic in national elections to the European Parliament[4] in June across EU Member States including France, Italy, Austria, Germany, Poland and the Netherlands. The elections resulted in a strengthened anti-migration agenda in the political groups in parliaments and in many member states, jeopardising the backing of the recently adopted EU Pact on Migration and Asylum[5] – a reform package aimed at establishing a common asylum system.

The start of the EU's new legislative cycle can again be summarised by policy discussions increasingly focused on reforms and even more restrictive migration policies, instead of prioritising the much-needed attention to human rights compliance and implementation.

In this year of elections, the need for a balanced perspective on mixed migration – one that can inspire policy choices and directions based on principles, values and solidarity – is clear. National governments hold the keys to the safety of their populations, as well as of those seeking refuge or opportunities on their territory, including safeguarding the fundamental right to seek asylum.

Tough measures on migration based on a 'threat' narrative may win votes, but the shifting of blame and scapegoating does not tackle domestic and regional challenges long-term. Rather, it adds fuel to the fire and contributes to instilling unnecessary fear and insecurity in the public.

We need our representatives to lead and inspire a positive long-term vision of global mobility. We need a balanced policy debate on the challenges as well as the positive benefits that mobility brings to our societies. We need visionary, brave narratives and policies that embrace and normalise mobility rather than frame it as a problem and a threat.

This year's Mixed Migration Review is an impressive repository of evidence-based insights and updates from across the world. With its consistent and comprehensive data and analysis, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) continues to offer us all the

1 Amnesty International (2023) Tunisia: President's racist speech incites a wave of violence against Black Africans.
2 UNHCR (2023) UNHCR disturbed over mob attack and forced eviction of refugees in Aceh, Indonesia.
3 Ratcliffe, R., & Syakriah, A. (2024) The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees. The Guardian.
4 Horwood, C., & Forin, R. (2024) Hard winds coming: Impacts of the EU elections for mixed migration. Mixed Migration Centre.
5 European Commission (2024) Pact on Migration and Asylum.

opportunity to see through the many layers of politics that distort, skew and manipulate facts and figures of human mobility for short-term political gains.

Mobility is fundamental to human life and will continue to be so. The way we choose to receive those forced to seek safety and opportunities elsewhere defines us as fellow human beings and as societies. Let our way be one of compassion and solidarity rather than one of fear and dehumanisation.

Charlotte Slente,
DRC Secretary General

Photo credit: Guayo Fuentes / Shutterstock

El Salvador: Elections in El Salvador in February and March 2024 were relevant to migration. The incumbent Nayib Bukele was re-elected as president in a huge landslide of popularity, partly derived from his iron-fist approach to crime. El Salvador has been a typical, crime- and gang-infested Central American country from which millions of citizens are fleeing, primarily migrating north to claim asylum in the US. It remains to be seen if crime reduction will result in fewer people wanting to leave. [See *Thematic snapshot: Punitive populism: a solution to displacement and flight in the Northern Triangle? The case of El Salvador* on page 227]

Introduction

In 2024, the highest number of elections in recent history took place globally, with almost half of the world going to the ballots. Across many regions, migration has become a key issue on the agenda in political, public and media debate, particularly in Europe and the United States, and it is increasingly instrumentalised by populist leaders and political actors (see page 168).

At the heart of this year's Mixed Migration Review (MMR), therefore, is a critical examination of the role of migration in politics, how migration narratives are being shaped and how this affects migration policymaking. Social media and mainstream media have become powerful tools in framing migration not just as a policy issue but as a divisive societal one. Different migration narratives (see page 194), sometimes very detached from reality and evidence, are influencing public opinion in profound ways, often fuelling fear, xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment, consequently driving more restrictive and inhumane policies.

A continuing trend in 2024 is the securitisation and deterrence of migration. More governments are resorting to border fortifications, detention and questionable migration deals with third countries – a tactic that is often sold as a pragmatic solution but that comes at an immense human and moral cost. These deals, frequently with nations that lack the capacity or will to ensure basic human rights protections – and instigated by nations increasingly more than willing to turn a blind eye to gross violations as long as migrant arrivals remain low – have raised ethical concerns and legal challenges, and they pose the risk of serious human rights abuses.

The EU's agreements with countries in North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Australia's offshoring policies, are prime examples of this increasingly common practice. These partnerships, in effect, externalise migration control and often expose migrants to harsh and inhumane conditions, far from the reach of the public eye.

As always, the MMR compiles a list of all the unacceptable and previously unimaginable actions and policies against migrants in the annual *Normalising the extreme* section (see page 264). When we started this series five years ago as part of the MMR, we introduced it by referring to the Overton Window, an analytical concept to describe the acceptable range of political discourse and actions in a society, which crops out ideas deemed so controversial that they will not be taken seriously. But the Overton Window continues to shift, allowing formerly fringe ideas and radical actions to fall within its frame as they become more and more acceptable. The key question is: can we also halt this daily erosion of moral standards and shift it back? While there are signs of possible changes due to some election results, where far-right, anti-migration parties scored less than expected, sadly, there seems to be little reason for optimism.

Persistent myths continue to dominate media debates, political speech and even policymaking. This year's report, therefore, includes data from 60,000 surveys with migrants conducted through MMC's 4Mi programme (see page 210) which clearly dispels some of these myths – for example, on the role of smugglers in people's decision to migrate, the extent to which a generous asylum system is a pull-factor or the role of climate change in international mobility. However, the big question remains: why, despite so much available knowledge and evidence on migration, does so little of it find its way into policy? The answer probably brings us back to the overarching theme of this MMR: it's the politics.

Are there recipes against the detrimental influence of politics on rational and humane policy development on migration? We can take some inspiration from initiatives at the local and city level, especially those democratic innovations where citizens are much more actively involved in policy development and decision-making, rather than just casting one vote once every few years (see page 181). In our current democratic system, it is clear that certain politicians and populist political parties fare well by keeping migration high on the agenda (see page 179) and maintaining the idea of a constant migration and asylum crisis – or, at least, the perception of a crisis – rather than working towards actual solutions, as it is exactly what gives them legitimacy and votes at the next election. To paraphrase the Austrian writer Karl Kraus, who warned about fake news more than a century ago: "Politicians lie to journalists and then believe these lies when they see them in print."

It is this toxic feedback loop between far-right politics, (social) media and the general public which continues to distort reality and makes migration such a polemical and salient topic. Ultimately, this has dramatic real-life consequences for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers all over the world.

In Europe, the Migration and Asylum Pact was designed after years of negotiations to create a more unified approach to asylum and migration. While it promised reform, it also exemplifies long-standing debates about

asylum, border control and the role of the EU in managing mixed migration. Just in the last few months of 2024, for example, we have seen the new government of the Netherlands asking to opt out of migration regulations in Europe (similar to Denmark), swiftly followed by Hungary – very aware this is impossible without an amendment to the European Treaty – and trying to declare a crisis regulation to bypass parliament and derogate from the law to take stringent migration and asylum measures (see page 100). In the UK, anti-immigration riots broke out all over the country during the summer (see page 165).

In France, migration dominated the European Parliament elections and led to an unprecedented win for the far-right Rassemblement National party. France's new Home Affairs minister suggested re-opening EU negotiations on the migration pact and reforming Schengen, with a possible return to permanent border controls, while Germany actually reinstated border controls with all nine neighbours and, effectively, suspended Schengen until Europe's external borders are strengthened (see page 179).

Paradoxically, these constant efforts to reduce migration take place against the backdrop of rapidly ageing societies, with many countries in the Global North facing severe labour shortages. In order to keep their economies going – and growing – many countries need migrants more than ever. Many, even those taking a profound hardline stance against migration, actually bring in large numbers of labour migrants, but with as little publicity as possible.

Clearly, politicians in many countries struggle to balance their economic and labour policies with a perceived need for harsh anti-migration policies (see page 230). Interestingly, opinion polls often show that migration is not even such an important issue for voters, especially not at a personal level, and in many countries the general public has even become more positive about migration in recent years – a finding that stands in sharp contrast with voting behaviour (see page 244). This raises several questions: is the public really negative about migration and are politicians simply responding to those sentiments? Or are certain politicians actively fueling negative feelings and reaping electoral gains by keeping migration challenges high on the agenda, while doing little to solve them (also blaming failures on flawed policies and the migrants themselves)? It is a question we engage with throughout the report, though it's hard to provide a conclusive answer.

Elsewhere in the world, war and conflict, persecution, poverty, a lack of freedom and opportunities and persistent inequality continue to lead to the displacement and migration of millions of people, mainly within regions (see the *Keeping track* sections throughout the report for a full overview of all migration developments in the past year). Sudan's largely forgotten war created new mass displacement within the country and across its borders, with people fleeing into neighbouring countries, exacerbating fragile situations in places that already host large numbers of refugees. Similarly, Southeast Asia continues to grapple with irregular migration, as economic drivers, organised smuggling networks and underemployment in origin countries create dangerous routes and new vulnerabilities for migrants. In the Americas, millions are on the move – the United States alone expects 2.4 million encounters on its southern border with Mexico, with migrants in the region navigating constantly and rapidly changing US migration policies and regulations, where the outcome of the November presidential elections will have profound implications for migration policies across the continent.

The war in Ukraine continues to displace many Ukrainians within their country and into the EU, while most people in Gaza have been displaced multiple times over the past year, but have no escape against the relentless lethal attacks by Israel and remain trapped in a war zone surrounded by closed borders. The rapid escalation of the situation in the Middle East, after Israel's attacks on and invasion of Lebanon, in addition to immense human suffering, creates even further displacement and migration throughout, and potentially out of, the region.

In this rather bleak and gruesome context, it is crucial we continue to look for glimmers of hope and positive change, as we always do in the annual *Resisting the extreme* section (see page 274). Equally, we must keep giving space to new voices and ideas, particularly those from young people and from outside the Global North. As every year, this MMR features five essays from young writers from the Global South who won our annual essay competition.

Throughout the report, interviews with policymakers, UN leaders, academics and activists aim to further enrich and spark the migration debate, while a series of *Thematic snapshots* (starting on page 36) provide rapid updates on a range of timely topics, from German migration politics to the Darién Gap and the politics in El Salvador.

Finally, as always, we need to keep in mind the consequences of migration politics, policies and narratives on the lives of migrants. This year's *Migrant stories* series (starting on page 35) captures the experiences and political perceptions of migrants in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, providing a human dimension to the statistics. They also remind us of the resilience, courage and dignity of those who embark on perilous journeys in search of safety or a better life.

As we reflect on all these trends and challenges towards the end of 2024, one thing remains clear: the global

migration system is at a crossroads. Narratives around migration, shaped by media and politics, have real-world impacts, influencing both the public perception and the policies that follow.

In 2024, our shared responsibility is to challenge misinformation, push back against inhumane migration policies, and advocate for a system that recognises the rights and dignity of all people on the move and offers actual solutions to challenges around irregular migration and integration. Migration is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be rationally managed with humanity, fairness and compassion.

Bram Frouws, Director, Mixed Migration Centre

Photo credit: Israel Gutierrez / Shutterstock

Mexico: Claudia Sheinbaum of the left-leaning Morena party won the country's election with more than 58 percent of the presidential vote, making history as Mexico's first female president. In the country, the issue of migration is both politicised and securitised. Mexico has recently become a major country of destination for significant numbers of asylum seekers and migrants and is under continual pressure from the US to enforce border control along its Northern Border. [See *Alternative perspective* essays (on Mexico) on page 140 and page 143].

Introduction to the Mixed Migration Centre

What is the MMC?

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.

What is MMC's mission?

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

What is MMC's vision?

Migration policies, responses and public debate are based on credible evidence and nuanced understanding of mixed migration, placing human rights and protection of all people on the move at the centre.

What are MMC's objectives?

- To contribute to a better, more nuanced and balanced understanding of mixed migration (knowledge)
- To contribute to evidence-based and better-informed migration policies and debates (policy)
- To contribute to effective evidence-based protection responses for people on the move (programming)

What is MMC's relationship with the Danish Refugee Council?

The MMC is part of and is governed by DRC. While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis, and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector. The position of the MMC does not necessarily reflect that of DRC and vice versa.

Where does MMC work?

The MMC focuses on six regions: Eastern and Southern Africa; Egypt & Yemen; North Africa; West Africa, Europe; Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean. The 45 staff members of MMC are based in Europe and, mainly, in its regional and country offices in Africa, Asia and Latin America, where they work in close cooperation with regional partners, stakeholders and donors. Through MMC's global data collection programme 4Mi, approximately 165 enumerators collect data on mixed migration in over 20 countries across different migration routes globally, conducting approximately 15,000 in-depth interviews with migrants on the move annually.

For more information on MMC visit our website mixedmigration.org, follow us at @Mixed_Migration or write to us at info@mixedmigration.org.

Who supports MMC?

The Mixed Migration Review 2024 builds upon the work by the various MMC regional hubs and 4Mi data collection projects, supported by a wide range of donors, including (between mid-2023 and December 2024): Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO), Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Horizon Europe, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), the Maghreb Action on Displacement and Rights (MADAR), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), United States Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), Regional Support Office of the Bali Process (RSO), Robert Bosch Stiftung, Save the Children, Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), the United Kingdom Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Photo credit: PradeepGaurs / Shutterstock

India: In elections in India between April and June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a third term but lost an outright majority and was forced to form a coalition government for the first time. The BJP has been criticised for being a populist and nationalist party with anti-Muslim attitudes and policies.

Photo credit: Jean-Marc Richard / Shutterstock

France: In France, this year, immigration and identity ideas of nationality were also at the top of the agenda. In the June EU elections, President Emmanuel Macron's alliance suffered a huge defeat by the far-right, anti-migrant National Rally (RN) led by Marine Le Pen, leading him to call a sudden election in early July. Although the RN was comfortably ahead in the snap election's first round, the rapidly-formed left-wing New Popular Front alliance and Macron's centrist coalition thwarted a far-right victory, with RN coming in third.

Section 1

Regions on the move

This section of the 2024 Mixed Migration Review is divided into different regions, presenting reports, interviews, *Migrant stories* and *Thematic snapshots* of important issues relating to mixed migration in Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, Europe and Asia. Each segment begins with a *Keeping track* section, which provides an overview of noteworthy events, developments and policies in mixed migration during the year. The featured interviews offer the perspectives of academics and practitioners speaking out strongly on contemporary immigration issues. The *Thematic snapshots* focus on specific topics, such as mass displacement within and out of Sudan; the latest displacement crisis in Lebanon; how *megabanda* gangs are preying on migrants and refugees in the Americas; how populists in The Netherlands maintain a perpetual political crisis around immigration and, lastly, irregular migration dynamics in Southeast Asia.

Africa

Overview

Peter Grant

The number of migrants reaching Italy and Spain from Africa has dropped significantly during 2024, but migration continues to be a major preoccupation in Europe, reflected in the development of new agreements with Egypt and Mauritania around managing irregular movement. The latter, in particular, has become increasingly important as the primary point of embarkation for the busy West Africa-Atlantic route: a journey that not only accounts for tens of thousands of arrivals in the Canary Islands, but also hundreds of deaths and disappearances along the way. Across the Central Mediterranean, meanwhile, movement appears to have reduced significantly, as the Libyan and Tunisian coastguards continue to intercept and return migrant vessels.

The outbreak of new conflicts, in particular the catastrophic civil war in Sudan, has resulted in the displacement of millions of people internally and across borders into neighbouring countries. Many of these crises, stretching across from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR) to the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, are mutually entangled through complex movements of large refugee and returnee populations that, in many cases, are contributing to deepening humanitarian emergencies. The impacts of climate change and environmental stress, ranging from drought to flooding, are also driving intercommunal violence and forced migration, as water and other resources become scarcer.

Irregular migration to Europe

Mixed migration from Africa to Europe typically follows three main routes. For some years, the Central Mediterranean route connecting **Libya** or Tunisia (with smaller numbers leaving from Algeria) to Italy, has been the dominant one. This has generally been followed by the Western Mediterranean route from **Morocco** to Spain, either by crossing from the coast to the Spanish mainland or the Balearic Islands, or crossing by land or water into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla bordering Morocco. Then, there is the Western Africa-Atlantic route, generally running from the western coast of the continent – including Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, **Senegal** and **The Gambia** – to the Canary Islands. There has also been growing attention on the Western Indian Ocean route, running from **Madagascar** on one side, and East Africa and the Great Lakes on the other, with migrants transiting from or through Comoros to the French territory of Mayotte.

Despite numbers dropping since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, movement from Africa to Europe has increased steadily in the subsequent years, reaching a peak of almost 216,000 registered arrivals in Italy and Spain in 2023. However, in 2024, the total is only a fraction of what was recorded in the previous year, with a little under 81,000 as of 8 September.[1] The picture, nonetheless, is much more mixed when disaggregated by route. While, in the case of Italy, the number of sea arrivals in the first eight months of 2024 was just over a third of the number seen in the same period of 2023, the total reaching Spain (the mainland, the Spanish enclaves and the Canary Islands combined) was almost two-thirds higher in 2024. Even here, the situation varies considerably between the Western Mediterranean route (where numbers have remained almost exactly the same as in 2023) and the Western Africa-Atlantic route, where movement in the first eight months has more than doubled compared to the same period in 2023.[2]

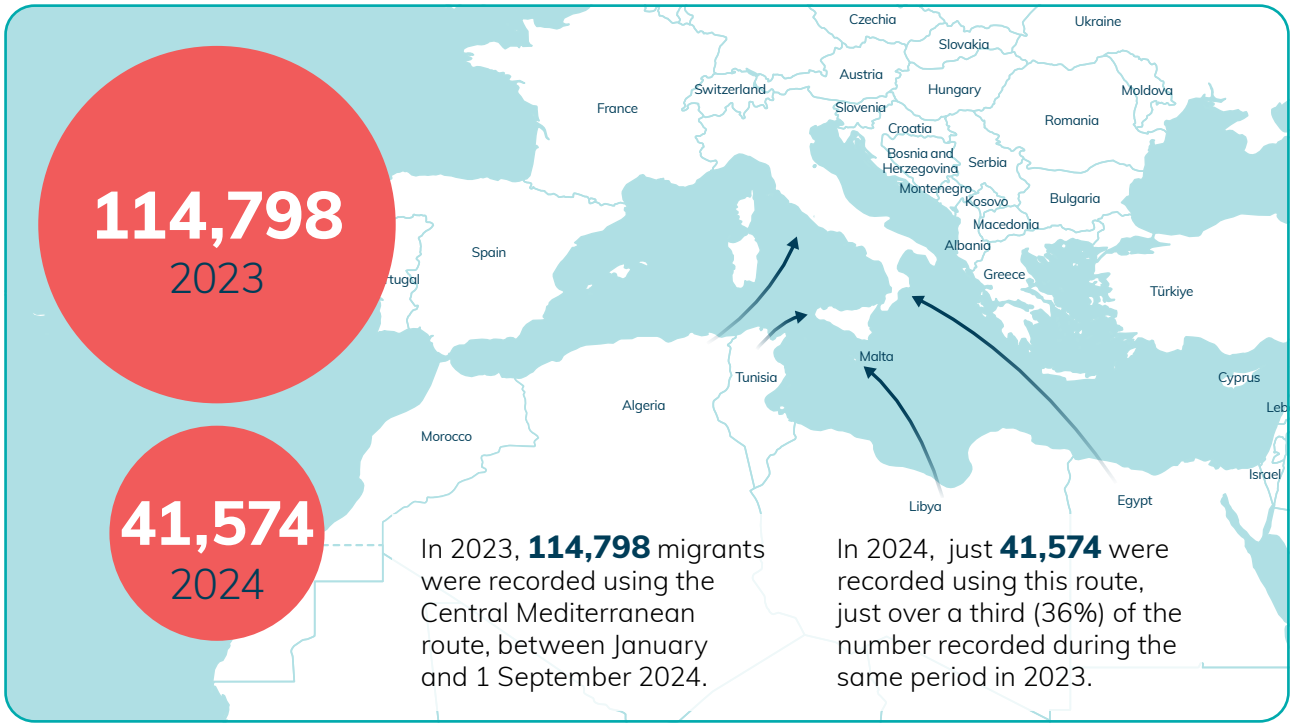
The Central Mediterranean route to Italy

The maritime journey from Africa to Europe has historically been dominated by the Central Mediterranean route, with boats usually leaving from Libya or Tunisia and ending in southern Italy. In 2023, for instance, 158,031 migrants were recorded along this route, compared to 40,330 along the Western Africa-Atlantic route and 17,208 along the Western Mediterranean route.[3] However, movement on the Central Mediterranean route to Italy dramatically reduced in 2024, with just 41,574 migrants recorded between January and 1 September 2024, just over a third (36%) of the 114,798 recorded during the same period in 2023.[4] The five most represented countries of origin among arrivals between January and the end of July 2024

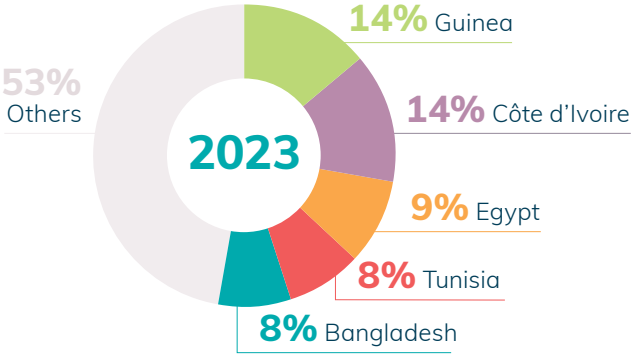
1 UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Italy; UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Spain.
2 UNHCR (2024) Italy weekly snapshot - 2 September 2024; UNHCR (2024) Spain Weekly Snapshot - Week 35 (26 Aug - 1 Sep 2024).
3 UNHCR (2024) Europe situations: Data and trends—Arrivals and displaced populations (December 2023).
4 UNHCR (2024) Italy weekly snapshot - 2 September 2024.

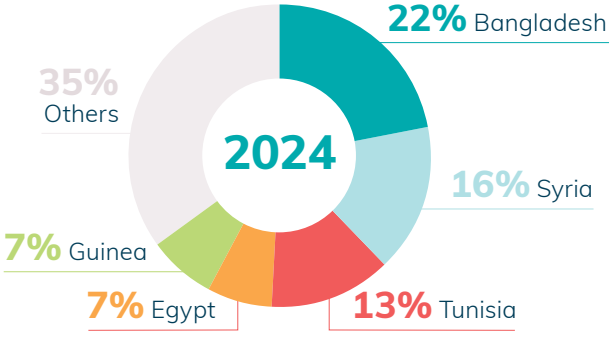
were Bangladesh (22%), Syria (16%), Tunisia (13%), Egypt (7%) and **Guinea** (7%). This is significantly different to the same period in 2023, when there was a predominance of arrivals from Guinea (14%), **Côte d'Ivoire** (14%), Egypt (9%), Tunisia (8%) and Bangladesh (8%).[5]

Graphic 1. Central Mediterranean route: 2024 sees dramatic drop in new arrivals



Five most represented countries (Jan – Sep 2023 and 2024)





Libya has been the primary point of embarkation for those making the journey in the first half of 2024, accounting for 14,526 arrivals, followed by Tunisia (10,210), with much smaller numbers from Türkiye (908) and Algeria (108).[6] This is a reversal of the trend evident in 2023, when Tunisia overtook Libya as the primary country of embarkation, accounting for 62 percent of all journeys to Italy during the year, almost double that of Libya (33%).[7] The Central Mediterranean continues to be one of the most dangerous migration routes, particularly as the increased risk of interception and return by Libyan and Tunisian coastguards in recent years has driven smugglers to choose more dangerous or extended routes to reach Italy. For instance, some are even favouring a route that recently opened between Eastern Libya and Greece to circumnavigate Libyan and Tunisian naval patrols.[8] These circuitous journeys, together with the use of cheaper and poorly constructed boats, place the lives of those on board at greater risk.[9]

5 UNHCR (2024) Ibid.
6 UNHCR (2024) Italy weekly snapshot—1 July 2024.
7 UNHCR (2024) Italy sea arrivals dashboard December 2023.
8 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Northern Africa—Quarter 2 2024.
9 Punzo, V. & Scaglione, A. (2024) Beyond borders: Exploring the impact of Italian migration control policies on Mediterranean smuggling dynamics and migrant journeys. Trends in Organized Crime.

These dangers are reflected in the scale of suspected fatalities at sea. Between January and the end of May 2024, 749 people died or went missing: this is lower than the 1,080 deaths and disappearances recorded during the same period in 2023, of whom nearly half were victims of the Pylos shipwreck in April 2023.[10] However, when factoring in the reduced movement along this route, the fatality rate per capita appears to have risen in 2024.

This may be due, in part, to the increasing securitisation of the route, largely following the multiple agreements in place between the EU and various North African countries including Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, all of whom have stepped up their maritime surveillance. With increased naval patrols, it is also likely that a larger proportion of those attempting the journey are being returned before they reach Italy: the Tunisian coastguard, for instance, reported 21,545 interceptions in the first four months of 2024, an increase of 22.5 percent from the same period in 2023.[11] This trend continued late into the year, with around 1,800 people intercepted by that agency over the course of just one weekend in mid-June.[12]

The Western Mediterranean and Western Africa-Atlantic routes to Spain

In Spain (mainland Spain, Spanish enclaves and Canary Islands combined), 36,062 arrivals were recorded from January to 1 September 2024, an increase of 63 percent from the same period in 2023. However, the situation varies considerably along different routes. As of 1 September 2024, an estimated 10,337 migrants had reached Spain along the Western Mediterranean route – almost exactly the same number recorded during the same period the previous year.[13] According to IOM's data, a total of 269 migrants died in the first ten months of 2024 on this route,[14] though estimates by the NGO Ca-Minando Fronteras are significantly higher for some of this period.[15]

Despite considerable coverage in recent years of the situation at the fenced borders between Morocco and the Spanish territories of Ceuta and Melilla – in particular, the attempted entry of around 1,700 migrants into Melilla in June 2022 that resulted in dozens of deaths – only a small fraction (225) crossed into Spain by land,[16] with a larger number also reaching these territories by sea. The maritime route from Morocco into these territories is relatively short but fraught with danger, as illustrated when, towards the end of February 2024, up to 100 people attempted to enter Ceuta by water; many of them were reportedly injured by rocks, attacked by dogs or suffered exhaustion and hypothermia.[17] The next month, during another crossing attempt of more than 50 migrants, one person reportedly died of hypothermia and others were hurt.[18]

Though the Western Africa-Atlantic route to the Canary Islands saw almost 32,000 arrivals during the "small boats" crisis of 2006, in the years since it has been a relatively marginal entry point into Spain, until numbers began to rise rapidly from 2020 onwards. In 2023, it exceeded the previous 2006 peak, with a record-breaking 40,330 arrivals.[19] The route became even more popular during 2024, with 25,725 registered arrivals as of 1 September 2024 – an increase of 122 percent compared to the same period in 2023.[20]

This is despite the considerable dangers of the route, with 2023 being the second most deadly year on record with 959 deaths or disappearances, according to IOM data. The first half of 2024 was even deadlier, with 315 fatalities and disappearances between January and the end of June, compared to 211 in the same period of 2023.[21] The total climbed even higher at the beginning of July, when at least 89 people died and dozens of others went missing after a boat carrying up to 170 passengers capsized off the coast of Mauritania.[22] The true number of fatalities may be considerably greater than IOM's figures suggest, however, given that many bodies are never recovered and some incidents may never be recorded. Ca-Minando Fronteras, for instance, estimates the death toll along the route in 2023 as 6,007 – more than six times higher.[23] During the first five months of 2024, according to its estimates, 4,808 people – an average of 33 each day – died on the route. Senegal, previously the main embarkation point, was overtaken by Mauritania, with 3,600 of these deaths attributed to migrants who had left from there.[24] This can be partly explained by the uptick in interceptions of migrant boats by the Senegalese navy in its waters, though significant numbers of Senegalese migrants continue to arrive in the Canary Islands.

10 IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Central Mediterranean.
11 Arab News (2024) Tunisia reports increase in migrant interceptions.
12 Ben Mbarek, G. (2024) Tunisia intercepts more than 1,800 migrants aiming to sail to Europe. The National News.
13 UNHCR (2024) Spain Weekly Snapshot - Week 35 (26 Aug - 1 Sep 2024).
14 IOM (2024) Migration Flow to Europe — Dead and Missing.
15 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2024) Right to life monitoring: First five months 2024.
16 UNHCR (2024) Spain weekly snapshot—Week 27 (1—7 Jul 2024).
17 InfoMigrants (2024) Ceuta: Dozens of migrants swim to Spanish enclave.
18 Lechheb, I. (2024) Moroccan migrant drowned in tragic Ceuta crossing, many injured. Hespress.
19 UNHCR (2024) Europe situation: Data and trends—arrivals and displaced populations—December 2023.
20 UNHCR (2024) Spain Weekly snapshot - Week 35 (26 Aug - 1 Sep 2024).
21 IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Western Africa/Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.
22 The Guardian (2024) At least 89 migrants dead after boat capsises off Mauritania, state news agency says.
23 Reuters (2024) Migrant arrivals to Spain's Canaries jump by over 1,000% in January.
24 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2024) Op. Cit.

Egypt and Mauritania: the latest frontline in the EU's externalisation policy

For some years, the EU has invested large sums into the development of cooperation frameworks with North African countries, which have served both as countries of origin and transit for tens of thousands of migrants travelling to Italy and Spain. Though the terms and conditions vary, the basic template of these agreements is the provision of EU financial assistance for a range of areas, such as economic development and security, tied to a component on migration management – typically a requirement for the signatory government to increase its interception of migrant vessels, strengthen its borders and accept returns to its territory.

In the wake of the collapse of the EU's migration agreement with **Niger** in November 2023, cancelled by the junta as a reprisal for sanctions imposed on the country following the military coup earlier in the year,[25] the EU has continued to expand its approach of outsourcing and containment to other countries. The controversial €1 billion deal finalised with **Tunisia** in July 2023, including provisions to reduce undocumented migration into the country and onward to the EU, has served as a blueprint for other agreements since. In particular, **Mauritania**'s strategic importance for the EU has grown, given its role as a point of embarkation on the Western Africa-Atlantic route to the Canary Islands. This was reflected in a €210 million EU partnership announced in February 2024 and finalised the following month, with the stated aim of supporting "migration management including the fight against migrant smuggling, as well as [to] promote security and stability, humanitarian aid for refugees and support to host communities", along with investments in job creation.[26]

However, critics of the partnership have argued that it will have no substantive effect on migration to Europe, with the most likely outcome that current migration pathways will be reconfigured to adapt to these conditions along other, potentially even more hazardous routes. Furthermore, the agreement could exacerbate existing divisions within Mauritania, contributing to greater instability. Opposition groups have condemned the policy as a plan to resettle "illegal migrants", prompting protests in the capital, while local NGOs have expressed concern about the implications of Mauritania adopting an increasingly militarised approach to migration on behalf of the EU.[27] This is troubling, given reports that Mauritanian security forces, apparently with the assistance of Spanish officials, have been detaining migrants (including third-party nationals) and forcibly abandoning them in the desert at the border with **Mali**.[28] The implicit securitisation of migration is also concerning for the country's marginalised Afro-Mauritanian population, much of which faces barriers to accessing civil documentation and is already at risk of harassment by police.[29]

Similar dynamics were at play with an agreement finalised with **Egypt** in April 2024, comprising a total of €7.4 billion in financial assistance, much of it for loans and investments in areas such as energy, but also including €200 million for migration management.[30] Egypt has become increasingly important as a sending country in recent years: between January and the end of May 2024, Egyptians were the fifth most represented nationality (6.5%) among registered arrivals in Italy,[31] though all of these departures have been from Libya or Tunisia rather than Egypt itself. Since 2020, when just over 1,260 Egyptians reached Italy (still making them the sixth most represented nationality, given the general drop in migration that year in the midst of the pandemic), their numbers have steadily risen, peaking at around 21,300 in 2022 and falling to just under 11,500 in 2023.[32] Much of this movement has been driven by Egypt's economic stagnation, high unemployment and inflation. Though the number of Egyptians arriving in Italy has declined in 2024, accounting for around 1,380 arrivals in the first five months of the year[33] – to some extent a reflection of the wider drop in movement along the Central Mediterranean route in the same period – the challenging economic conditions within the country persist, with no clear end in sight.[34]

However, and perhaps of even greater significance, is Egypt's position as both a country of transit and a host country for around nine million refugees, migrants (authorised as well as unauthorised) and asylum seekers (predominantly Sudanese,

25 Koné, H. (2024) Mauritania —the latest target in EU migration control. Institute for Security Studies.
26 European Commission (2024) The European Commission launches new migration partnership with Mauritania.
27 Moctar, H. O. (2024) The EU-Mauritania migration deal is destined to fail. Al Jazeera.
28 Lighthouse Reports (2024) Desert dumps.
29 Moctar, H. O. (2024) Op. Cit.
30 Van Moorsel, J. & Bonfiglio, A. (2024) A conscious coupling: The EU-Egypt 'strategic and comprehensive partnership'. Mixed Migration Centre.
31 UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Italy.
32 UNHCR (2021) Italy sea arrivals dashboard—December 2020; UNHCR (2023) Italy sea arrivals—dashboard December 2022; UNHCR (2024) Italy sea arrivals dashboard—December 2023.
33 UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Italy.
34 Freedom House (2024) Joint statement — Thirteen years after Mubarak's ouster, unprecedented repression and economic instability in Egypt.

Syrians, Yemenis and Libyans),[35] particularly in the wake of the outbreak of conflict in **Sudan** and the displacement of half a million Sudanese citizens into Egypt.[36] The newly arrived and growing Sudanese refugee population has placed a considerable financial cost on Egypt: in July 2024, the government called on international donors to share the responsibility for what it estimated at $10 billion in annual expenditure to support this population.[37]

A central motivation of the EU's agreement with Egypt is to prevent the effects of these and other displacement crises translating into onward movement to Europe. However, human rights organisations have questioned the cost of this approach in supporting and legitimising Egypt's government at a time when repeated human rights violations continue to occur, with migrants particularly vulnerable to abuse. While Egypt is notable in that it generally allows refugees to self-settle rather than forcing them into camps, Egypt's refugees have increasingly been scapegoated for political purposes, with the country's protracted economic crisis blamed on the presence of its "guests".[38] While Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers were subjected to arbitrary detention and beatings by Egyptian security forces in the years before,[39] Amnesty International has drawn attention to a "campaign of mass arrests and forced returns" that escalated following an August 2023 decree requiring foreigners in the country to regularise their status.[40] A report by the *New Humanitarian* uncovered evidence of a large clandestine network of military bases where thousands of Sudanese asylum seekers were detained in deplorable conditions before being forced back across the border.[41]

Critics have also questioned the long-term effectiveness of an agreement that largely fails to address the underlying drivers of Egypt's crisis through meaningful reforms to governance and human rights.[42] At present, the limited visibility of protection in the partnership framework risks leaving migrants in Egypt even more vulnerable to detention and mistreatment in future, in the context of an EU-sponsored crackdown on irregular migration.[43]

Mixed migration in North Africa

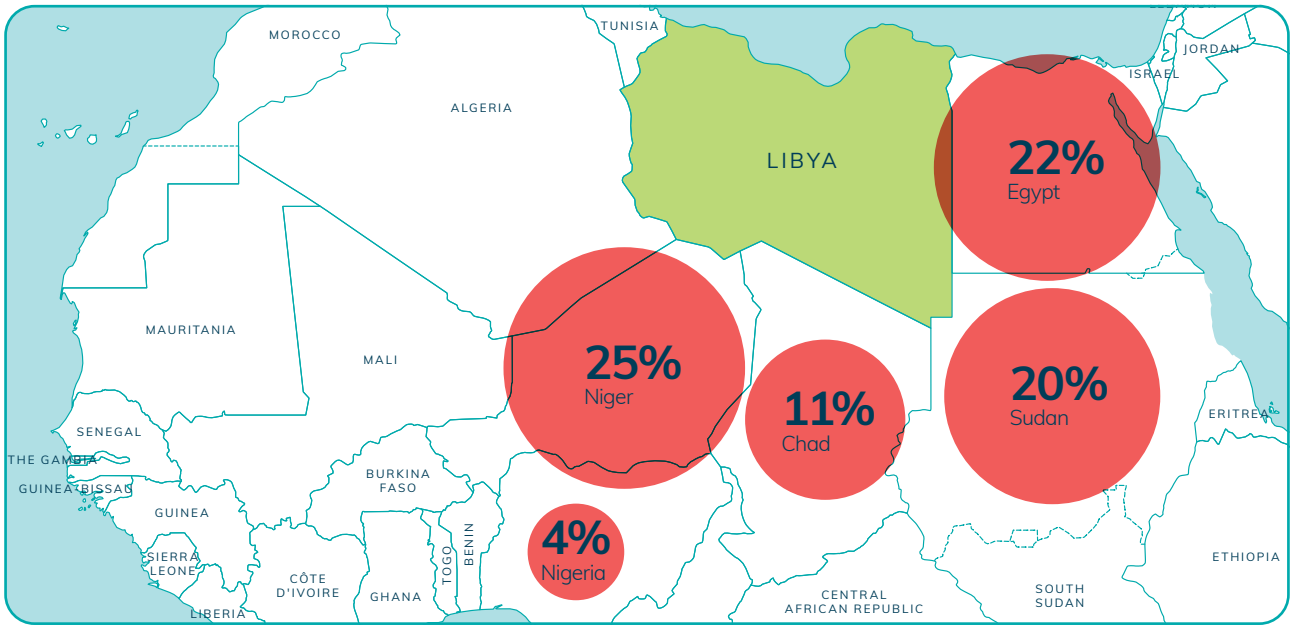
While the many fatalities at sea en route to Italy or Spain are relatively well known, the dangers of the various routes from the East and Horn of Africa and West Africa towards the North African coast are less widely publicised. Nevertheless, these journeys – through conflict zones, increasingly restricted border areas and the harsh conditions of the desert – have resulted in numerous deaths and disappearances. In the Sahara alone, at least 1,180 migrants perished between January 2020 and May 2024, though the true numbers are likely to be far higher.[44] In addition to the natural hazards of extreme heat and arid environments, those travelling through the region face an array of risks, from arbitrary detention by authorities to the depredations of criminal groups. Some of the most dangerous locations include cities such as Tamanrasset in **Algeria**, Tripoli in Libya and Agadez in Niger.[45] However, the outcomes of a tripartite discussion between the Algerian, Libyan and Tunisian governments in April 2024 made little reference to the protection needs or human rights concerns of migrants travelling through, instead stating their shared commitment to "securing the common borders from the danger and impacts of unorganised immigration".[46]

Abuses in Libya enabled by EU assistance

Libya has an estimated 725,304 migrants in the country, predominantly from Niger (25%), Egypt (22%), Sudan (20%), Chad (11%) and Nigeria (4%).[47] Severe human rights violations against migrants, including arbitrary arrest, detention, torture and sexual assault, by security forces, criminal groups and smugglers have been documented for years. The number of deaths and disappearances in the country is difficult to document, given the weak rule of law and climate of impunity for perpetrators of these abuses. This is illustrated by the recent discovery of mass graves containing the bodies of migrants, including one, identified in March 2024 in southwestern Libya, containing the remains of 65 people, followed by another site on the Libya-Tunisia border in July.[48]

35 InfoMigrants (2024) Egypt seeks 'cooperation' for hosting 9 million refugees and migrants.
36 UNHCR (2024) Sudan emergency.
37 InfoMigrants (2024) Op. Cit.
38 Gibson, L. (2024) Egypt's crackdown on refugees shows no signs of slowing. The New Arab.
39 Human Rights Watch (2022) Egypt: Police target Sudanese refugee activists.
40 Amnesty International (2024) Egypt: Authorities must end campaign of mass arrests and forced returns of Sudanese refugees.
41 Creta, S. & Khalil, N. (2024) Inside Egypt's secret scheme to detain and deport thousands of Sudanese refugees. The New Humanitarian.
42 Francavilla, C. (2024) EU deal with Egypt rewards authoritarianism, betrays "EU values". Human Rights Watch.
43 Van Moorsel, J. & Bonfiglio, A. (2024) Op. Cit.
44 IOM, Mixed Migration Centre & UNHCR (2024) On this journey, no one cares if you live or die: Abuse, protection and justice along routes between East and West Africa and Africa's Mediterranean coast: volume 2.
45 IOM, Mixed Migration Centre & UNHCR (2024) Ibid.
46 Le Monde (2024) Tunis, Alger et Tripoli pour un travail commun contre « le danger » de l'immigration clandestine.
47 IOM (2024) Migrant report key findings 52 (March—May 2024).
48 OHCHR (2024) "Peace and stability in Libya go hand in hand with human rights," says High Commissioner.

Graphic 2. Nationalities of migrants in Libya in 2024



Source (adapted) and credit: IOM (2024) Migrant report key findings 52 (March – May 2024).

Some of the most vulnerable to abuse are those intercepted by the Libyan coastguard who, after being returned to Libya, are routinely held indefinitely in detention centres where physical violence, exploitation and extortion are commonplace.[49] Many of these abuses continue to be facilitated by the close cooperation between the EU and Libya over migration management, whereby, in exchange for financial and technical assistance, Libyan authorities agree to intercept and return migrants. In February 2024, a report by the organisation Lighthouse Reports documented at least 2,000 separate incidents over the previous three years where the EU border agency Frontex shared the coordinates of migrant vessels with the Libyan coastguard, despite the agency witnessing Libyan officials beating, assaulting and shooting at those on board on multiple occasions during this period.[50] The organisation also revealed, in an earlier report in December 2023, that the EU border agency Frontex had collaborated with the Tariq Bin Zeyad Brigade, a notorious militia, to enable pullbacks of migrant boats[51] – a clear violation of the EU's "do no harm" principle of engagement in Libya.[52]

While most of the human rights abuses carried out in Libya are by militias and armed groups, government officials are also complicit in many cases. The Anti-Illegal Immigration Agency, for instance, is responsible for managing undocumented migration and reportedly carried out 7,750 deportations from Libya in the first half of 2024 alone.[53] A video leaked in June, however, appeared to show Egyptian and Syrian migrants being stripped and abused by staff.[54]

More 'desert dumps' in Tunisia

One contributing factor to the vulnerability of migrants in North Africa is the growing hostility of national governments towards them. This is evident in **Tunisia**, where, in 2023, against a backdrop of xenophobic rhetoric from senior officials, hundreds of foreign nationals were rounded up and abandoned at the border with Algeria or Libya. Dozens of people are believed to have died or disappeared as a result of these actions.[55] After being paused in July 2023 following an international outcry, these mass expulsions resumed in September 2023 and have continued throughout 2024, becoming increasingly systematic in the process.[56] Among other actions, at the beginning of May 2024, a raid was carried out on an encampment near UN offices in Tunis, resulting in the expulsion of 400 migrants and the arrest of 80 others.[57] Reports suggest that many of those expelled into Libya are handed over to Libyan border guards, who have then subjected them to torture, extortion and violence.[58]

49 Human Rights Watch (2024) World Report 2024: Libya.
50 Lighthouse Reports (2024) 2,200 Frontex emails to Libya.
51 Lighthouse Reports (2023) Frontex and the pirate ship.
52 Nielsen, N. (2023) EU's 'do no harm' Libya policy hit by militia revelations. EUobserver.
53 The Libya Observer (2024) 7,000 migrants deported from the city of Tobruk since the beginning of 2024.
54 Middle East Monitor (2024) Syrian, Egyptian migrants tortured in Libya detention camp.
55 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review 2023.
56 Holleis, J. (2024) Tunisia: Thousands of migrants 'dumped' in the desert. DW.
57 Human Rights Watch (2024) Tunisia: Joint statement calling for end to crackdown.
58 Lewis, D. (2024) Exclusive: Migrant expulsions from Tunisia to Libya fuel extortion, abuse, UN says. Reuters.

New legislation recently proposed by the government to amend the existing law on foreign nationals in the country could also exacerbate their vulnerability, with increased penalties that raise the potential prison sentence for irregular entry from one month to up to three years.[59]

Lighthouse Reports, following a year of investigations in Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania, accused the EU of being complicit in these so-called "desert dumps" through its funding of "migration management" in Tunisia as part of the contentious partnership brokered in 2023. From its findings, it concludes that "Europe knowingly funds, and in some instances is directly involved in systematic racial profiling, detention and expulsion of Black communities".[60] Similarly, as with the uptick in maritime interceptions (including the formal designation of a Search and Rescue zone in Tunisian waters in June 2024),[61] Tunisia's security at the border with Algeria and Libya has increased significantly since the beginning of its new partnership with the EU, with tens of thousands of entries prevented during the year.[62] However, as many are escaping even more dangerous conditions in their countries of origin, return is generally not an option; as a result, thousands of foreign nationals are effectively trapped in Tunisia, unable to go back to their country of origin or move on to Europe.[63]

Mass expulsions from Algeria continue

While Tunisia's engagement in large-scale expulsions is relatively recent, **Algeria** has been summarily deporting migrants from its territory for years. In 2023, according to the NGO Alarme Phone Sahara, around 23,000 foreign nationals from a variety of sub-Saharan African countries were left at the Point Zero border post between Algeria and Niger. While many of those expelled are rounded up in crackdowns in Algerian cities, some of those deported over the past year are also likely to be so-called "domino deportations" of migrants pushed by Tunisian authorities across the border into Algeria. In the first five months of 2024, more than 10,000 were reportedly expelled, suggesting that the total number of expulsions for the year could exceed 2023 if they continue at the current pace. Those left in the desert typically have to traverse 14 kilometres through this harsh environment to reach the Nigerien town of Assamaka, with some dying in the attempt: over the course of just two months, between March and May 2024, at least 11 people are believed to have died after being abandoned there by Algerian authorities.[64]

Niger repeals its anti-migration law

Historically, the city of Agadez, bordering the Sahara, was not only a trade hub connecting West and North Africa, but also a major gateway for migration. In particular, movement through the town increased exponentially as new routes to Libya opened up following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011.[65] All this came to an abrupt end when, apparently under pressure from the EU, Niger adopted the controversial Law 36-2015. This legislation (passed in 2015 and enacted the following year) criminalised the transportation of migrants northwards to Libya. With it, the entire industry went underground, in the process transforming the city's "travel agents" into human smugglers.

In July 2023, the democratically elected government of Niger was deposed in a military coup. It was clear in the months that followed that the new regime was seeking to reorient its international relationships away from the deposed government's Western allies. The decisive moment came in November 2023 when it was announced that Law 36-2015 would be repealed, effectively ending the country's eight-year partnership with the EU on migration and anti-smuggling. Given the cooling in relations since the coup, this in itself was probably not very surprising for Brussels. More surprising, perhaps, considering the hundreds of millions of Euros in financial assistance provided by the EU since the passage of the law, was the widespread popular support the repeal provoked.

While, from Brussels, the law's seeming reduction in movement appeared to be a success story in its efforts to contain irregular migration to Europe, the view on the ground in Niger's vast and impoverished northern region was very different. Most Nigeriens experienced few direct benefits from the large sums disbursed by the EU to tackle the root causes of migration, with many believing that the elite were the main beneficiaries.[66] Any supposed benefits were less readily identifiable than the visible social and economic devastation wrought by the migration ban.[67] Overnight, one of the main sources of livelihood and income in the area was criminalised. As a result, many licit businesses and travel operators – having previously aligned their itineraries so they accompanied the weekly military

59 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: North Africa—Quarter 2 2024.
60 Lighthouse Reports (2024) Desert dumps.
61 Agenzia Nova (2024) Tunisia establishes a search and rescue zone at sea.
62 Arab News (2024) Tunisia reports increase in migrant interceptions.
63 Al Jazeera (2024) Tunisia: The migration trap.
64 Boitiaux, C. (2024) Expulsions in Algeria: 11 migrants died of thirst in desert, Alarm Phone Sahara says. InfoMigrants.
65 Hoffmann, A., Meester, J. & Nabara, H. M. (2017) Migration and markets in Agadez: Economic alternatives to the migration industry. Clingendael.
66 Simoncelli, M. (2024) 'Agadez has begun to live again': Migrants and smugglers are returning after Niger repealed its anti-migration law. Al Jazeera.
67 Claes, J. & Schmauder, A. (2020) When the dust settles: Economic and governance repercussions of migration policies in Niger's north. Clingendael.

escort north – suddenly found themselves actively targeted by the country's security forces.

However, the implications were even more serious for migrants wishing to move north. Suddenly, these found themselves unable to travel along the relatively safe regulated pathways and instead had to journey along longer, more indirect routes that incurred higher costs and significantly greater risks.[68] As a result, the number of fatalities and arrests among migrants increased significantly.[69] This suggests that the EU's stated aims of regularising migration pathways and disrupting criminal networks were, in fact, undermined by the new legislation. In its wake, migration from Niger towards North Africa went underground and merged with other criminal networks such as drug trafficking.[70] The fact that Nigerien authorities enforced its restrictions on northward migration from Agadez, despite it being located more than 1,000 kilometres from the border with Libya, further reinforced popular resentment of a law that was widely seen as an overly coercive – even colonialist – imposition of European priorities on Niger's domestic policies.[71]

Movement northwards has increased significantly since the repeal, as evidenced in a 50 percent spike in detected cross-border movements into Libya and Algeria in January 2024 compared to December 2023.[72] Though risks remain and bandits continue to operate in the north, operators can again accompany military escorts northwards – a significant change from a year ago, when migrants had to actively avoid security forces as well as armed groups. With more transparency and legitimacy, too, the likelihood of abuse or mistreatment at the hands of human smugglers is greatly reduced.[73] Agadez's economy also appears to be flourishing.[74]

What the implications for the EU will be in the long term remains uncertain. While officials have warned of a likely increase in irregular migration to Europe,[75] these predictions had yet to materialise months after the routes north resumed. If this remains the case, it may be due in part to the fact that many of those travelling towards Libya are looking for work there rather than intending to continue their journey to Europe, with others confronted by difficulties there that leave them unable to move on.[76] But it is also the case that, in practice, despite being illegal, migration through Niger continued throughout the years the ban was in place – only in more unsafe conditions and with lower detection rates than is the case now it is again taking place in the open.[77]

More fundamentally, however, the repeal of the law, not to mention the widespread popular support that has accompanied this decision, raises troubling questions for the future of the EU's so-called "partnership" approach in Africa. The supposed success of the 2015 law, in terms of containing migration, brought with it all manner of costs and unintended consequences that were borne disproportionately by ordinary Nigeriens and migrants: loss of livelihoods, more fatalities en route and the increasing engagement of criminal organisations in human smuggling. Any future agreements with Niger or other countries in the region will need to accommodate local needs and protection concerns to ensure safe and sustainable outcomes.

East and Horn of Africa

The East and Horn of Africa continue to be faced with severe displacement crises, underlined by human and environmental insecurity. At the beginning of 2024, there were more than 24 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and asylum seekers in the region, displaced by violence, drought and flooding,[78] a figure that has only increased during the year as Sudan's brutal conflict has intensified and hundreds of thousands have been displaced by the worst flooding in the region for decades.

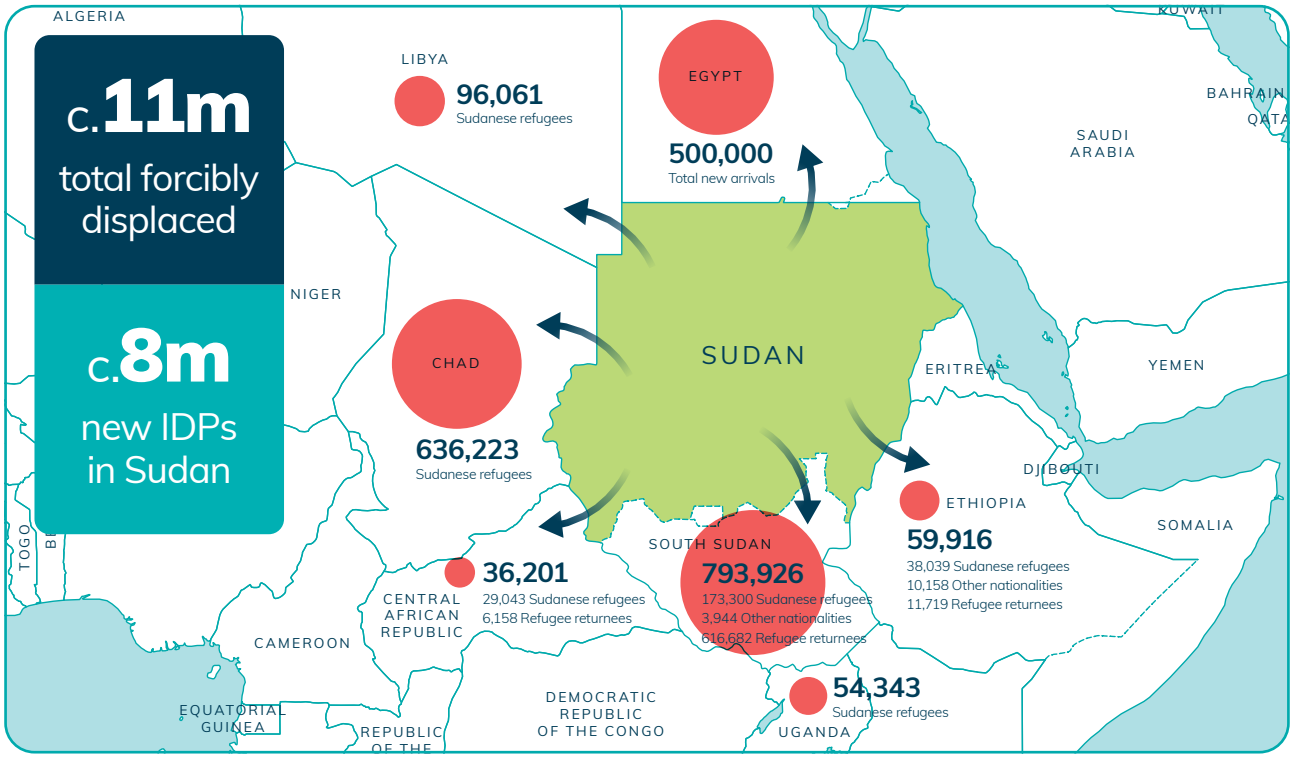
War in Sudan

Since the outbreak of conflict in **Sudan** in April 2023, more than 10 million people – around a fifth of the entire population – have been forced to leave their homes to escape the violence. In addition to the 2.2 million refugees who have sought sanctuary in neighbouring countries as of September 2024, Sudan itself is now the largest internal displacement crisis in the world, with eight million newly displaced IDPs as of September 2024 along with some 2.4 million IDPs already in the country before April 2023, bringing the total forcibly displaced population in Sudan

68 UNODC (2024) Smuggling of migrants in the Sahel.
69 Adetayo, O. (2023) Niger repeal of anti-migration law applauded as one less 'colonial fetter'. Al Jazeera.
70 Tubiana, J., Warin, C. & Saeneen, G. M. (2018) Multilateral damage: The impact of EU migration policies on central Saharan routes. Clingendael.
71 Adetayo, O. (2023) Op. Cit.
72 IOM (2024) Niger — Rapport sur le suivi des flux de populations 72 (Janvier 2024).
73 InfoMigrants (2024) Niger: Migrants return to the route towards the Mediterranean; Adetayo, O. (2023) Op. Cit.
74 Douce, S. (2024) In post-coup Niger, migration becomes legal again. The New Humanitarian.
75 Euractiv (2024) Niger coup risks jump in EU immigration, commissioner says.
76 Djibo, I., Prentice, A. & Lewis, D. (2024) Despite fears in Europe, no migrant surge after Niger junta scrapped ban. Reuters.
77 Douce, S. (2024) Op. Cit.
78 WHO (2024) Greater Horn of Africa (GHoA) public health situation analysis (PHSA), as of 31 December 2023.

to 10.4 million.[79] The humanitarian context continued to deteriorate during 2024, with around 25 million people in need of assistance and catastrophic levels of hunger.[80]

Graphic 3. Sudan: conflict exodus 2023-2024 (up to September)



Source (adapted) and credit: UNHCR Population movements from Sudan September 2024.

While the largest proportion of IDPs (around five million, including more than 3.1 million displaced since April 2023) is in North Darfur, where fighting intensified in the middle of 2024 in the densely populated areas of Al Fasher, the current displacement crisis is notably more widespread than in previous periods of unrest and insecurity, where the majority of IDPs were located in Darfur and Kordofan. Currently, IDPs are present across the entirety of Sudan and originate from 12 of its 18 states. Strikingly, given that between 2003 and 2024 the IDP population was largely from rural areas and sheltering in camps or settlements, the most represented place of origin among the country's more than 10 million IDPs is Khartoum at 3.7 million (36%), followed by South Darfur (21%) and North Darfur (12%). In terms of current location, the states with the largest IDP population are South Darfur (18%), North Darfur (13%) and Central Darfur (9%).[81]

With both parties to the conflict (the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces) accused of atrocities, ranging from sexual assault and pillaging to indiscriminate bombing and mass killings, civilians have borne the brunt of the violence.[82] Around half of the internally displaced population are children, with many displaced multiple times as the fighting has spread to new areas. In December 2023, for instance, the town of Wad Madani in Al Jazeera State – at the time serving as a safe haven for around half a million IDPs who had escaped insecurity elsewhere in the country – came under attack, forcing 300,000 people to flee.[83] In the meantime, with no apparent end in sight, the death toll has continued to rise: conservative estimates suggest that, as of April 2024, at least 15,550 fatalities had occurred since the conflict began.[84]

The situation of the estimated 2.1 million Sudanese refugees who have sanctuary in neighbouring countries is also fraught with difficulties, with many children separated from their families and severely traumatised by the violence.[85] The largest refugee population is

79 UNHCR (2024) Sudan situation map: Weekly regional update - 09 Sep 2024.
80 OCHA (2024) Sudan: Situation report—last updated: 3 September 2024.
81 OCHA (2024) Sudan Humanitarian Update (24 June 2024).
82 Osman, M. (2024) Sudan conflict fuels world's largest internal displacement. Human Rights Watch.
83 IOM (2024) Up to 300,000 Sudanese displaced by latest surge in fighting; IRC (2024) Conflict in Sudan: Over 8 million people displaced.
84 ACLED (2024) One year of war in Sudan.
85 UNHCR (2024) As Sudan conflict turns one, UN in Egypt appeals for more support.

in **Chad** where, as of mid-July 2024, almost 623,000 Sudanese have sought sanctuary since April 2023,[86] though agencies fear that ongoing fighting in Darfur and protracted restrictions on aid distribution there could result in more arrivals during the year.[87] The existing camps set up to accommodate refugees are reportedly operating beyond their capacity and resources are increasingly stretched as the number of refugees in the country has reached a 20-year high. Lack of clean drinking water or sanitation have contributed to an outbreak of disease, including hepatitis E, and a number of pregnant women have died.[88]

One of the most significant destination countries for Sudanese refugees is Egypt where, as of September 2024, around 500,000 Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers have arrived since the outbreak of the conflict.[89] In addition to Libya, Ethiopia, Uganda and the Central African Republic, a significant number of Sudanese refugees have also reached **South Sudan** (almost 175,000 as of September 2024),[90] where the situation is further complicated by the large-scale return of almost 800,000 South Sudanese refugees who had been living in Sudan before the conflict. South Sudan also continues to struggle with its own displacement challenges, rooted in conflict, food insecurity and climate change, with 2.2 million IDPs in the country and another 2.3 million refugees living in nearby countries including Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).[91]

Drought and flooding drive displacement across the region

For several years, following a series of failed rainy seasons, **Somalia** has been contending with its most extreme drought in four decades. In a broader context of weak governance and the ongoing threat of conflict in areas such as the autonomous Somaliland region, where fighting erupted for months in 2023, the impacts have been especially devastating for agropastoral communities whose livelihoods have been destroyed. In this context, many have been forced to move to urban areas in search of safety, adding to the 3.86 million IDPs currently in the country.[92] The subsequent flooding only exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, with millions facing acute food insecurity and malnutrition.[93]

Beginning in March 2024 and continuing for weeks, East Africa was also hit by one of the worst incidents of flooding recorded, with heavy rains, flash floods and landslides bringing widespread death and displacement. As of the end of May, almost 1.6 million people had been affected, with more than 482,000 displaced and at least 528 fatalities as a result of the flooding. The highest displacement occurred in **Kenya**, where more than 293,000 people were forced to move to escape the flooding.[94] The environmental impacts have been exacerbated by poor urban planning and environmental degradation, with some of the most catastrophic incidents of flash flooding occurring as a result of blocked drainage and the location of housing in high-risk areas.[95] In Nairobi, while the flooding has highlighted the vulnerability of many residents in informal settlements situated next to riverbanks, their plight was greatly exacerbated by the government's directive that all land within 30 metres of the river should be evacuated within 48 hours. As a result, thousands of residents were forced to leave their homes without any alternatives or adequate compensation in place.[96] Around 95,000 people in Ethiopia, 39,000 in Somalia, 37,000 in Burundi and 18,000 in Uganda were also displaced by the flooding.[97]

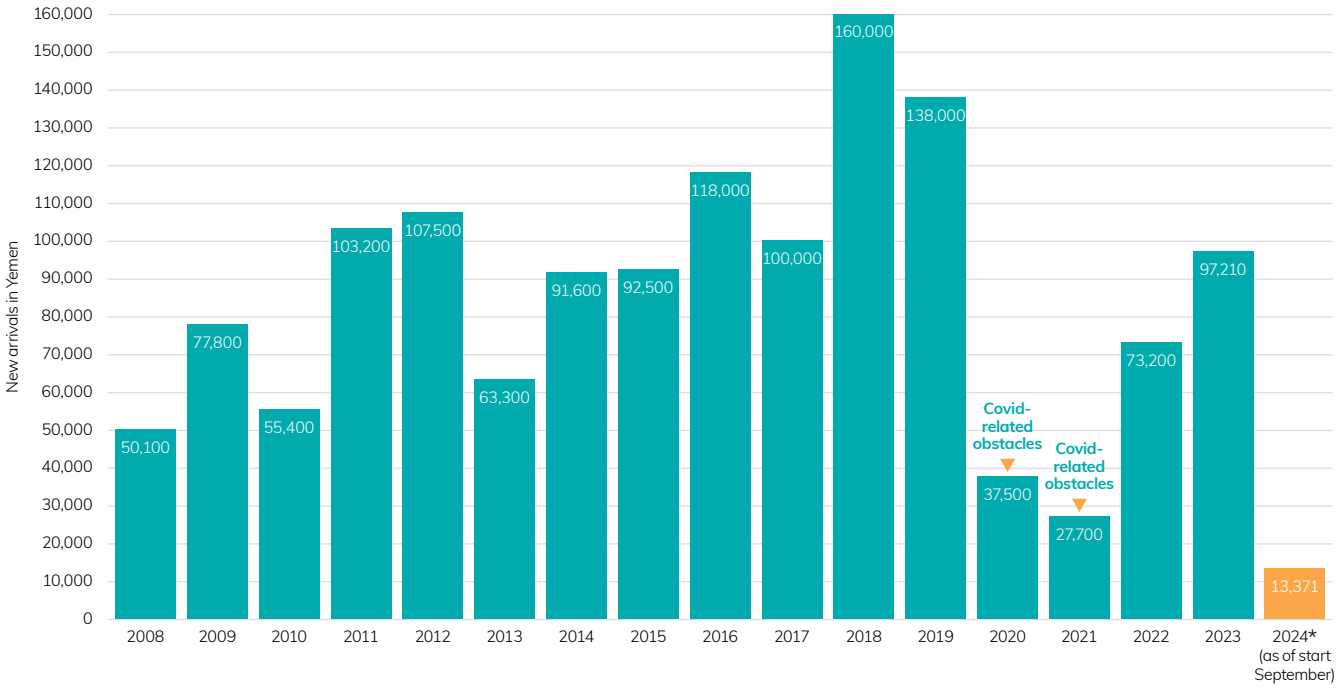
Tensions in Ethiopia amid concerns of renewed fighting

Despite a ceasefire brokered in November 2022 between the government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), bringing the two-year conflict to an end, an estimated 4.5 million people remain displaced in **Ethiopia** (predominantly in the Somali, Oromia and Tigray regions). The majority of these were uprooted by the conflict: while some 3.3 million people displaced during the height of the fighting have since returned, many of those still living in displacement have been doing so for multiple years.[98] Sporadic violence and human rights violations have continued in the north, with government forces, Eritrean peacekeepers and various armed groups including Fano insurgents implicated in these abuses.[99] There are also concerns that heightened tensions in the Amhara and Oromia regions could escalate imminently into full-scale conflict at a time when tensions are also increasing with Ethiopia's neighbours, with the arrival of large numbers of refugees from Somalia and Sudan.[100]

86 UNHCR (2024) Sudan situation.
87 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR: Chad fears 'very real' prospect of more Sudanese refugee arrivals, needs support.
88 Ulirch, J. N. & Donati, J. (2024) Refugee camps in Chad are overcrowded and running out of aid, and Sudanese refugees keep coming. AP.
89 UNHCR (2024) Sudan situation.
90 UNHCR (2024) Ibid.
91 UNHCR (2024) South Sudan situation; UNHCR (2024) South Sudan.
92 International Rescue Committee (2024) Crisis in Somalia: What you need to know and how to help; UNHCR (2024) Horn of Africa Somalia situation: Somalia.
93 OCHA (2024) Somalia.
94 OCHA (2024) Eastern Africa: Heavy rains and flooding Flash Update #4 (30 May 2024).
95 Avery, S. (2024) Kenya's devastating floods expose decades of poor urban planning and bad land management. The Conversation.
96 Wakhungu, M. et al. (2024) Double Disaster: Flood fallout and state eviction in Nairobi & Karachi. IDS.
97 OCHA (2024) Eastern Africa: Heavy rains and flooding Flash Update #4 (30 May 2024).
98 OCHA (2024) Ethiopia: Internal displacement overview (as of June 2024).
99 OHCHR (2024) Ethiopia: UN Human Rights Chief calls for sustained efforts to halt violations and abuses.
100 International Rescue Committee (2024) Crisis in Ethiopia: What you need to know and how to help.

Graphic 4. Sixteen-year summary of movement of migrants and refugees to Yemen from mainland Africa

Illustrating the consistently high level of movement other than in exceptional years (Covid and 2024)



Credit: A variety of UNHCR, IOM and MPI sources.
*Due to access constraints and limited arrivals monitoring the figures for 2024 are not representative and are likely to be a very large under-estimation of arrivals.

Migration and returns between the Horn of Africa and Yemen

Ongoing economic challenges, environmental pressures and political instability have all contributed to the continued movement of migrants from Ethiopia and Somalia in particular to **Yemen** and **Saudi Arabia** via **Djibouti** and the Gulf of Aden.[101] After dropping markedly following the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, migration to Yemen has risen dramatically over the past few years, from 27,000 in 2021 to over 90,000 in 2023,[102] largely returning to pre-pandemic levels. Due to insecurity and lack of access to relevant areas, data collection during 2024 has been reduced and this review cannot offer reliable data on new arrivals. As such, this is an exceptional year insofar that for almost two decades agencies have managed to collect information on new arrivals in Yemen. However, as long as the drivers affecting migration decisions from Ethiopia (and Somalia to a lesser extent) continue to be present and the informal labour demand in Saudi Arabia remains high, there is little reason to think numbers of arrivals significantly changed in 2024. If there has been any fall in the numbers, it may be attributable to a joint military campaign launched by Saudi Arabia and Yemen, beginning in August 2023, that is known also targeted human smuggling. Additionally, Djiboutian naval vessels reportedly increased surveillance to curb movement to Yemen across the Gulf of Adenelf.[103]

The journey from the Horn of Africa remains one of the most dangerous migration pathways in the world, beginning with the maritime crossing itself. This was illustrated in June 2024 by the capsizing of a boat with 240 on board, with at least 56 confirmed fatalities and 129 others missing.[104] This was preceded by several lethal shipwrecks earlier in the year where dozens died.[105] However, the hazards of the route are also intertwined with the mistreatment of migrants on arrival in Yemen, with smugglers, armed groups, security personnel and Houthi fighters all implicated in a variety of human rights abuses, including kidnapping, violence, sexual assault and murder.[106]

101 IOM (2024) Regional migrant response plan for the Horn of Africa to Yemen and Southern Africa 2024.
102 OCHA (2024) Humanitarian needs overview: Yemen.
103 IOM (2024) Djibouti — Flow monitoring dashboard (January 2024).
104 IOM (2024) Rescue at sea: The unwavering courage of a Yemeni doctor.
105 The Guardian (2024) At least 21 migrants dead after boat capsizes off coast of Djibouti.
106 Mwatana for Human Rights (2023) Transit in hell: The horrific violations targeting African migrants during their journey across Yemeni territory.

Given the constraints to mobility within Yemen and the difficulties of continuing on to the Gulf, as many as 30,000 migrants are stranded in the country, unable to move on to Saudi Arabia or return home.[107] The majority are forced to survive in brutal conditions, and are in urgent need of a safe, voluntary return to Ethiopia, with economic assistance and psychological counselling to support reintegration.[108] While hundreds of nationals from Ethiopia and other countries have attempted to escape the dangers in Yemen by engaging smugglers to take them back to Djibouti, with 642 detected in June 2024 alone,[109] others are also deported from Yemen.

Most arrivals in Yemen intend to move on to Saudi Arabia, despite the systematic abuse of migrant labourers there and the constant threat of mass round-ups and arbitrary detention: in May 2024 alone, for instance, Saudi authorities deported 21,293 people to Ethiopia – the largest monthly figure since July 2021. However, since 2022, a variety of reports by the Mixed Migration Centre, Human Rights Watch, Mwatana for Human Rights and other organisations (discussed in more detail in the *Keeping track in the Middle East* chapter) document how Saudi border guards have been engaging in mass killings, torture and terrorisation of Ethiopians, Somalis and Yemenis attempting to cross into Saudi Arabia, in the process killing hundreds of people and seriously wounding many more.[110]

West and Central Africa

Across West and Central Africa, a series of frequently intersecting crises has contributed to a number of intractable displacement upheavals that, in many cases, have led to a situation of almost permanent displacement for civilians. In the **Central African Republic**, for instance, the havoc wrought by the eruption of ethnic and religious civil conflict a decade ago has left one in five civilians still displaced within the country or elsewhere in the region. While the government, with the assistance of Russian mercenaries, has managed to recover vast swathes of rebel-held territory in recent military operations, this process has been accompanied by numerous human rights abuses against communities.[111] Elsewhere in the region, particularly the Sahel, a convergence of violent insurgency, extreme weather, intercommunal tensions and an increasingly militarised response from governments is taking place.

The Sahel crisis

The prolonged conflict in the Sahel, centred around **Burkina Faso**, Mali and Niger, has continued to escalate, driving a further deterioration in the security situation. Around one in five people in these countries is now in need of humanitarian assistance, and around three million people are displaced, a figure that has steadily increased as fighting has spread into new areas.[112] In the meantime, the military governments now installed in all three countries are pivoting away from their former Western allies towards Russian support to tackle the jihadist insurrections spreading through their territories. According to forecasts by the Danish Refugee Council, the region could see internal displacement increase by 10 percent during the year, as the various conflicts continue unabated.[113]

In June 2024, Burkina Faso was ranked, for the second time running, as the world's most neglected crisis in the Norwegian Refugee Council's annual survey of global conflict and displacement (followed by Mali and Niger in fourth and fifth place respectively).[114] More people were killed and displaced in 2023 than in any year since the crisis began in 2019, with around two million people – around one in 10 civilians – internally displaced in the country and one in four in need of humanitarian assistance.[115] While the population struggles with acute aid shortages, the post-coup military government has enrolled communities into anti-jihadist vigilante groups, prompting militants – who collectively control around half of the country – to increasingly target civilians, with at least 8,000 killed in 2023. Dozens of towns and cities across the country have been blockaded, affecting more than one million people and cutting off access to basic services and food.[116]

In Mali, meanwhile, there is a similar picture of conflict-induced displacement and urban besiegement as the government has intensified its fight with insurgent groups in the north of the country. Drawing on support from the Wagner mercenary group, military forces have captured key rebel strongholds during their offensive but also provoked a violent resurgence from Arab and

107 IOM (2024) Migration along the Eastern Corridor (April 2024).
108 Qaoud, M. (2024) Soaring number of migrants trapped in Yemen face abuse and starvation, say NGOs. The Guardian; Kuschminder, K. et al. (2024) Migration interrupted: Can stranded migrants from Ethiopia, Somalia, and Sudan rebuild their lives upon return?. Migration Policy Institute.
109 IOM (2024) DTM Yemen—Flow monitoring datasets—June 2024.
110 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Indifference and impunity: 10 months on, Saudi border killings of migrants continue.
111 Lechner, J. & Ingasso, V. (2023) Wagner woes and a rebel crackdown: A briefing on the Central African Republic's shifting conflict. The New Humanitarian.
112 IOM (2024) One in five people in the Central Sahel needs humanitarian aid: Now is the time to act.
113 Danish Refugee Council (2024) Global Displacement Forecast 2024.
114 Norwegian Refugee Council (2024) Once again, Burkina Faso is the world's most neglected crisis.
115 OCHA (2024) Burkina Faso; Norwegian Refugee Council (2024) Ibid.
116 The New Humanitarian (2024) International aid groups 'utterly failing' conflict victims in Burkina Faso: Egeland; International Rescue Committee (2024) Crisis in Burkina Faso: What you need to know and how you can help; ACLED (2024) The Sahel: A deadly new era in the decades-long conflict.

Tuareg armed groups. Human rights abuses by Wagner fighters especially have driven mass displacement, destruction of property and hundreds of civilian deaths.[117] In particular, protracted fighting in Kidal led to several towns being emptied and tens of thousands of residents reportedly uprooted, many across the border to Algeria and Mauritania.[118] With acute food shortages and an estimated 7.1 million in need of humanitarian assistance, including some 400,000 IDPs, civilians are also at heightened risk of being directly targeted by armed combatants.[119]

In Niger, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 181,000 conflict-induced displacements were recorded during 2023 – the highest number since records began in 2015.[120] This trend has continued into 2024, with the Danish Refugee Council projecting a 15 percent rise in displacement during the year, the largest relative increase in the three countries.[121] As with its neighbours, humanitarian conditions are dire, with an estimated 4.5 million people (17% of the total population) in need of assistance.[122] Since the July 2023 coup and the subsequent escalation of military action against insurgent organisations, including cross-border operations against militants in Mali, Nigerien civilians have found themselves at greater risk of being targeted.[123] As of the end of May 2024, in addition to 407,430 IDPs, the country also hosted 411,268 refugees and asylum seekers. Of these, more than half were from **Nigeria**,[124] where almost four million people are also internally displaced.[125]

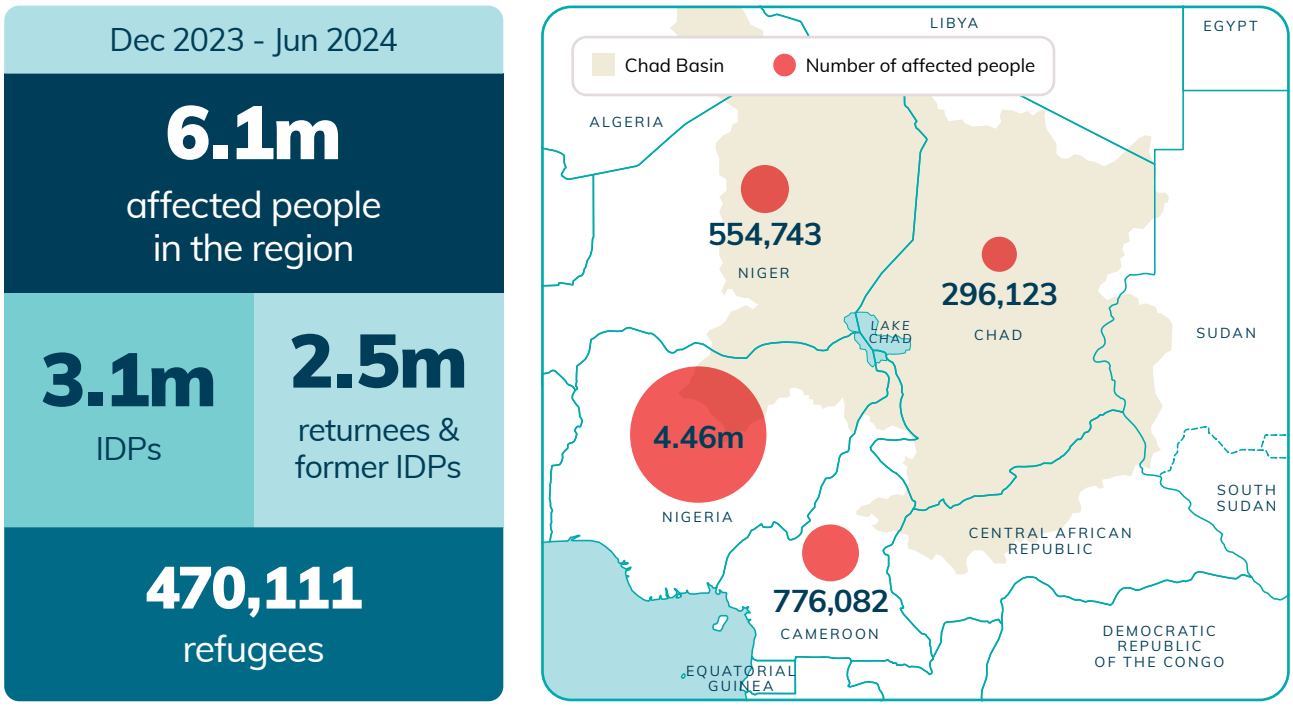
The situation in the Sahel could deteriorate further in the near future. UNHCR, for instance, has warned that, without appropriate action, the crisis could extend across the wider region to encompass neighbouring countries.[126] Nearby coastal countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo are already being substantively impacted by the arrival of large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers with acute humanitarian needs.[127] The increasing entanglement of geopolitical divisions, internal instability, violent extremism and climate change together make an easy resolution of the current crisis especially difficult to achieve, laying the ground for further death and displacement.

Lake Chad Basin

A similar dynamic of weak governance, armed insurgencies, environmental stress and chronic poverty is playing out in the Lake Chad Basin. As of June 2024, there were almost 6.1 million affected individuals in the region, including 3.15 million IDPs, 2.17 million returnees and former IDPs, 293,282 returnees from abroad and 470,111 refugees. Within the context of the Lake Chad crisis, in addition to Niger (554,743), Cameroon (776,082) and Chad (296,123), the largest proportion of affected individuals is in Nigeria (4.46 million).[128] Here, the security context is complicated by violent extremism in the form of Boko Haram, banditry and a nexus of intercommunal conflicts, often exacerbated by the actions of government forces, who have also been implicated in severe human rights abuses.[129] IDPs are especially vulnerable to targeted attacks, killings and mass abductions, as illustrated by the kidnapping of more than 400 people from displacement camps in Borno State on 3 March 2024 – one incident in a repeated pattern of abuse by militants in the north of the country in recent years.[130]

117 ACLED (2024) Ibid.
118 ACLED (2024) Ibid.; UNHCR (2024) Mauritania.
119 International Rescue Committee (2024) Crisis in Mali: What you need to know and how to help.
120 IDMC (2024) Niger.
121 Danish Refugee Council (2024) Global Displacement Forecast 2024.
122 OCHA (2024) Niger.
123 ACLED (2024) Op. Cit.
124 UNHCR (2024) Niger.
125 IOM (2024) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) | Nigeria - National Displacement Profile 2023.
126 Voice of America (2024) UNHCR: 'Act now' or Sahel crisis will be 'problem for the world'.
127 UNICEF (2024) Response in coastal countries linked to central Sahel crisis spillover.
128 IOM (2024) Lake Chad Basin crisis monthly dashboard 65 (June 2024).
129 Human Rights Watch (2024) Events of 2023: Nigeria.
130 Amnesty International (2024) Nigeria: Authorities must ensure safe release and return of over 680 people abducted this week.

Graphic 5. The impact of armed insurgency and conflict in the Lake Chad Basin (as of June 2024)



Source (adapted) and credit: IOM (2024) Lake Chad Basin crisis monthly dashboard 65 (June 2024).

While levels of violence appeared to reduce in the first months of 2024, after reaching a peak at the end of 2023, the situation nevertheless remains highly volatile: from February to April 2024, at least 521 people died in 415 documented security incidents.[131] The profound difficulties already entrenched in the region have been exacerbated further by spiralling conflict in neighbouring countries, such as Sudan. This is especially evident in **Chad**, where the refugee population has increased to almost 1.97 million refugees – an extraordinary rise from 583,356 at the end of March 2023.[132]

Cameroon continues to contend with a far-reaching, multi-faceted displacement crisis rooted in the outbreak of insurgencies in the north of the country and civil conflict in its Anglophone regions, rooted in a history of discrimination towards its English-speaking population. In the impoverished, politically marginalised Far North region, where an estimated 453,661 people were internally displaced as of the end of April 2024,[133] the cross-border depredations of the militant organisation Boko Haram in Nigeria continue to drive displacement. Many of these IDPs have been displaced for years, with little or no access to basic services, education or adequate shelter.[134] The situation has been further complicated by inter-communal fighting between Choa Arab herders and Musgum fisherfolk, with growing concerns that other ethnic groups could also become embroiled in violence amid heightened competition for water, food and other resources.[135]

In the country's Anglophone North-West and South-West regions, meanwhile, 583,113 people were displaced at the end of April 2024, as fighting between government forces and Ambazonian separatists has continued into its seventh year. The conflict emerged in the wake of the government's violent response to 2016 protests against the perceived dominance of the French-speaking population, triggering the development of an insurgency that has actively targeted schools, students and infrastructure as part of its campaign. More than 6,000 civilians in the Anglophone regions have died at the hands of government forces and separatists.[136]

Displacement rises in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

The **DRC**'s longstanding displacement crisis, much of it concentrated in the eastern part of the country, has worsened in the last two years, as repeated fighting by an array of armed groups in North Kivu and South Kivu provinces has uprooted hundreds of thousands of people. In the first three months of 2024 alone, the

131 CHA (2024) Lake Chad Basin: Humanitarian snapshot (as of 23 May 2024).
132 UNHCR (2024) Chad; IOM (2024) Lake Chad Basin crisis monthly dashboard 65 (June 2024).
133 UNHCR (2024) Cameroon.
134 Global Protection Cluster (2024) Analysis of forcibly displaced persons in Far North Cameroon—February 2024.
135 International Crisis Group (2024) Curbing feuds over water in Cameroon's Far North.
136 Human Rights Watch (2024) Events of 2023: Cameroon.

number of internally displaced in the country rose by 738,000 people, bringing the total IDP population to 7.2 million.[137] Recent incidents, including an attack on the town of Sake that displaced around 380,000 people to Goma and Minova, have increasingly been characterised by the use of indiscriminate heavy artillery attacks on densely populated areas and civilian infrastructure, with many IDPs subjected to brutal human rights abuses.[138]

While the majority of displacements are conflict-induced, flooding and other natural disasters, as well as epidemic outbreaks of diseases such as cholera, have further complicated an already complex displacement context that encompasses more than 10.3 million refugees, IDPs, asylum seekers, returnee IDPs, returnee refugees, stateless groups and other people of concern. The severity of the situation, exacerbated by chronic shortfalls in humanitarian funding, has led to the DRC being the only country in Africa where UNHCR has declared "three L2 emergencies for refugees as well as two L3 emergencies and two L2 emergencies for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in less than five years".[139]

Southern Africa

Though less documented than some other migration corridors, the Southern route from East and the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes towards **South Africa**, running through **Tanzania**, **Malawi**, **Mozambique** and **Zambia**, saw an estimated 80,000 movements in 2023 alone.[140] The journey, driven by the increasingly difficult economic, environmental and security conditions in countries of origin, poses significant risks along the way, from theft and assault at the hands of criminal gangs to harassment and detention by local officials. In transit countries such as Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, the latter continue to intercept, detain and deport thousands of foreign nationals travelling through their territories.[141] However, the route remains far less documented than other migration corridors – for example, those running from the East and Horn of Africa towards the Gulf or North Africa – in part because, as "South-South" migration, it is less of a concern within the EU and, therefore, receives less attention in terms of international media coverage or research.[142]

Conflict in northern Mozambique

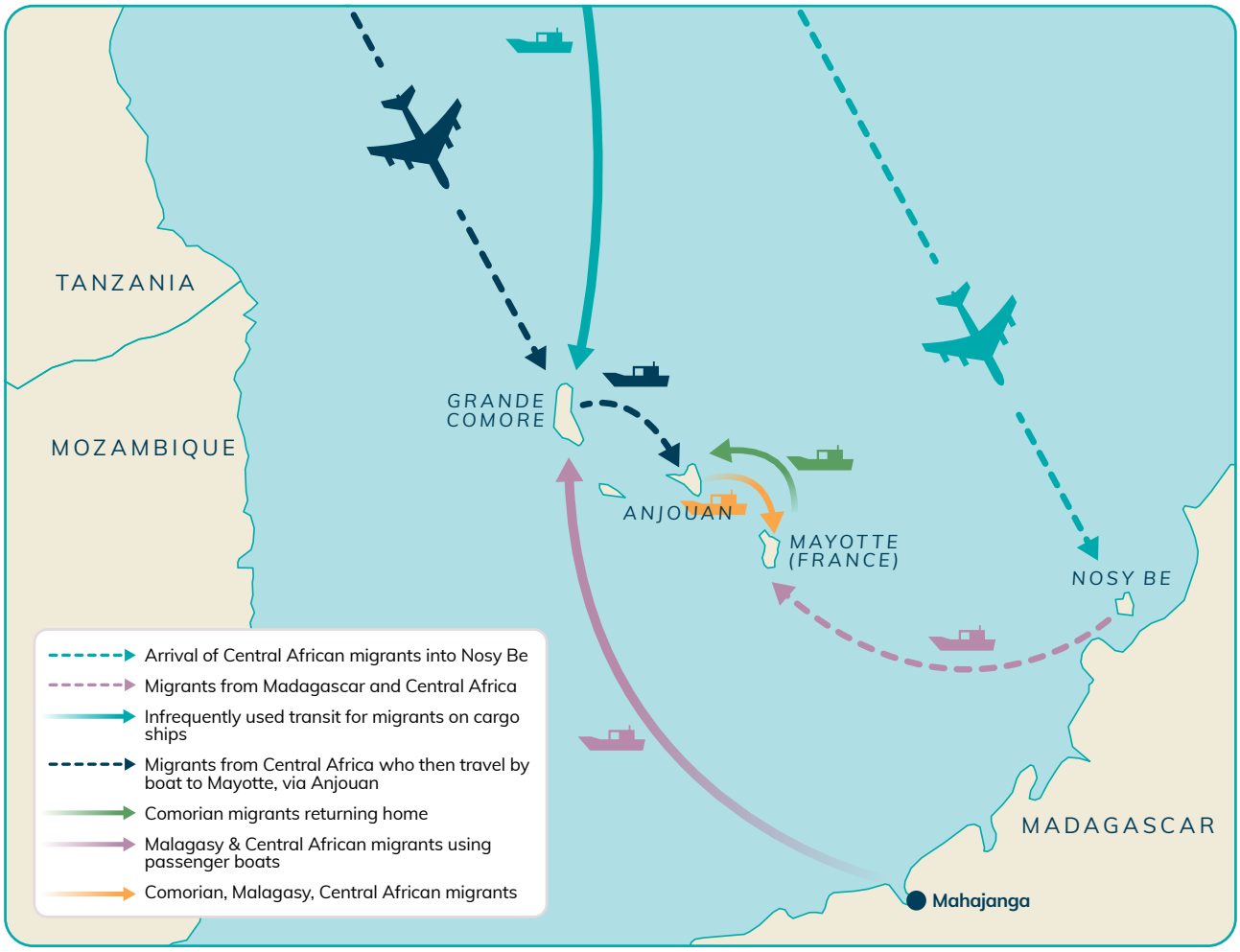
In 2017, the outbreak of conflict in the northern province of Cabo Delgado in Mozambique , along with the impact of regular flooding, typhoons and other natural disasters, led to large-scale displacement and widespread atrocities against local communities. Though security appeared to improve in some areas during 2023, enabling hundreds of thousands of IDPs to go back to their homes, many returnees continue to face profound challenges including substandard living conditions and little or no access to services.[143] At the same time, ongoing insecurity and further attacks against civilians by armed groups continue to drive further displacement, with almost 710,000 people internally displaced as of the end of March 2024.[144] At the start of March, IOM reported that more than 110,000 people had already been displaced by fighting in the space of just over two months since the year began.[145]

Mayotte protests against immigration continue

Irregular migration from **Comoros** to the neighbouring island of Mayotte – geographically part of the same archipelago, but administratively still part of France, having voted to remain part of the country in a 1972 referendum – is not a new phenomenon, but has attracted increasing attention in recent years. According to some estimates, around half of the 300,000-strong population on the island is believed to be foreigners.[146] Though poverty is widespread in Mayotte, a situation that some local Mahorais blame on undocumented migrants, the fact that conditions in Comoros are even more challenging has meant that many Comorians continue to attempt the hazardous crossing. Other nationalities attempting the journey include migrants from neighbouring Madagascar, as well as Somalis, DR Congolese and Burundians, who have been detected transiting through Comoros on their way to Mayotte. The journey is exceptionally hazardous, with various estimates suggesting that, since the early 1990s, thousands of people, even tens of thousands, have died attempting to reach Mayotte.[147]

137 OCHA (2024) Democratic Republic of the Congo: Internally displaced persons and returnees, March 2024.
138 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR urges immediate action amid heightened risks for displaced in eastern DR Congo.
139 UNHCR (2024) Democratic Republic of Congo.
140 IOM (2024) Appeal for USD 112 million for migrants along the Eastern and Southern Africa routes.
141 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Eastern and South Africa / Egypt and Yemen —Quarter 1 2024; Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Eastern and South Africa / Egypt and Yemen—Quarter 2 2024.
142 Anyadike, O. (2023) From Ethiopia to South Africa: The human cost of a neglected migration route. The New Humanitarian.
143 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR's Grandi and UN's Piper call for renewed focus on Mozambique displacement.
144 UNHCR (2024) Mozambique: Operational update—March 2024.
145 InfoMigrants (2024) Over 110,000 displaced in Mozambique amid rising violence —IOM.
146 Jesuthasan, M. (2023) 'Insulted, humiliated, hunted': plight of migrants as slums razed in French territory of Mayotte. The Guardian.
147 ECRE (2024) France: Recent Decision By National Court of Asylum Decision Could Have Significant Impact for Palestinians from the Gaza Strip — Tension in Mayotte Amid Possible Change to Citizenship Rights for Islanders — Former Frontex Chief to Run in European Parliament Elections for Far-right Party.

Graphic 6. Shifting dynamics of mixed migration routes to French territory Mayotte



Source (adapted) and credit: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

In 2023, French authorities responded with a major security crackdown targeting informal settlements where most undocumented migrants resided, rounding up thousands in the process. Though the threat of deportation was not new – authorities claimed to have rounded up an average of 25,000 undocumented migrants every year since 2018[148] – the scale and visibility of these expulsions marked a new phase in its approach to irregular migration. In February 2024, with tensions rising against a backdrop of gang violence that many locals blamed on migrants, protests erupted in Mayotte demanding improved security and better living conditions – a situation that left many foreigners afraid to leave their house due to the risk of attacks.[149] The French government attempted to quell local anger with the announcement of an amendment to its nationality law, whereby anyone born on French soil is automatically granted citizenship, to exclude the children of foreigners born in Mayotte.[150] The move, justified as a measure to reduce the attractiveness of Mayotte as a destination, has proved controversial.

148 Merot, G. (2023) Anti-migration operation on French African island of Mayotte stirs tensions, exposes inequalities. AP.
149 InfoMigrants (2024) Mayotte: Slow-down in migrant crossings from Comoros as protests continue; Courtois, M. (2024) Mayotte : depuis les manifestations et la venue de Gérald Darmanin, "on a peur de sortir et de se faire attaquer". InfoMigrants.
150 Fabricius, P. (2024) France plans to terminate Mayotte's 'droit du sol'. Institute for Security Studies.

An uncertain future for refugees, as South Africa mulls an end to protection

The presence of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in South Africa has become highly contentious in recent years, with Zimbabweans – many of whom entered the country decades ago and had their status regularised through the granting of Zimbabwean Exemption Permits – particularly targeted. Alongside an increase in hate speech and vigilante attacks against foreigners, official policy has also become increasingly hostile. However, in November 2023, the government went a step further when it aired the possibility that, alongside other immigration reforms, South Africa could withdraw from the 1951 Refugee Convention due to a lack of resources.[151] In April 2024, it subsequently gazetted a Final White Paper on Citizenship, Immigration and Refugee Protection outlining a possible withdrawal from the convention to "deter economic migrants who come to South Africa disguising as asylum seekers"[152] – wording that explicitly obscures valid protection concerns.

Xenophobic sentiment escalated in the lead-up to national elections in May 2024, when candidates from across the political spectrum engaged in discriminatory rhetoric in an apparent effort to win votes by scapegoating migrants.[153] The results saw the African National Congress (ANC) lose its parliamentary majority for the first time in 30 years. While it was ultimately able to remain in power by forming a coalition with a number of other political parties, it will have to negotiate its position moving forward with these new allies, among them the Patriotic Alliance, a right-wing organisation that has backed down on its previous calls for mass deportations since entering the coalition. It remains uncertain to what extent the new arrangement will inform the future direction of immigration policy, given the shift towards a more exclusionary approach long before the election.

151 Masiko-Mpaka, N. & Seibert, L. (2023) South Africa mulls major immigration overhaul. Human Rights Watch.
152 Cocks, T. (2024) Mandela's vision of Black unity fades as South Africa closes door to migrants. Reuters.
153 Human Rights Watch (2024) South Africa: Toxic rhetoric endangers migrants.

Gender-based persecution in Uganda

"I keep my sexuality to myself to keep myself safe."

I was born in Rwanda but moved to Uganda when I was eight, with my mum. As a transwoman, I experienced lots of incidents where I got assaulted, beaten up, and humiliated. Things got really bad when the AHA [Anti-Homosexuality Act] was passed. Once, a couple of men stopped and asked me if I was a man or a woman. I didn't expect that, and I began to stammer. That's when they hit me – they punched me in the face! I had head injuries and, of course, my mental health suffered too. Anxiety, depression, trauma... that kind of stuff.

After that incident, when I got better, I knew it was high time to leave the country. That's when I decided to move to Nairobi. I've always lived in the city, I'm a city girl. I love fashion and would love to travel to Paris or Monaco. A girl can dream!

On my way to Kenya, ... people were suspicious of me. I only had some temporary documents on me with my birth name on them. So they realised I was an LGBTQI+ person fleeing Uganda, like many others.

One of the bus drivers came up to me and said he could help me. I gave him some small money, and he walked me past the border, without getting interrogated or anything. I crossed into Kenya, sat in the bus and waited for my fellows to get checked up at Immigration. To be honest, I think he understood the dynamics in the country and felt he could profit out of my situation as I needed help.

In Nairobi, I had this Ugandan friend. Apparently, she had a job for me as a masseuse. But then, it turned out to be a job in a brothel. I lasted three days and then I left. I had some savings, so I found myself a sort of motel, and then a shelter.

The shelter was technically a safe house, with a lot of trans women, but then some girls spread rumours about me. I looked very feminine and had beautiful hair and nails. I think they were jealous of my looks. Anyway, they found out I was on hormones and complained to the police. The police then raided the house, but luckily I wasn't there and didn't get arrested.

Security and safety are big deals for me. I only feel safe when I'm managing my own security. Mentioning my identity or my sexuality makes me feel insecure, so I always keep it to myself to keep myself safe. Now, I live ... within an apartment block that has security cameras and armed guards. It's in a decent area, too.

I'm an extrovert at heart, a people-person, but my circumstances have basically forced me to become an introvert and to keep to myself. And yes, I have been struggling with depression. I have a history of feeling high-level anxiety.

I don't have a permanent job right now. I do some work with an NGO. We try to make ends meet. I'm not gonna lie, I still do some casual sex work occasionally, but not as much as I used to in Uganda.

The Kenyan government is not doing enough for migrants, let alone for LGBTQI+ migrants. To be honest, they don't care about us. They have even stopped processing the asylum cases of LGBTQI+ persons. So I feel like the government has been limiting everything for us here.

In Africa, a lot of politicians use the LGBTQI+ community as a way to gain public votes and support. They go as far as to put paedophiles and homosexuals on the same level! They make parents feel scared for their kids. And then it's also affected by religion. Those anti-LGBTQI+ demonstrations you see here are spearheaded by religious groups. So it's not government policies alone, it's also highly affected by culture and religion.

All of this affects our employment, our healthcare and even our education as SGM [sexual and gender minority] migrants. Without valid documents, you can't work, get healthcare insurance or go to university. As an SGM migrant, you're extremely limited in terms of the services you can access, the things you can do and the places you can travel to.

I've only been here less than a year, but my friends say that the community was better back in the day. There was more money, safety and just a better lifestyle. But what's good now is that advocacy for our case is getting better and it's starting to have an impact. For example, now there are government hospitals that partner with LGBTQI+ organisations to provide SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] services.

Despite it all, I love Africa. I don't want to move to Europe or the US, I want to stay here. We have the perfect weather – sometimes I even find that Nairobi is a bit too cold actually! And then, who knows, I might become a famous activist one day. As long as I feel safe, I'll stay.

‘Solidarity is missing’ – Mass displacement and mixed migration in Sudan’s neglected war

On the morning of 15 April 2023, in the streets of Sudan’s capital Khartoum, armed clashes began between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), who previously shared power after ousting President Bashir in 2019. Fighting rapidly spread throughout the country, triggering the mass movement of at least 18 percent of its population of 49 million people.

A year and a half on, of those who remain in the country, 25 million are reckoned to need assistance by the UN. Beyond the need for protection from violence that, by April 2024, had already claimed the lives of an estimated 15,500 people in 5,550 incidents of political violence, people need food, healthcare, water and sanitation services.[1] In March 2024, the head of the World Food Programme warned that the war risked creating the world’s largest hunger crisis and that the likelihood of mass starvation in parts of the country is high.[2] Currently, there are at least 28.4 million people in need of assistance, with 18 million (more than 37% of the population) acutely food insecure people within the country – 10 million more than before the start of the conflict, in what UNHCR has described as “epic suffering”.[3]

By October 2024, Sudan was among the top four countries in the world with the highest prevalence of global acute malnutrition (GAM) and was grappling with multiple disease outbreaks including cholera, malaria, dengue fever, measles and rubella.

Despite this, only 51% of the 2.7 billion USD assistance funding requested for 2024 had been pledged by early October – by donors who are being stretched politically and financially by the wars in Gaza and Ukraine as well as other domestic and international concerns.

Sudan is no stranger to war and conflict – with the country witnessing internal inter-ethnic conflicts and at least two major protracted civil wars since its independence in 1956 – which may also account for a degree of international donor weariness and wariness. As of the end of March 2023, just before the current war started, there was already a vast cohort of 3.7 million long-standing IDPs in Sudan.

This current, less reported (some say forgotten) new war in Sudan by October 2024 had displaced more than 11 million people, with another 3.1 million having crossed borders into neighbouring countries.[4] That’s a rate of over 20,000 people each day. But it’s not just Sudanese who have been impacted; those affected reflect the chequered and troubled history of Sudan and the politics of the region. As the battles spread and intensified in 2023 and 2024, the different groups of refugees and displaced in Sudan sought refuge in the midst of the inevitable economic breakdown and collapse of utilities and services.

Not all people wanting to move or being forced to move have been able to. While some groups were hugely assisted, the majority had no assistance at all and only faced obstacles and increased vulnerability, with some – like Eritrean refugees – facing the dilemma of having nowhere to run. The different groups are too varied and complex for this snapshot to track, but they included:

- International diplomats, businessmen, consultants, journalists, aid workers and travellers.
- Sudanese seeking refuge elsewhere in Sudan as IDPs. There were already 3.7 million IDPs before the conflict started, and a further 7.3 million have been newly displaced.
- Sudanese seeking refuge outside of Sudan as refugees – more than three million between April 2023 and October 2024.
- Existing refugees and asylum seekers living in Sudan mainly from neighbouring countries – as of early 2023, Sudan hosted 1.1 million refugees, mainly from South Sudan (over 800,000), Eritrea (137,000), Syria (90,000) and Ethiopia (70,000).[5] Apparently, as of April 2024, over 950,000 refugees were still in the country, unable to leave.

1 ACLED (2024) One Year of War in Sudan.
2 WFP (2024) Sudan’s war risks creating the world’s largest hunger crisis, warns WFP Chief.
3 International Rescue Committee (2024) Conflict in Sudan: Over 8 million people displaced; UNHCR (2024) As Sudan conflict fuels epic suffering, UN launches humanitarian and refugee response plans for 2024; OCHA (2024) Sudan Situation report.
4 IOM (2024) Displacement in Sudan Crosses 11 Million as Devastating Crisis Reaches New Heights: IOM Chief.
5 European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (2024) Sudan. European Commission.

- International labour migrants – at the time of the outbreak of war, it is estimated Sudan hosted approximately 1.2 million labour migrants, among them 10,000 Egyptians, 100,000 Ethiopians and nationals from Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Mauritania, Somalia and the Philippines.[6]

Before the current conflict, the region hosted large numbers of registered Sudanese refugees, primarily residing in South Sudan (290,000), Chad (410,000), Ethiopia (50,000) and Egypt (60,000) – the same countries where new asylum seekers have fled to. Events in Sudan in 2023 and 2024 mean that the prospects for a safe return and reintegration into the country remain very bleak and out of reach, while the number of Sudanese refugees continues to increase rapidly.

As of October 2024, counting the existing displaced, the total number of people internally displaced in Sudan has surpassed 11 million, making it the largest internal displacement crisis in the world. Over half (approximately 53%) of IDPs are children under the age of 18,[7] and around 22 percent were children under the age of five. Additionally, over a quarter of the IDPs are girls under the age of 18 and face unique protection risks in a context where sexual violence is ever-present.[8]

Since the fight started, almost three million Sudanese nationals have crossed borders into South Sudan, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic (CAR) as well as Uganda. By contrast, access to Europe and other OECD countries has been extremely limited due to restrictions on resettlement places and, in the case of Europe, the EU's ever-restrictive externalisation policies across North Africa, with mixed migration control outsourced in new or ongoing deals with Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco.[9] Specifically, the EU deal with Egypt appears to have been established against the background of large movements of Sudanese into Egypt and concerns about onward movement to Europe.[10] Sea travel is also hazardous for Sudanese trying to enter Europe irregularly, with drowning accidents reported.[11] Nevertheless, in the same way that the onward movement of Syrian refugees from neighbouring countries to Europe occurred some years after their initial flight from Syria, the same could occur with Sudanese.

Compared to Sudan's neighbours, the international response to Sudanese refugees and asylum seekers has been paltry. Some countries, such as Canada, the US and Sweden, announced temporary protection or deportation freezes for Sudanese, with Canada also announcing a new family reunification pathway.[12] According to UNHCR, Germany resettled more Sudanese refugees in 2023 than any other European country – but this was still a mere 472 people. In the same period, the US resettled 1,817 Sudanese and Canada took in 674. Aside from these efforts, Sudan's conflict has been largely neglected by Europe and the international community, which has "failed to provide safe and legal pathways outside Africa", according to Human Rights Watch.[13] As Jan Egeland, head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, lamented, the current humanitarian crisis in Sudan is many times larger than previous Sudan emergencies, "but this time the international outrage and solidarity is missing".[14]

6 Emergency Trust Fund in Africa (2020) First steps taken to protect migrant domestic workers in the Sudan; IOM (no date) A Network of Care for Migrants in Sudan.
7 Osman, M. (2024) Sudan Conflict Fuels World's Largest Internal Displacement. Human Rights Watch.
8 OHCHR (2023) UN experts alarmed by reported widespread use of rape and sexual violence against women and girls by RSF in Sudan.
9 European Commission (2022) EU working together with African partners on migration: Launch of Team Europe initiatives.
10 van Moorsel, J. & Bonfiglio, A. (2024) A conscious coupling: The EU-Egypt 'strategic and comprehensive partnership. Mixed Migration Centre.
11 Al Jazeera (2024) At least 13 Sudanese asylum seekers killed after boat capsizes off Tunisia.
12 York, G. & Dickson, J. (2024) Canada prepares to welcome thousands of Sudanese, but new pathway sparks questions. The Globe and Mail.
13 Seibert, I. (2024) Sudanese Refugee Deaths Highlight EU Policy Failures. Human Rights Watch.
14 Norwegian Refugee Council (2024) Survivors of Sudan's brutal war have been forgotten.

Interview

Tunisia – the trauma of immobility

The externalisation of European borders will only cause more deaths and disappearances of Tunisians at sea, says **Wael Garnaoui**, but it won't cure the country's "migration fever" and its ever-strong desire for the West.

Wael Garnaoui is Doctor in Psychoanalysis and Assistant Professor of Psychology at the Tunisian University. He conducts research on migration policies, the processes of borderisation and their impacts on the political subjectivities of migrants from the Global South, particularly in the context of irregular immigration by Tunisians. In 2022, he published his book Harga et désir d'Occident (Harga and Desire for the West).

In 2019, you wrote the article titled *Mère ne vois-tu pas que je brûle? Esquisse d'une compréhension de la dynamique familiale des migrants clandestins disparus.*[1] What did you mean by 'brûle' (burn)?

Brûle means "to burn", and those who burn are the illegal migrants – we call them burners. This is because, after the closure of the Schengen space, the European borders, in 1990, young people from Tunisia or North Africa could no longer go to Europe – especially to Italy for Tunisians and to Spain for Moroccans and Algerians – whenever they wanted just with a passport. After the creation of the Schengen space in 1995, young Tunisians and other people from North Africa, were banned from going to Europe without a visa. The procedure itself was very difficult, even if you wanted to go so you could be with your family. You had to ask for a visa and it was a long process. You could wait two, three months, just to have a meeting to submit your papers. And, after giving your papers, you had to wait another month, if not more. So, the politics of migration is also the politics of waiting. People did understand that they had to wait, but the problem was that afterwards they might still not have a visa. But because it was dangerous to stay in Tunisia, they thought, "We have to go now, however we can." And even when the journey itself is not dangerous, the very fact of being stopped and having your plans thwarted will make you psychologically afraid to stay all your life *enfermé* or imprisoned in Tunisia.

North African people have always wanted to go to Europe to take a look, to do some tourism, to work and then to come back. They didn't have this idea to stay there. But after Schengen, they developed new strategies, such as hiding in boats or in the back of container trucks. When they arrived and they were afraid to be arrested by the police, they burnt their papers, their passports, their identity cards, they'd not be identified by the police and wouldn't be taken back to Tunisia or Algeria – because when you don't have identity papers, your country can't accept you because

1 Translation: *Mother can't you see that I'm burning? Outline of an understanding of the family dynamics of missing illegal migrants.*

it doesn't know you. That's why they called themselves burners. In fact, in Arabic the word is used in multiple ways and has different cultural meanings. For example, by altering a letter in the word for 'burn' (*harqa*), we get the word humiliation (*hogra*) and people burn when they feel humiliated. The way they are forced to travel to Europe makes them feel humiliated. And the way they feel treated by the state itself humiliates them even more and makes them want to migrate. It's actually part of a longer psychological analysis of this word *brûle* that's also closely linked to the damaged identity of Tunisians and our perception of ourselves.

So, the issue of migration is closely linked to Tunisian identity?

Yes, and this is a very old narrative – a colonial narrative about the Arab, claiming he's not very intelligent, not *civilisé*. The migratory policies then reproduce this narrative about all of us Arabs from North Africa. "I don't give you the visa because we are not sure that you will voluntarily return home after your seasonal work in Europe, or your resident period or tourist period." They don't tell people why their visa was refused. I've conducted so many interviews where the people who have had their visa applications refused without being told why think that maybe they are the problem, because maybe they are not 'normal'. The consular authorities are making a diagnosis, indulging in a wild interpretation of the unconscious desire of the person wishing to travel. They turn them into 'potential illegal immigrants' incapable of demonstrating 'good' will.

> **"The consular authorities are making a diagnosis, indulging in a wild interpretation of the unconscious desire of the person wishing to travel. They turn them into 'potential illegal immigrants' incapable of demonstrating 'good' will."**

Of course, in the end, it's strictly racist. It's just like the difference between the coloniser and the colonised. The colonisers have freedom of movement, while the colonised – in this case, the Tunisian people – can't move – an immobile society. Tunisian, Algerian, Moroccan people – they are all Mediterranean, but they don't have access to the Mediterranean Sea. They have just the beach and they go swimming and they come back home, they don't get to enjoy the other part of the Mediterranean Sea. That's forbidden to them. And then, of course, it's only natural for people to desire even more and to 'burn' for that which is forbidden to them. Who wants to stay all their life *enfermé* or imprisoned? It's like they develop a kind of anxiety, a sort of trauma of immobility. These are some of the psychological aspects of migration.

> **"The colonisers have freedom of movement, while the colonized – in this case, the Tunisian people – can't move – an immobile society."**

Who would you say is affected by this sense of immobility anxiety and trauma in Tunisia?

Interestingly, it particularly affects the middle class in Tunisia. Often, they have their children in Europe. There are engineers and their sons and daughters also have European nationality now – often French or Dutch nationality, but if you want your mother to come to visit you, you have a problem.[2] Maybe you or she is sick and you want to spend time with her but she is not allowed to travel. For whatever reason, they are not given a visa. Or you are pregnant and need your mom with you in Paris, but your mom can't get a visa. So this becomes a trauma for the whole family, because it destroys the social links between people. You do everything to send your son or daughter to school in Paris, you spend a lot of money, your children get good grades in school and university, where they may become engineers and stay working there because the salary in Tunisia is not good. And, of course, we can go elsewhere but we feel Mediterranean, all of us in North Africa feel we are also part of Europe, so these blockages are hard to accept. Of course you could go to Japan, but to go to Japan you have to pay 2,000 euros just for the plane tickets. To go to Europe, you have to pay 60 euros. It's not just the cost, though, it's this 'desire of the West' that is very powerful for people.

> **"Who wants to stay all their life *enfermé* or imprisoned? It's like they develop a kind of anxiety, a sort of trauma of immobility."**

Can you explain what you mean by this 'desire of the West'?

We all have just one life and things are very difficult here in Tunisia, especially for the youth. You might see your friend or family member come back from Europe or send some pictures. We all live in a very visual world these days, the age of the spectacle. So you see your friend standing by the Eiffel Tower. He takes a picture with the Eiffel Tower in the background and you think, my life will be bad because I'll never get to see Paris. So you feel you have to migrate too. You think it's the best idea – perhaps the only idea – for your future. We live in

2 See Visa Policies and the Traumas of (Im)mobility.

a world of pictures and images – TikTok, Instagram, the internet in general. We have famous Instagrammers. They take a video on a boat, or somewhere else, and it's like a picture of success. The desire for the West is hatred of oneself and one's homeland.

> **"The desire for the West is hatred of oneself and one's homeland."**

A young man could go to his family and say, okay, I want to go! They all say, no, no, please don't go. It's dangerous and they give him example after example but he says, no, I will go, and you have to help me. So the mothers and the family feel forced to help their sons to migrate. If they give them more money, they have a higher chance of less dangerous travel and higher chance of success, so they are, of course, contributing to the dynamics of the smuggling business and that's why some journalists criticise them. Meanwhile, this new externalisation of the European borders is just going to increase border control, make it harder to travel and, in turn, increase risk. The direct result will be more deaths – many more deaths and missing Tunisians and sub-Saharans. The increased securitisation within Tunisia and the control of the shores and beaches is the 'interiorisation of borders' that is the direct result of this externalisation. For example, Tunisians who were not from the island of Kerkennah are not permitted to go there anymore because it's considered a departure point for migrants to go to Lampedusa and Italy, as if the city were part of European territory.

> **"This new externalisation of the European borders is just going to increase border control, make it harder to travel and, in turn, increase risk. The direct result will be more deaths – many more deaths and missing Tunisians and sub-Saharans."**

In their mind, in Europe, everything is easy. You can have work, you can find women, there is sexual freedom, you get to enjoy your life. This perception of Europe is of being able to have a liberal life free from conservative traditions. But when they arrive, they don't find anything because they have the label of migrant. They find that they are not actually European, they normally don't have money, they can't have the same type of job and the same salary as a European, especially when they don't have proper qualifications or if their status is illegal.

How do you feel about the election results in France for the European Union, and how do you feel about the rise of Marine Le Pen's far right in France?

I think the result of the election is very bad, for migrants in general in France and for those in Tunisia, because the Tunisian perspective is a reflection of the perspective in Europe. Kais Saied's recent migration policy has strengthened right-wing parties in Europe. Some migrants are thinking beyond Europe now as a place to migrate to. Like Canada or the United States, or even other European countries like Germany instead. For example, a doctor who previously directed the education and aspirations of their children to go to Europe may now be planning to move to Canada so they can do better there. A lot of middle-class Tunisians are thinking like this now.

Migrants are afraid in France now, especially after 7 October, the war in Gaza. Since the war started, people have been saying they feel like strangers in Europe and France – it's not like before the war. They feel that they are not free to just say, 'I support Gaza', 'I support Hamas', 'I'm with the resistance', 'I'm with the victims', or 'I'm against the genocide". So they are in Europe, but they don't feel free even if technically people go to Europe to be free. That's why we now have some return flows, because of this issue in Gaza and the fear of the rise of right-wing parties.

In fact, at the same time, we have a right wing discourse here in Tunisia as well, even if we don't have parties. We just have the president, but he criticises migrants in Tunisia all the time and therefore is doing the same thing that Marine Le Pen is doing in Europe.

Tunisia is participating now with the EU to act as an external border for Europe, preventing Tunisians and other migrants coming through Tunisia from getting to Europe. Do you think the people of Tunisia are aware of what their government has agreed?

Migration policies are a very complex subject, and the Tunisian government, our government, does not show us what it signed with Europe. We have not seen anything. But our current president won the election with 72.7% of votes, so he and his government are in a strong position. People identify with this president and they like him because he puts Islamist parties behind bars. He arrested Islamist militants, has blocked the Islamist party and other militants from the left, and has arrested a lot of allegedly corrupt bureaucrats and put them in prison, even without due procedure and trials. As for the externalisation, the president claims he is against the externalisation of the EU border and claims it was the party that pushed for this. And yet, at the same time, he takes EU money and arrests migrants from Libya on the way to Europe. He stops them at sea and takes them to other cities. I think people have this consciousness about this question and they make links also between externalisation and colonisation.

It's like the border now is inside Tunisia, and this has a big impact on our society because the European Union gives a lot of money to our government to control the borders and the government takes this money and controls people inside the country. You have a lot of police these

days. I think they should use the money for other things, such as attending to economic problems. Instead, this government is offering a strategic partnership with the EU like the previous, deposed president.

> **“It’s like the border now is inside Tunisia, and this has a big impact on our society because the European Union gives a lot of money to our government to control the borders and the government takes this money and controls people inside the country.”**

Many countries have what can be called a ‘culture of migration’ but also many do not. What about Tunisia?

I see it more as an obsession now. Like a fever, much stronger than a ‘culture of migration’. I think the 2011 revolution in Tunisia was a good thing. It was an important event in the country. I was in Tunisia, studying at university when it happened, and I’d walk on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba, in the centre of Tunis, to talk to the many people who had gathered there. Everybody was excited about the change and spoke about what was happening and what needed to be done. It’s like you are in a new space in the world and the world is watching you. People were afraid, excited, and happy all at the same time. Suddenly, people were discussing and questioning everything. Secularism, the role of Islam, the LGBT movement; are we Muslims, Berbères, Carthaginians, or Westerners? Should we speak English, French or Arabic? All of these questions, that had previously been suppressed when Ben Ali was in charge, came back to the surface. Imagine, before we had just one TV channel and one party. But after 2011, we had 110 political parties and 10 or 20 channels. But with this came enormous uncertainty and also frustration. In a way, it was easier for people psychologically when things were more fixed, more traditional and closed.

> **“In Tunisia, before the revolution, everything was clear. We didn’t have freedom of expression, but after the revolution, nothing was clear, which led to increased anxiety and a desire to leave Tunisia – an obsession to leave. Something like an identity crisis.”**

Suddenly, in this more uncertain space, you had people wanting to join ISIS [Daesh] and other people wanting to go to Europe, and everybody trying to find their own identity and place of certainty that the revolution had destabilised so much. In Tunisia, before the revolution, everything was clear. We didn’t have freedom of expression, but after the revolution, nothing was clear, which led to increased anxiety and a desire to leave Tunisia – an obsession to leave. Something like an identity crisis.

I’m a psychoanalyst so I don’t see identity as fixed. I see now that people in Tunisia identify themselves as Europeans. They want to be like you, like European people, and have the same standard of living as you. Before 2015, they wanted to be like Salafists [conservative Muslims]. And it’s not just Tunisians – Algerians also have this obsessive desire to move to Europe now. I feel it myself. We are just one hour from Italy, if I take a plane from Monastir to Palermo. We listen to Italian radio and during our childhood we watched Italian TV – people feel close to this culture and people are also learning the language. Not just Italian, but many people are taking courses to learn English, Dutch and German. This whole generation, and especially the middle class, is preparing to migrate. Many of those learning in language schools will soon be ‘burners’ but also some of them may die trying to reach Europe.

Tell me a bit about the families of the disappeared in Tunisia – how does it affect people?

I’ve been researching and interacting with families of missing migrants in Tunisia since 2013. These families can develop profound pathologies around their losses. For example, they can’t eat fish because fish equals eating the bodies of their drowned children. All contact with the sea gives them psychological trauma and it’s all connected to the fact that they don’t have the body of their dead loved ones. So they wait for up to 10 years or more. They don’t have the death papers from the Tunisian state or the European side. I was in Parma, Italy, last month, and I discovered that when the police find a dead migrant, they just put them into a grave without any identification. There is a big problem around identification, and organisations like Avocats Sans Frontières are trying to make the authorities in Italy put in place better procedures. But for the family, it’s a desperate situation. They just endlessly wait. They have their telephones connected all the time with an aerial to make sure they can receive that long-awaited call. They think, ‘Maybe he will call us one day, we must always be alert and wait.’ It’s very sad, of course. They don’t even know if they’re dead. They just disappeared. The Tunisian state makes no effort to locate those who have disappeared.

In my view, if you are a state, you have to identify the deaths of your citizens. This is your first responsibility as a state. The mothers of the disappeared are doing a lot of work around the question of migration because they are respected in the city and they protest in Tunis, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They include old women, so

they are respected by the police. Police can't treat them badly, because the place of a woman – especially when she becomes a mother – is sacred in Tunisian culture.

Finding the bodies of their sons and burying them has become a dream for the families of the missing. Tunisian society is affected by collective mourning, with thousands of dead and missing in all regions, all caused by visa policies and the ban on travel in the Mediterranean.

> **"Tunisian society is affected by collective mourning, with thousands of dead and missing in all regions, all caused by visa policies and the ban on travel in the Mediterranean."**

But the discourse in the media is bad. People say these women are lying. Journalists who have no understanding of migration start to criminalise these mothers by saying they caused their children's drowning by helping them to migrate in the first place. By helping to pay the smugglers. But for me, it's normal: every mother wants to help their children. When these children want to go, nobody can change their minds. It's like a virus. That's why I developed this concept, the 'desire of the West'.

Tunisia has been in the news for the president's criticism and discriminatory comments about sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. Is this a bit ironic considering Tunisians' complaints about their own treatment by Europe?

Yes, it was really horrible because as you say it's a kind of contradiction. And Tunisian people have some shame about this treatment of black Africans who are mostly stranded in our country and prevented from onward travel. The trouble was that the president took the lead on the kind of statements and language which legitimised this horrible reaction to the migrants in Tunisia. The president said all kinds of things, like 'these migrants are dangerous and will attack us', or 'they will stay here and transform our demographic profile'. He says, 'we are Muslims and Arabs, we are not African', and 'there is no place in Tunisia for them', and all the other classic stereotypes about Africans. But the average person doesn't think this, only some poorly educated people think like he does. Everybody's suffering in Tunisia at the moment, so it's easy to try to turn migrants into the enemy. But on social media, we have an active discussion and rejection of what the president said and those who take his position – especially people who have been migrants themselves. They have worked with African migrants in France, for example, and they say what is being said about them in Tunisia is just wrong.

What is the future for Tunisians if this present condition and the migration dynamic continue?

I think it's very difficult with this current government. They don't have any plans for anything – they just have this 'security project'. We will have a lot more deaths at sea. Tunisians will die, and the flow of migrants out of the country will never stop. People want to find a new solution. If you control the Mediterranean, you will just cause more deaths at sea or you will cause a lot of conflict in North Africa, because everybody will want to go to Europe. This creates a dynamic of confrontation, with a lot of inequality. It's very one-sided, and Europe is controlling this dynamic. I'm a professor here, and all the professors I work with are now dealing with issues around the prevention of illegal migrants. All the NGOs in Tunisia work to assist the EU with externalisation. But the fact is we are neighbours and have to do things together not against each other.

> **"All the NGOs in Tunisia work to assist the EU with externalisation. But the fact is we are neighbours and have to do things together, not against each other."**

The plight of Senegal's 'invisible' refugees

"People don't take an interest in us. We're on our own."

I'm from Bangui, in the Central African Republic [CAR]. I'm a biologist, and studied both in CAR and here in Senegal. In 2013, a military and political crisis shook my country and brought a lot of killing and violence. That's when I fled to Senegal.

I arrived by plane and stayed for a few months with some compatriots. But then they started asking me to contribute to the rent. I had no money left and I applied for asylum status.

My wife and children joined me. They flew to Cameroon and then drove to Senegal. We didn't need smugglers. I got refugee status two years after my application, in 2021. Here in Senegal, I did my master's degree in biology. I looked for jobs but struggled to get any. All I got was low-paid work.

Life is very difficult in Senegal, but if I find a well-paid job I'll find stability. The Senegalese are welcoming towards foreigners and I experienced no discrimination here. The media don't talk badly about foreigners, either.

But during the elections, I started getting hassled by the police. I was coming from work and the police stopped me. I showed them my refugee card, but they told me they didn't know my status and locked me up. The next morning, the Commissioner came and saw my card and asked why they'd locked me up. He apologised, saying that it shouldn't have happened.

A big problem is that the refugee card isn't widely known, so we need to let the services know about it.

In 2023, there were gangsters around who would assault you at night and take everything you had. They would even stab you. Once they took my phone and 15,000 francs[1] when I was on my way back from church. But they do this to Senegalese people too, not just foreigners. Luckily, this doesn't happen anymore.

We've only just celebrated World Refugee Day on 20 June. The government made a lot of promises to refugees, but they haven't been kept. There was supposed to be a decree to help us, but it has not been implemented. This law covers access to education, social integration, social services and employment for refugees.

We already have access to basic services, health, education and housing. We don't have a reception point for refugees and migrants. A lot of migrants sleep outside, even with children and babies.

As far as the police and gendarmerie are concerned, if you have your papers there's no problem. Now I'm sometimes afraid of the Senegalese because if you have a row with them, they can pay gangsters and other people to come and do something to you because you're not actually in your country.

Recently, cases of sexual violence have increased among refugee women. When it comes to assaults, they know when they see you that you're not Senegalese, either from your face or from the way you're dressed.

A Senegalese friend of mine told me that the new government wants to look after Senegalese people first, because they say that foreigners come here to grab resources. The UNHCR is the one pushing for sustainable solutions, but of course it has to have the government's agreement.

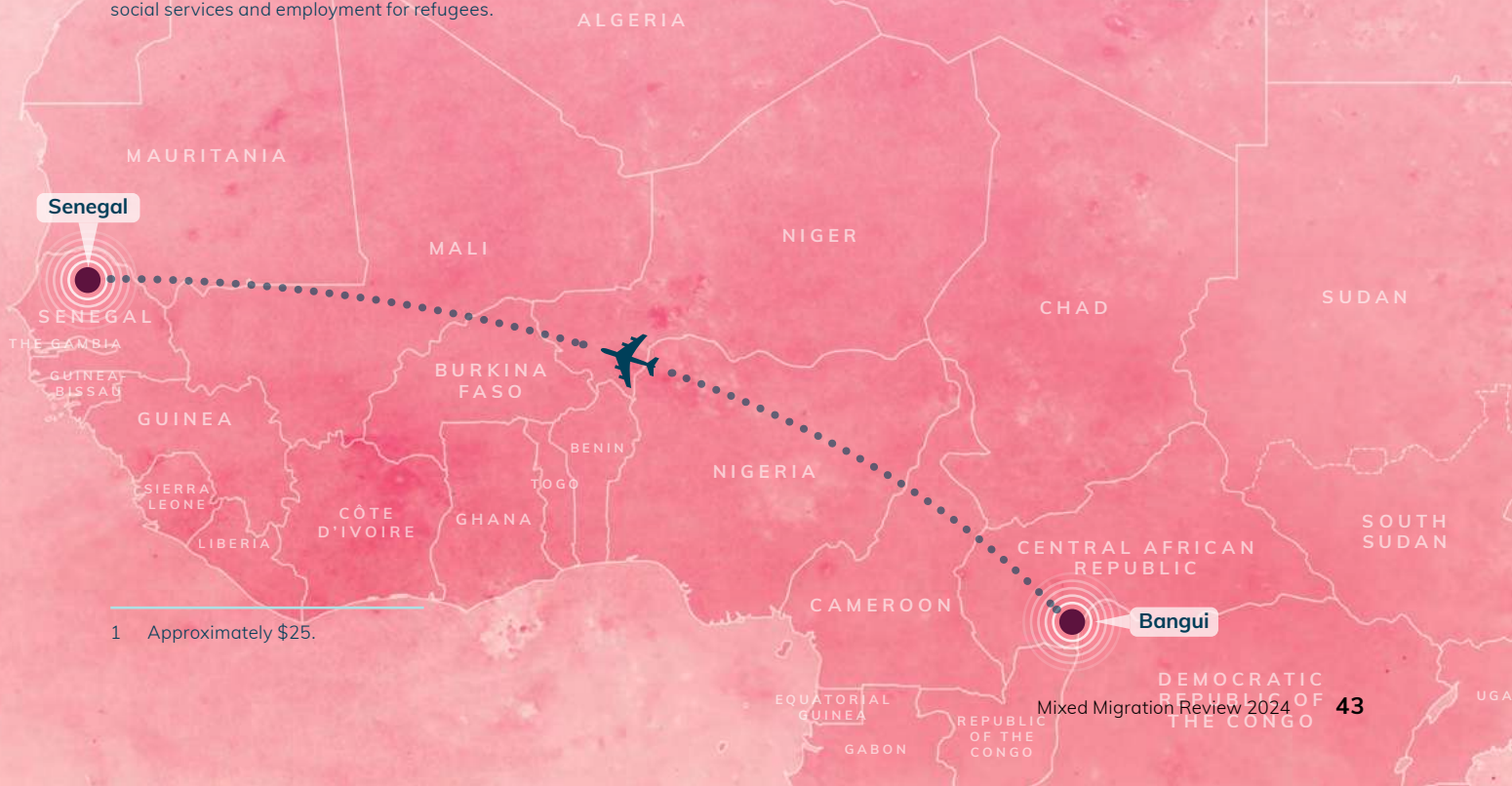
Here, there are also no good policies for young people, and so they flee the country to go elsewhere, to go West and find a better life.

The 2024 elections have not led to many changes. I can't see anything at the moment, apart from the naturalisation of 400 Mauritanians. But 800,000 people have applied for naturalisation since then, so things are moving very slowly.

In terms of the elections, we feel excluded. Maybe refugees should be able to vote. So there's a feeling of marginalisation and some NGOs are really working to amplify the voice of refugees, during the election period too, by speaking out and arguing for more inclusive policies.

If we don't talk about refugees, the state won't bother, whereas if we talk about them a lot, the state will need to try and find lasting solutions.

And right now, people don't take an interest in us. We're on our own, despite the difficulties.



1 Approximately $25.

The Middle East

Overview

Peter Grant

Since October 2023, the conflict in Gaza has quickly developed into an unprecedented catastrophe, further exacerbating the situation in a region that has long contended with some of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. On the one hand, the situation is characterised by the repeated and large-scale movement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians within Gaza in response to fighting and mandatory mass evacuations. On the other, as evidenced by the shrinking "safe zones" in which the displaced can supposedly seek sanctuary, their plight is defined by forced immobility – most notably, the closure of both Israel and Egypt's borders. With no end to the conflict in sight, and much of Gaza's housing, farmland and infrastructure erased by aerial bombing, the prospects for its population (the majority of whom remain displaced at the time of writing) are bleak. Following targeted assassinations of senior Hamas officials in Beirut and Tehran, as well as escalating fighting at the Israel-Lebanon border and the threat of reprisals from Iran, many fear not only the indefinite continuation of the devastating conflict in Gaza, but also its spread into a wider regional war.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, there are few positive signs, with Syria's continued conflict offering little respite to the large IDP population within the country and the millions of refugees living in Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan, who face an increasingly inhospitable climate in their host countries and growing political pressure to expedite their return. In Yemen, meanwhile, around one in seven civilians are still displaced, numbering – together with the sizeable population of Ethiopian and Somali migrants in the country – among the most vulnerable groups in a country struggling with protracted violence and chronic food insecurity.

Crisis in Gaza

On 7 October 2023, armed gunmen belonging to the militant organisation Hamas broke through the security barrier separating the Gaza Strip (part of **Palestine**) and southern **Israel** and carried out an indiscriminate assault on civilians and security forces. In the ensuing violence, as many as 1,200 people were killed and more than 250 others abducted, including children. In addition to mass killings,[1] "clear and convincing" evidence of sexual violence[2] and other severe human rights violations, the attacks also displaced around 126,000 Israelis who were forced to flee southern Israel.[3] In response, Israel launched intensive airstrikes accompanied by a ground invasion with the stated aim of destroying Hamas. UN investigations into the attacks and subsequent conflict have accused both Hamas and the Israeli government of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.[4]

The ongoing conflict in Gaza shows no sign of abating, with almost the entire civilian population displaced by the violence. As of the end of August 2024, more than 41,000 Palestinians have been killed in the fighting and many others injured, according to official data from Palestinian health authorities.[5] Meanwhile, the blockading of Gaza by Israel has obstructed the delivery of food and medical supplies, contributing to a deepening humanitarian crisis and severe levels of hunger among the Palestinian population.[6] In addition to deaths directly attributed to the violence, researchers fear that the knock-on effects of malnutrition, disease and unsafe living conditions could ultimately lead to a far higher death toll, with one academic study projecting that 186,000 or more Palestinian deaths could ultimately be attributed to the conflict.[7]

1 UN (2024) Hamas, Israel committed war crimes, claims independent rights probe.
2 UN (2024) 'Clear and convincing information' that hostages held in Gaza subjected to sexual violence, says UN Special Representative.
3 Sinmaz, E. (2023) 'I'll never go back': the Israelis displaced from homes by Hamas attack. The Guardian.
4 Graham-Harrison, E. & Beaumont, P. (2024) Israel and Hamas have both committed war crimes since 7 October, says UN body. The Guardian.
5 Al Jazeera (2024) Israel-Gaza war in maps and charts: Live tracker. Al Jazeera.
6 Griffen, D. (2024) 'High risk' of famine in Gaza persists, new UN-backed report says. BBC.
7 Khatib, R., McKee, M. & Yusuf, S. (2024) Counting the dead in Gaza: Difficult but essential. The Lancet.

Humanitarian evacuations or forced displacement?

Alongside the catastrophic impacts described above, the conflict has triggered one of the largest displacement crises in the Middle East. That this was going to be a defining feature of the conflict was first signalled on 13 October, when the Israeli government called on the entire population of Gaza City, home to more than one million people, to move south within 24 hours. In the months that followed, as the military bombardments spread across the north, around 90 percent of Gaza's population – approximately, 1.9 million people – have been displaced.[8] The successive phases of Israel's military campaign have seen the Gazan population displaced multiple times.[9]

After Gaza City was emptied, the Israeli military subsequently established an east-to-west dividing line across Gaza to prevent Palestinian civilians from re-entering, though many Palestinians – between 300,000 and 350,000, according to 2024 mid-year estimates by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) – were trapped in the north, unable to move southwards.[10] On 1 December 2023, Israel published an "evacuation grid" that carved Gaza into 623 separate blocks and began ordering Palestinians living in some of the areas, including the city of Khan Younis and various refugee camps in central Gaza, to continue moving south. Subsequently, from late January 2024 onwards, the military launched repeated attacks on supposed "safe zones", such as Al-Aqsa University in the Mawasi Humanitarian Zone and Rafah refugee camp, to where many Palestinians had already been displaced as a result of Israel's evacuation orders. While often lacking coherence at an individual level, with civilians in some cases ordered to relocate into areas that were themselves "evacuation areas" only the day before, the combined effect of Israel's orders has been the systematic mass displacement of the Gazan population into ever smaller pockets of land in the south, often in ways that have only exacerbated the threats to its security.[11]

Israel, defending itself against charges of genocide from the International Court of Justice, justified its announcement of mass evacuations as evidence of humanitarian precaution on the part of its military. However, a March 2024 report published by the organisation Forensic Architecture disputed this presentation, instead arguing that the successive evacuation orders issued by Israel were effectively a form of "humanitarian violence" that contributed to systematic mass displacement, a situation aggravated by the fact that the Israeli military subsequently launched multiple attacks on civilians using designated "safe corridors".[12] This analysis appeared to be borne out by Israel's subsequent May attacks on the Rafah refugee camp, that displaced around 800,000 people, driving large numbers of them to the southern coastal strip of Al-Mawassi, without adequate shelter or infrastructure to meet their needs.[13] Indiscriminate bombing by Israel,[14] as well as Hamas's strategy of embedding its fighters in civilian areas,[15] mean that nowhere is now safe for the more than two million Palestinians unable to leave Gaza.

Conditions deteriorate in the West Bank

Though the conflict within Gaza has dominated international coverage, due to the scale and intensity of its destruction, the situation in the Israeli-occupied West Bank has also deteriorated dramatically since October 2023. In addition to an array of economic sanctions and growing restrictions on movement out of the West Bank, conditions have become increasingly violent as fighting has escalated between Israeli forces and militants. While a number of deadly attacks have been carried out by Hamas fighters in the area, including the killing of several Israeli police officers in September,[16] large-scale military operations by Israel have resulted in at least 676 deaths (including 152 children) and 5,400 more injuries by the end of August 2024.[17] Thousands have also been displaced by targeted demolitions and evictions carried out by Israeli authorities and settlers, a longstanding pattern of human rights violations that has, nevertheless, escalated since the October 2023 attacks. While at least 1,539 Palestinians in the West Bank were displaced during 2023, 1,208 of these were displaced after 7 October.[18] These incidents have continued into 2024, with estimates suggesting that Israeli authorities had destroyed or seized 1,355 Palestinian structures, resulting in the displacement of more than 3,000 Palestinians, close to half of whom were children.[19]

8 The Guardian (2024) About 90% of people in Gaza displaced since war began, says UN agency.
9 Amnesty International (2024) Mass forced displacement in Gaza highlights urgent need for Israel to uphold Palestinians' right to return.
10 The Guardian (2024) Ibid.
11 Forensic Architecture (2024) Humanitarian violence in Gaza.
12 Forensic Architecture (2024) Humanitarian violence in Gaza.
13 UN (2024) Gaza: Nearly 800,000 now displaced from Rafah.
14 Amnesty International (2024) Israel/OPT: New evidence of unlawful Israeli attacks in Gaza causing mass civilian casualties amid real risk of genocide; Frankel, J. (2023) Israel's military campaign in Gaza is among the most destructive in history, experts say. PBS.
15 Willick, J. (2024) We can't ignore the truth that Hamas uses human shields. The Washington Post; Beaumont, P. (2023) What is a human shield and how has Hamas been accused of using them? The Guardian.
16 AP (2024) Palestinian militants kill 3 Israeli police in the West Bank.
17 Al Jazeera (2024) Israel-Gaza war in maps and charts: Live tracker.
18 OCHA (2024) About 4,000 Palestinians displaced in the West Bank in 2023.
19 OCHA (2024) Humanitarian situation update #201: West Bank.

Nowhere to go and nowhere to return to

From the outset of the conflict there were concerns that civilians in Gaza could be subjected to large-scale ethnic cleansing[20] and these fears were amplified by comments from various officials in the Israeli government calling for the complete destruction of Gaza.[21] Ensuring the right to return, particularly in a context where some right-wing voices in Israel have been calling for Gaza to be permanently emptied of its Palestinian residents,[22] is therefore a priority. Nevertheless, commentators have also argued that, in the immediate term, Palestinians must be offered the "right to flee".[23] Both Israel and **Egypt** have closed their borders to Palestinians, effectively trapping them in a steadily narrowing war zone. Egypt's justification for refusing to allow Palestinians to cross into Sinai is that, once there, it fears Israel might not allow them to return to Gaza.[24]

The scale of destruction in Gaza, with one independent estimate suggesting that around 57 percent of the buildings had been destroyed as of late April 2024 – rising to around three-quarters of all buildings in Gaza City[25] – means that, even with an end to hostilities, return will be difficult for many of those whose homes have been destroyed. Hospitals, schools and other civilian infrastructure have also been devastated. As of the end of May, 31 of Gaza's 36 hospitals were damaged or destroyed, including Al-Shifa, the largest medical facility in Gaza.[26] With Gaza itself described as "uninhabitable",[27] UN estimates suggest that its reconstruction could take 16 years and cost $40 billion.[28] Even food production is likely to be severely curtailed, with satellite analysis suggesting that more than half of Gaza's agricultural farmland has been destroyed.[29]

Conflict at the Israel-Lebanon border

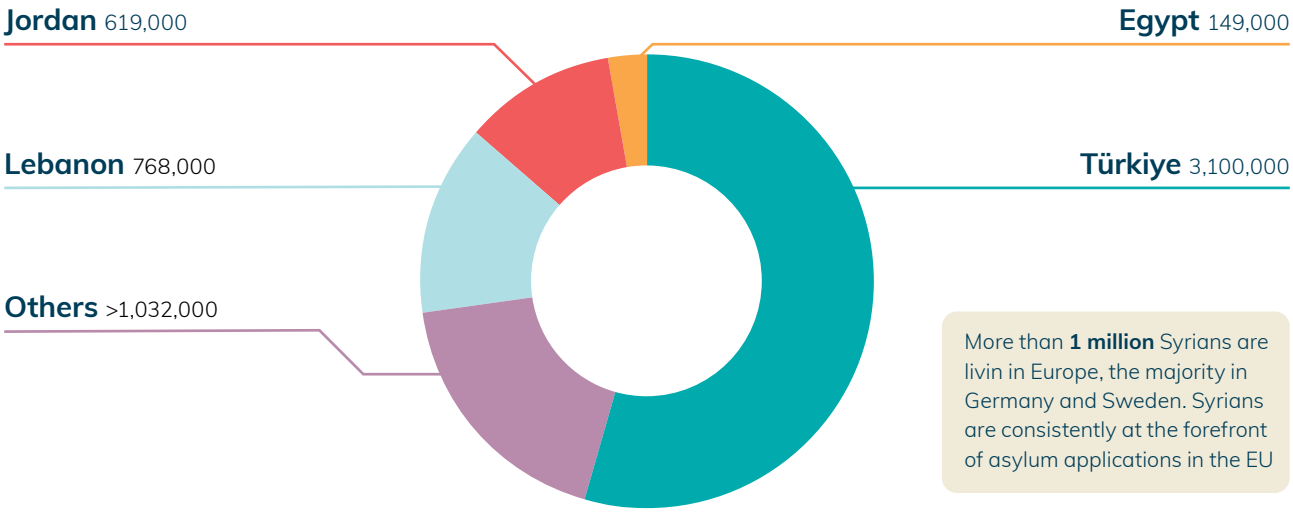
The geopolitical dimensions of the conflict have drawn in a range of actors, directly or indirectly, but the area where the fighting is most intense beyond Gaza itself is at Israel's northern border with **Lebanon**. Repeated outbreaks of fighting between Israeli forces and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah have resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians on both sides of the border. While Israeli communities in the north have been forced to evacuate to escape rocket attacks launched from within Lebanon, Israeli airstrikes have extended deeper to reach targets in cities like Nabatieh, 50 kilometres from the border.[30] As of June 2024, around 90,000 civilians in southern Lebanon and 60,000 in northern Israel were displaced as a result of the hostilities.[31]

Syria

For years, **Syria** has been fragmented into different areas under the control of rival factions, with around 70 percent of the country occupied by the Al-Assad regime and the remaining territory in the north variously held by Kurdish forces, opposition groups and militants.[32] Though often described as a "frozen conflict",[33] the risk of renewed violence and further displacement remains. More than half of the population is still in a state of displacement, either as IDPs within Syria or refugees outside the country. Many of the estimated 15.3 million people in need currently do not have access to humanitarian assistance.[34] The impacts of the devastating earthquake that hit Syria and neighbouring Türkiye also continue to be felt, with more than 40,000 people in the northwest of the country still in a limbo of displacement as a result of the disaster.[35]

20 UN (2023) UN expert warns of new instance of mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, calls for immediate ceasefire.
21 Tharoor, I. (2024) Israeli calls for Gaza's ethnic cleansing are only getting louder. The Washington Post; Holligan, A. & Slow, J. (2024) Israel officials support Gaza destruction, court hears. BBC.
22 Davies, W. & Davies, A.BBC (2024) Israeli minister outlines plans for Gaza after war. BBC
23 Frelick, B. (2024) No exit in Gaza. Human Rights Watch.
24 Myre, G. & Batrawy, A. (2024) Why Egypt won't allow vulnerable Palestinians across its border. NPR.
25 France24 (2024) 'Unlike anything we have studied': Gaza's destruction in numbers.
26 ECHO (2024) Palestine: Statement on attacks on medical and civilian infrastructure in Gaza and the West Bank.
27 The Guardian (2024) UN warns Gaza is now 'uninhabitable' as war continues.
28 Burke, J. & Tondo, L. (2024) Rebuilding homes in Gaza will cost $40bn and take 16 years, UN finds. The Guardian.
29 Hussein, M. & Haddad, M. (2024) How Israel destroyed Gaza's ability to feed itself. Al Jazeera.
30 Ghossn, K. (2024) Displacement and upheaval in southern Lebanon as Israel intensifies airstrikes. The New Humanitarian.
31 Gebeily , M., Taher, A. & Hankir, H. (2024) Displaced yet again, southern Lebanese decry lack of state support. Reuters.
32 Council on Foreign Relations (2024) Conflict in Syria.
33 IISS (2023) Syria's frozen conflict and a wave of earthquake-related diplomacy.
34 Humanitarian Action (2024) Syrian Arab Republic.
35 UNHCR (2024) A year after Türkiye-Syria quakes, UNHCR warns of rising humanitarian needs.

Graphic 1. Location of Syrian refugees (as of October 2024)



Source: UNHCR (2024) Operational Data Portal.

The majority (over five million) of the more than six million Syrian refugees worldwide are living within the region, with the largest population in Türkiye (over 3.1 million) followed by Lebanon (779,600 according to the official number of registered refugees, though the true number is likely to be around 1.5 million), Jordan (631,700), Iran (285,000) and Egypt (156,500).[36] Another one million are living in Europe, particularly in Germany and Sweden.[37] Despite the difficult living conditions they face, the majority have few prospects for a safe return – though pressure is mounting in some host countries for them to do so.

An increasingly hostile environment for Syrian refugees

With an estimated 1.5 million Syrians living in the country, equivalent to around a quarter of the total national population, Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world.[38] However, against a backdrop of political tension and a protracted economic slump, Syrians have increasingly served as scapegoats for Lebanon's internal crises. In particular, with unemployment widespread, Syrians are regularly accused of "taking" jobs from locals – a trope that some Lebanese politicians have actively sought to exploit.[39] Stigma, poverty and the threat of violence have contributed to deteriorating living conditions in recent years, with many struggling to access essential services or formal employment due to a lack of official documentation. Only 20 percent of Syrians in Lebanon have legal residency, leaving the large majority at risk of detention and exploitation.[40]

Lebanese authorities have regularly conducted round-ups and deportations of Syrians in the country, despite the evident dangers they could face upon their return. However, the situation for Syrian refugees became even more uncertain on 8 May 2024, when – shortly after a substantial package of financial assistance for Lebanon was announced by the EU – the government announced a wave of new restrictions against Syrians. This included the introduction of penalties for anyone offering undocumented Syrians shelter or employment, the closure of Syrian-owned businesses operated without the appropriate legal permissions, the imposition of curfews in some municipalities and the repatriation of refugees. Though the latter was caveated as "voluntary and safe" in the official text, the UN is clear that no areas in Syria are currently safe for returns. In practice, the new regulations could put hundreds of thousands at risk of forced deportation.[41] Even before the announcement, human rights groups were raising the alarm about the growing frequency of deportations, torture and other forms of abuse against Syrians by the authorities.[42] Syrians also face the threat of vigilante violence, particularly after the assassination of a member of a major Christian political party in April was attributed to a Syrian gang.[43]

36 UNHCR (2024) Syrian regional refugee response; UNHCR (2024) Lebanon.
37 UNHCR (2021) Syria refugee crisis—Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus.
38 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR Lebanon at a glance; ILO (undated) Lebanon.
39 Wood, D. & Nasser, R. (2024) Is everyone 'potentially an enemy'? Al Jazeera.
40 UNHCR, UNICEF & WFP (2024) VASyr 2023: Vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
41 Amnesty International (2024) Lebanon: Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees at imminent risk of deportation.
42 Human Rights Watch (2024) Lebanon: Stepped-up repression of Syrians.
43 BBC (2024) Lebanon's shift from safe haven to hostile country for Syrian refugees.

In **Türkiye**, too, Syrian refugees face an increasingly unwelcome environment in a wider context of economic and political division. Opposition parties, who have accused President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of granting citizenship to Syrians as a means of winning votes, explicitly campaigned on a promise to return all refugees to Syria in the 2023 national elections. Though Erdoğan ultimately secured enough votes to remain in power, many Syrians are nevertheless being forcibly returned: over 57,000 Syrians and people of other nationalities were deported into Syria in 2023 alone, continuing during 2024 with thousands more expelled across the border.[44] Syrian refugees are also regularly the subject of popular vilification and resentment. At the end of June, for instance, protests broke out in the city of Kayseri after a Syrian national was accused of assaulting a seven-year-old girl who was his relative, with Syrian-owned businesses and homes targeted with arson and vandalism.[45]

Syrians struggle with a range of pressures in **Jordan**, too, though their presence there has not become as politicised as elsewhere in the region. This is happening particularly as a result of the steady reduction of international humanitarian assistance for Syrians in Jordan and other host countries in the Middle East. While stopping short of the mass deportations evident in neighbouring countries, authorities have called for conditions within Syria to be improved in order to facilitate safe returns in future. There are fears that, as relations normalise between the two countries, Jordan may join calls for the repatriation of Syrian refugees.[46] The precariousness of their situation was highlighted in May, when two Syrians were arrested at pro-Gaza protests and threatened with forcible deportation, with authorities only reversing their decision after widespread condemnation from rights groups.[47]

The EU's €1 billion agreement with Lebanon

The so-called "externalisation" policy of the EU, whereby border management is increasingly outsourced to third countries – in particular, those serving as major countries of origin or transit for mixed migration – has long been a feature of its relationship with various North African states, including Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. Typically, this has involved agreements with partner countries to commit to intercepting refugees, migrants and asylum seekers before they reach the EU and accepting returns in exchange for significant financial assistance. These arrangements have been widely criticised for incentivising abusive practices and facilitating the violation of human rights.[48]

On 2 May 2024, the EU announced that it would be offering Lebanon €1 billion in multiyear assistance. Though justified as support to "Lebanon's socio-economic stability", the disbursement came in the context of a strong increase in the number of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers attempting to reach **Cyprus** from Lebanon. According to UNHCR data, between 1 January and 17 April, at least 59 boats carrying 3,191 people, most of them Syrian though also including Palestinian and Lebanese nationals, attempted to leave Lebanon – an almost 60-fold increase compared to a total of 54 people on three boats in the same period of 2023.[49] Cypriot authorities (who, in April 2024, took the extraordinary step of suspending Syrian asylum applications in response to the increasing number of arrivals[50]) had for some time called on the EU to extend its cooperation to Beirut, while the Lebanese government had also threatened to suspend the interception of migrant boats leaving its shores if it did not receive more financial support from the EU. The agreement, in addition to investments in basic services, financial reforms and security assistance, also includes provisions around migration management.[51]

Critics of this new partnership have pointed to the deleterious implications that similar arrangements have had for the rights of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in other countries, in many cases institutionalising forced pushbacks and detention of those attempting to travel to Europe. In recent years, under pressure from the EU and in an unofficial partnership with Cyprus, Lebanon's relatively *laissez-faire* approach to boats leaving its shores has given way to a more militarised approach of violent "pullbacks" and the facilitation of illegal returns from Cyprus. The increasing securitisation of the sea route from Lebanon to Cyprus has also forced boats to make the more hazardous journey to Italy instead – a situation that has likely contributed to many deaths and disappearances.[52]

44 Human Rights Watch (2024) Syrians face dire conditions in Turkish-occupied 'safe zone'.
45 Middle East Eye (2024) Turkey: Syrian businesses set ablaze after reports child was sexually abused.
46 Marks, J. (2024) Syrian refugees in Jordan: A crisis of dwindling humanitarian aid. Carnegie Endowment.
47 Christou, W. (2024) Jordan halts deportation of Syrian refugees for joining pro-Gaza protests. The New Arab.
48 Khan, H. (2024) From Tunis to Cairo: Europe extends its border across North Africa. Carnegie Endowment.
49 Sewell, A. (2024) EU announces 1 billion euros in aid for Lebanon amid a surge in irregular migration. AP.
50 DW (2024) Cyprus suspends Syrian asylum applications.
51 DW (2024) EU funnels aid to Lebanon amid Syria migrant surge to Cyprus.
52 Ayoub, E. J. (2024) The EU's 1 billion-euro gift will hurt Lebanon and its people. Al Jazeera; El Murr, Y. (2024) Intercepted at sea: Anatomy of a pullback. The Public Source.

Abuse and exploitation of foreign workers in the Gulf

Migrant workers play a vital role in the economies of countries across the Gulf, in many cases making up the bulk of the workforce in construction, hospitality, domestic work and other sectors. Despite this, they continue to be highly marginalised within their societies, frequently subject to restrictive conditions governing their work that make them especially vulnerable to abuse and mistreatment by their employers. Underpinning this situation is the complex set of regulations known as *kafala* – an inequitable system that, while nominally abolished across much of the Gulf, has left a legacy of exploitation that persists to this day.

Migrant rights remain a low priority

The plight of migrant workers in **Qatar**, in particular, received significant international scrutiny after the country was named as the host for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Activists pointed to its track record of violating the rights of foreign workers and the human cost of the infrastructure built ahead of the event, with thousands of workers believed to have died during the construction of the stadiums and other facilities. Despite much publicised labour reforms, many migrant workers continue to be subjected to wage theft, confiscation of their passports, inadequate living conditions and the constant threat of deportation.[53] Similar concerns emerged around the situation of migrant workers in the **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) ahead of its hosting of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 28) at the end of 2023, with reports of construction labourers working in extreme heat throughout the day in contravention of a midday ban to prevent potentially fatal heat exposure.[54]

The precarious situation that many migrants face, often dependent on the continued goodwill of their employer as sponsor, means that, when workers are dismissed or choose to seek out better employment elsewhere, they can easily fall into irregularity due to the high costs and complex administrative processes involved in securing labour permits. Without this documentation, they may be targeted in round-ups and summarily expelled from the country. **Bahrain**, for instance, escalated its campaign of deportations throughout 2023 and into 2024, removing thousands of irregular labour migrant workers in the process.[55] Reports have highlighted the substandard living conditions that apprehended migrants face while being held in detention, with authorities apparently "placing greater emphasis on the criminalisation of workers rather than their protection".[56] The same appeared to be true for **Kuwait**, with the government announcing a pay-for-amnesty call on 18 January 2024 for foreign workers who had become irregular to formalise their status, only to rescind the offer the next day and resume its crackdown on undocumented migrants.[57]

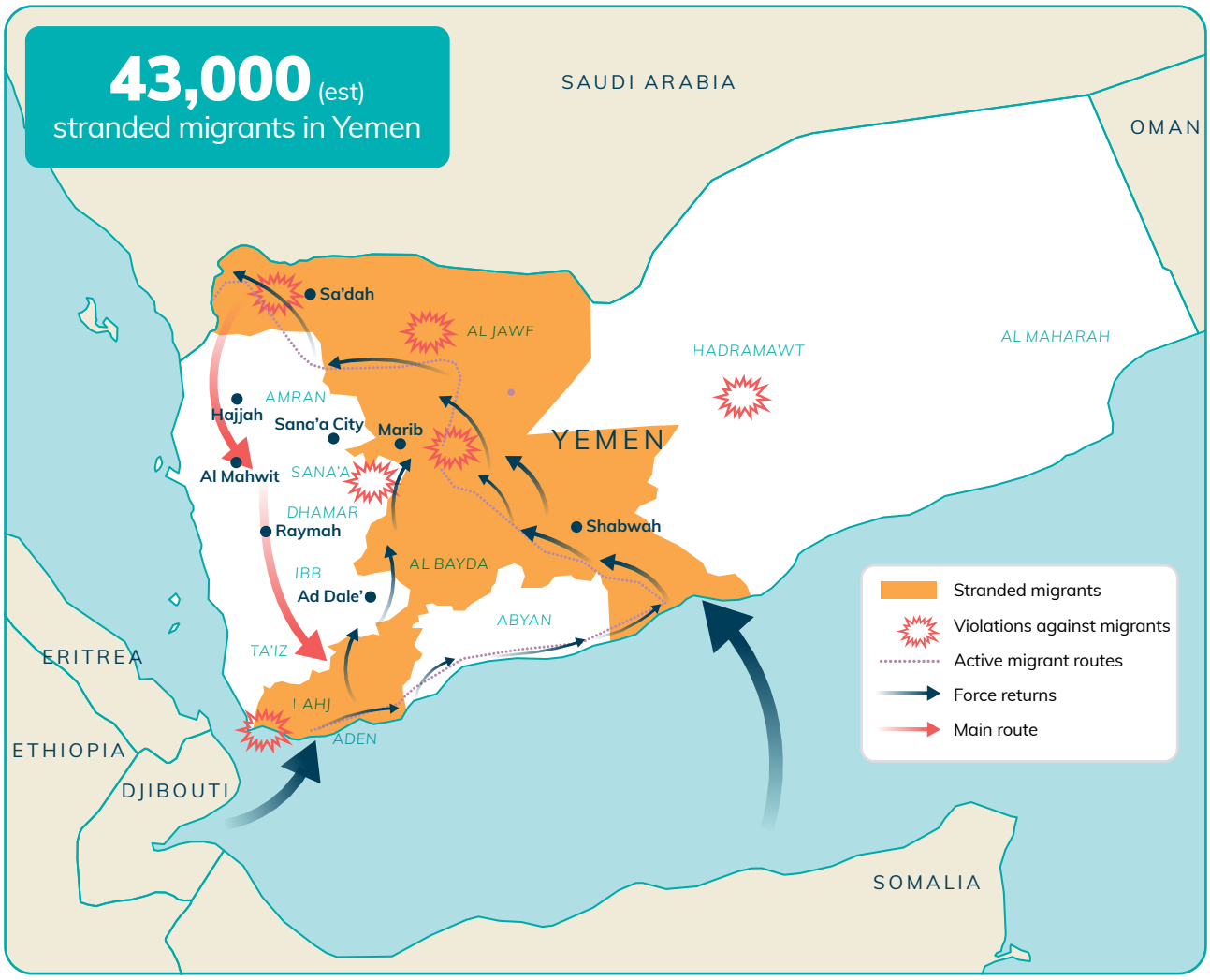
In general, while piecemeal reforms may bring some improvements for migrant labourers, the priority in most Gulf countries appears to be the needs of employers, not the rights of their imported workforce.[58] In many cases, new legislation focuses on improving the situation for citizens seeking to recruit foreign workers, even at the expense of migrant workers. In **Saudi Arabia**, for instance, where wage theft remains "rampant",[59] a ministerial directive issued in December 2023 reduced the fines that small businesses would incur for unpaid wages, passport confiscation and other abuses. This is the latest in a series of reforms in recent years that have reduced, not strengthened, the penalties incurred by employers for labour violations; this amendment "might further encourage employers from not adhering to labour regulations, exacerbating an already challenging situation".[60]

Yemen

After nine years of civil conflict, the situation in **Yemen** is more precarious than ever, with two-thirds of the population – 21.6 million people – requiring humanitarian assistance amidst a protracted food crisis that could develop into large-scale famine. The situation has been aggravated by acute funding shortfalls that mean only a fraction of the assistance needed can be delivered on the ground.[61] Though all of the civilian population struggles in these conditions, the challenges are especially acute for the 4.5 million IDPs (around 14% of the population) across the country. Many of them have been living in a state of displacement for years and uprooted by fighting multiple times.[62] While a significant proportion of these have been displaced by violence, climate change is increasingly a major driver, with one analysis claiming that "between January 2024 to May 2024, the most significant displacement events (above 1,000 persons) were climate-induced".[63]

53 Human Rights Watch (2024) World Report 2024: Qatar: Events of 2023.
54 Lakhani, N. (2023) Migrant workers toil in perilous heat to prepare for Cop28 climate talks in UAE. The Guardian.
55 Gulf Insider (2024) Bahrain cracks down on illegal workers, deporting thousands in 2023 and 2024.
56 Migrant-Rights.Org (2023) Migrant detainees endure systemic abuse at Bahrain's Al-Hidd deportation centre.
57 Alshammari, Y. (2024) Op-ed: Kuwait's backtracking on 'pay-for-amnesty' policy fails to protect rights of migrants. Migrant-Rights.org.
58 Migrant-Rights.org (2024) Domestic workers face harsher working conditions as Ramadan begins.
59 Human Rights Watch (2024) Saudi Arabia: Migrant workers' long overdue wages at risk.
60 Migrant-Rights.org (2024) Saudi Arabia reduces penalties for employers' labour law violations.
61 Norwegian Refugee Council (2024) Funding cuts leave Yemenis facing difficult choices.
62 USA for UNHCR (2024) Yemen crisis explained.
63 Cherrier, J. (2024) Displacement and climate change in the Middle East: Yemen and Syria at the forefront. Alternative Policy Solutions.

Graphic 2. Stranded migrants in Yemen (2024)



Sources (adapted) and credit: OCHA.

In addition, around 308,000 migrants and 72,000 refugees and asylum seekers, predominantly from Ethiopia and Somalia, are currently based in Yemen.[64] Side-lined from local systems of community support and without access to essential services, they are especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation. In addition, significant numbers of Yemenis continue to be returned from Saudi Arabia, with more than 21,500 returned in the first five months of 2024, the majority (almost 20,600) without travel documentation.[65]

Mixed migration from the Horn of Africa

Yemen continues to be a hub for mixed migration from the Horn of Africa en route to Saudi Arabia and **Oman**, with most heading towards the Gulf in search of employment. The number of arrivals tripled from 27,000 in 2021 (when numbers had fallen sharply in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic) to levels similar to those seen in the years before 2020, with over 90,000 reported in 2023.[66] As previously mentioned, due to insecurity and lack of access to relevant areas, data collection during 2024 has been reduced and this review cannot offer reliable data on new arrivals. However, numbers may have been affected by a joint military campaign launched by Saudi Arabia and Yemen, beginning in August 2023, that partly targeted human smuggling as well as increased surveillance in the Gulf of Aden by Djiboutian naval vessels.[67]

64 OCHA (2024) Humanitarian needs overview: Yemen.
65 IOM DTM (2024) Flow monitoring registry dashboard (May 2024).
66 OCHA (2024) Humanitarian needs overview: Yemen.
67 IOM (2024) Djibouti — Flow monitoring dashboard (January 2024).

The dangers of the journey, including the sea crossing itself, have been well documented for many years: this was highlighted by an incident in June 2024, when a boat carrying 240 people capsized off the Yemeni coast, resulting in the deaths of at least 56 people with another 129 missing.[68] This followed a number of other fatal sinkings, earlier in the year, of boats departing from **Djibouti** that resulted in dozens drowning.[69]

Despite being one of the deadliest routes in the world, those attempting the journey are not always fully aware of the risks they face when they decide to migrate. Even once they reach Yemen, migrants are at risk from traffickers, criminals, security forces and Houthi fighters who, together, are responsible for a host of human rights abuses, including abduction, torture, mutilation, sexual assault and murder. Many end up being exploited by host communities as well as armed groups, forced to work for low wages in perilous conditions before they are able to continue their journey to the Saudi border.[70]

In principle, most migrants in Yemen are in transit, however, many end up being trapped in the country: at present, around 30,000 migrants are classified as "stranded", unable to move on to Saudi Arabia or return to their countries of origin.[71] In May 2024, IOM issued a warning about the deplorable humanitarian conditions facing these and other migrants in the country, calling for immediate funding to support their safe and voluntary return.[72]

Detentions and deportations in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, like other Gulf states, has long relied on an extensive foreign labourer population to work in agriculture, construction, cleaning and domestic services. This demand will likely only increase if, as currently predicted, Saudi Arabia successfully wins its bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup. This is despite accusations of an "epidemic of abuses" against migrants in Saudi Arabia,[73] with foreign workers reporting wage theft, exploitation and other mistreatment at the hands of employers, as well as frequent mass deportations of migrants who have become irregular. This sizeable population includes not only those who have managed to cross over from Yemen, but also those who arrived through brokers and subsequently lost their legal status, often following unfair treatment or dismissal by their employers. Some deportees claim they were rounded up even though their papers were in order. Others allege their employers allowed their work permits to lapse and then reported them to the police, causing them to be deported with months of wages yet to be paid.[74]

The scale of the deportations, targeted in particular at Ethiopian nationals, is evidenced by the fact that, in the six-year period between May 2017 and June 2023, IOM registered the return of almost 558,000 Ethiopian nationals from Saudi Arabia.[75] In total, across all nationalities, the number of migrants detained and deported runs into the millions.[76] In one week alone, between 24 April and 1 May 2024, Saudi authorities reported the arrest of 19,662 migrants without an authorised status and the deportation of 15,200.[77] Many of those held in detention facilities prior to their deportation face torture, abuse, arbitrary processes and expropriation of their belongings.[78]

68 IOM (2024) Rescue at sea: The unwavering courage of a Yemeni doctor.
69 The Guardian (2024) At least 21 migrants dead after boat capsises off coast of Djibouti.
70 Mwatana for Human Rights (2023) Transit in hell: The horrific violations targeting African migrants during their journey across Yemeni territory.
71 IOM (2024) Migration along the Eastern Corridor (April 2024);
72 Qaoud, M. (2024) Soaring number of migrants trapped in Yemen face abuse and starvation, say NGOs. The Guardian.
73 Pattisson, P. (2024) Saudi Arabia accused of using forced labour ahead of Fifa World Cup decision. The Guardian.
74 Pattisson, P. (2024) Used, abused and deported: migrant workers land back in Bangladesh after Saudi dreams turn sour. The Guardian.
75 IOM (2023) Return of Ethiopian migrants from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Midyear overview 2023.
76 Adugna, G. (2022) Half a million Ethiopian migrants have been deported from Saudi Arabia in 5 years—what they go through. The Conversation.
77 Al Sherbini, R. (2024) Saudi Arabia: Over 19,000 illegals arrested in one week in crackdown. Gulf News.
78 Human Rights Watch (2024) World Report 2024: Saudi Arabia.

More deaths at the Saudi border as impunity persists

Those migrants who manage to successfully survive the many dangers in Yemen and reach the Saudi Arabia border face further threats at the hands of the country's security guards. Research by the Mixed Migration Centre, Human Rights Watch, Mwatana for Human Rights and other organisations, some of it dating back as far as August 2022, uncovered shocking evidence of extreme violence carried out at the border, resulting in hundreds of deaths and many more casualties. The violence ranged from largely indiscriminate mortar shell attacks on entire groups to torture and shooting at point-blank range. The true number of fatalities is unknown, though evidence of a clandestine cemetery housing the remains of as many as 10,000 migrants suggests the killings have been large-scale and systematic.[79]

Despite short-lived but extensive media coverage and international expressions of outrage, continued reports of extrajudicial killings and injuries suggest that lethal human rights abuses continue to be perpetrated at the border. In June 2024, the Mixed Migration Centre published updated research on the situation at the Saudi-Yemen border, drawing on testimony from migrants who had attempted to cross it between September 2023 and March 2024, in the months after the original findings on the large-scale border killings were published. The findings demonstrated that extrajudicial killings, injury and intimidation – including the use of machine guns and other heavy weaponry – continue to take place.[80]

This impunity has, in no small part, been enabled by the tepid response of key actors, such as the EU, the US and Ethiopia, whose nationals make up a large proportion of those killed and injured at the Saudi border. The issue did not feature in the preparatory report and formal submission for the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Saudi Arabia, only coming under discussion because some member states had specifically raised the subject of the mass killings in their questions to the Saudi government. One possible explanation for this inertia and the lack of concrete action from the international community is "cynical realpolitik", with various countries and institutions keen to avoid alienating Saudi Arabia due to its geopolitical importance.[81]

79 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Indifference and impunity: 10 months on, Saudi border killings of migrants continue.
80 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Ibid.
81 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Ibid.

Photo credit: Images3 / Shutterstock

Türkiye: Local elections in Türkiye took place throughout the country's 81 provinces on 31 March 2024. They were held 10 months after the 2023 parliamentary and presidential elections, where the Nation Alliance opposition coalition suffered an unexpected narrow defeat. Syrian refugees have been a major polarising issue in Turkish politics for some years, with the 3.7 million Syrian refugees living in Türkiye representing a 'political flashpoint' and one of the main issues at the forefront of the election campaign in the country in 2023 (won by Tayyip Erdoğan's People's Alliance). Reportedly, leading candidates competed to offer the most aggressive proposal to deport the refugees back to Syria. The issue of Syrian refugees became both securitised and politicised further in July after anti-Syrian riots.

Lebanon's escalating conflict: displacement and migration consequences

Lebanon's long-standing humanitarian crisis is deepening, following a surge in hostilities between Israel and Hamas over the last year, but significantly exacerbated by Israeli attacks on the country since September 2024.[1] Repeated airstrikes in southern Lebanon, the Beqaa Valley and Beirut's southern suburbs have resulted in widespread destruction and displacement. As always, civilians are bearing the brunt of this new round of crisis, with more than one million people fleeing their homes.[2]

This emergency has many layers, beyond the immediate violence. The country's long-standing political deadlock and extreme financial collapse have driven the population to desperation: 80 percent of Lebanese are now living in poverty.[3] [4] Multidimensional hardships have spurred xenophobia, particularly toward migrant and refugee communities, with tensions rising significantly during the past year.[5] In April 2024, for example, violent attacks were carried out against Syrian refugees, who were blamed for competing with locals for jobs and essential resources.[6]

Lebanese population: displacement, forced immobility and migration

Since October 2024, following Israel's offensive, more than 600,000 people have been internally displaced in Lebanon, many taking shelter in overcrowded areas or outdoors in public spaces.[7] Access to safer areas is increasingly difficult due to targeted attacks on critical infrastructure, including roads like the Beirut-Damascus highway.[8] Beirut's airport could also become a target for Israeli strikes, cutting off remaining evacuation options for civilians.[9]

Thousands of Lebanese have sought refuge in neighbouring Syria and Iraq, despite difficult conditions there.[10] As of mid-October 2024, approximately 75,000 Lebanese had already fled to Syria, renting accommodation or staying in collective shelters, most ill-provisioned with food and sanitation. Additionally, over 6,500 Lebanese travelled to Iraq, primarily to reach cities like Najaf and Karbala.[11] Crucially, though, both Syria and Iraq have very limited capacity to host more displaced people, as they already contend with major domestic issues.

Wealthier Lebanese and those with foreign passports, on the other hand, managed to leave Lebanon through independent means, underscoring stark inequalities within the country, where the most vulnerable are forced to remain in dangerous conditions.[12]

Syrian refugees: caught between unsafe returns and the Lebanese emergency

Lebanon is home to 1.5 million Syrian refugees, making it the country with the largest refugee population per capita in the world.[13] Syrians now face a dilemma between staying in unsafe and deteriorating conditions in Lebanon, fleeing back to Syria or attempting dangerous journeys to other countries like Türkiye and Cyprus.

For many Syrians, returning to their homeland remains a choice fraught with fears and dangers, given Syria's long-standing internal crisis and conflict. Despite this, since the conflict escalated, 50,000 Syrians have attempted to return to their country.[14] Even in areas less affected by conflict, housing, healthcare and employment opportunities remain scarce. The Lebanese government's National Emergency Plan, introduced in October 2023, does not prioritise Syrian refugees, leaving international organisations like UNHCR to provide whatever support

1 Ghaedi, M. (2024) Israel-Lebanon conflict explained in charts and maps. DW.
2 Johnson, D. (2024) Lebanon crisis: Over one million people flee strikes amid invasion fears. UN News.
3 Molana Allen, L. (2023) Lebanon struggles to emerge from financial crisis and government corruption. PBS News.
4 European Commission (2023) Lebanon: €60 million in humanitarian aid for the most vulnerable.
5 Sabaghi, D. (2024) Syrians in Lebanon Are Stuck in Limbo. Foreign Policy.
6 Edwards, M. (2024) Syrians in Lebanon stay indoors as fears of xenophobic violence grow. The New Humanitarian.
7 UN OCHA (2024) Lebanon: Flash Update #33 - Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, as of 7 October 2024.
8 Associated Press (2024) Israel expands its bombardment in Lebanon; thousands flee widening war. Voice of America.
9 France 24 (2024) Calls for safety of Beirut airport under threat of Israel strikes.
10 Kabalan, O. & Hariri, H. (2024) Syrians escape bombings in Lebanon to the country they once fled. UNHCR.
11 UNHCR (2024) Iraq Flash Update #9: Update on Displacement from Lebanon (8 October 2024).
12 Christou, W. (2024) $1,800 a seat: luxury yachts evacuate people from Lebanon as flights dry up. The Guardian.
13 UNHCR (2024) Lebanon.
14 DRC (2024) DRC Syria: Emergency Response to Displacement from Lebanon, Situation Report #1 (September 23rd - October 8th, 2024).

they get.[15]

Before the escalation of the current conflict, Syrians were already trying to leave Lebanon for Europe through dangerous sea crossings to Cyprus. These attempts have become more frequent as the conflict worsens, despite the high costs and risks involved. The first four months of 2024 saw 54 attempted crossings, carrying 3,200 individuals, mostly Syrians.[16] While the European Union and Cyprus have stepped up efforts to curb these crossings, a surge may still occur if Lebanon's situation deteriorates further.

Migrant workers: trapped and vulnerable

Migrant workers, particularly those under Lebanon's exploitative kafala system, have also been heavily impacted by the current situation in the country.[17] Most of these individuals, hailing from countries like Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Sudan, work as domestic workers and lack legal protection.[18] As violence escalated, many of these workers have been abandoned by their employers without shelter, food or wages, leaving them stranded and vulnerable.[19]

As a result, a large number of them have been forced to live on the streets or in parks, as most shelters only accept Lebanese citizens. Moreover, many migrant workers have also lost access to their passports and vital documentation, which were often held by their employers, making it nearly impossible to secure safe passage out of the country. As described by the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative (MICIC), humanitarian aid for migrant workers has been inconsistent, leaving them highly vulnerable to exploitation and forced immobility.[20]

Palestinian refugees: a protracted crisis

Lebanon is also home to over 470,000 Palestinian refugees, many of whom have lived in the country for decades in underfunded and overcrowded urban camps[21] which, given the high pressure they already face, might not be able to offer adequate support to a growing number of refugees and displaced persons. Inevitably, the current crisis has only worsened the conditions of Palestinians in Lebanon. Palestinian refugees enjoy very limited legal rights and few employment opportunities, leaving them highly vulnerable to displacement both within Lebanon and beyond its borders.[22]

International response and migration policies

The international response to Lebanon's crisis is still unfolding; several donors have pledged humanitarian aid, including the European Union, which has provided a further €30 million (bringing its contribution to humanitarian aid to more than €100 million in 2024).[23] Arguably, though, the focus of these contributions has largely been on curbing irregular migration to Europe, with migration diplomacy prioritising containment over protection.[24] For example, the 2024 €1 billion aid deal between the EU and Lebanon, aimed at reducing migration through routes like Cyprus, has seen a sixty-fold increase in attempted crossings during 2024 compared to 2023.[25]

There are also concerns that the movement of Lebanese and Syrian refugees fleeing to Syria could be used as justification for European countries to push for Syria to be recognised as a safe country for refugee returns, which would enable them to revise their own asylum policies and impose stricter restrictions on Syrian refugees in Europe.

Conclusion: broader implications for the region

The escalation of violence in Lebanon is part of a growing regional crisis that threatens neighbouring countries, including Israel, Syria, Iran and Iraq. A wider war involving Hezbollah, Israel and Iran will cause even more displacement, straining already overstretched resources in the region.

15 Anti-Racism Movement | As Lebanon's National Emergency Plan ignores the existence of migrants and refugees, families and individuals are left to fend for... | Instagram
16 Human Rights Watch (2024) "I Can't Go Home, Stay Here, or Leave": Pushbacks and Pullbacks of Syrian Refugees from Cyprus and Lebanon.
17 Robinson, K. (2022) What Is the Kafala System? Council on Foreign Relations.
18 Amnesty International (2019) End Kafala: Justice for Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon.
19 Marsden, O. (2024) Her employer promised to return with supplies but never came back. She is one of hundreds of migrant workers trapped in Lebanon. CNN.
20 IOM (n.d.) Background.
21 UN Relief and Works Agency (n.d.) Where We Work: Asylos (n.d.) Lebanon, Stateless Palestinians.
22 UN Relief and Works Agency (2020) Protection brief, Palestine refugees living in Lebanon.
23 European Commission (2024) EU boosts humanitarian aid to Lebanon by €30 million, bringing total to over €100 million for 2024.
24 Sewell, A. (2024) Rights group alleges Lebanon and Cyprus violated refugees' human rights and EU funds paid for it. AP News.
25 Petillo, K. (2024) Strategic aid: How the EU-Lebanon migration deal can work. European Council on Foreign Relations; Human Rights Watch (2024) Op. Cit.

Interview

The ‘spectacularisation’ of the refugee crisis

Itamar Mann is an Associate Professor of Law at the University of Haifa and a research fellow at Humboldt University, Berlin. He has written extensively in the areas of human rights law, refugee and migration law, international criminal law, Israel-Palestine, as well as legal and political theory. He is the President of the Geneva-based organization, Border Forensics, and has served as a legal adviser to the Global Legal Action Network (GLAN).

Violent pushbacks of migrants and refugees at Europe’s borders have become more systematised, argues Itamar Mann. Complicating an already challenging issue, the public seems to have developed either a sense of fatigue or a thirst for spectacularisation of the refugee crisis. Amidst all this, human rights actors tirelessly work towards more just and humane treatment of people on the move.

The Border Violence Monitoring Network published its *Black Book of Pushbacks* detailing thousands of rights violations at Europe’s borders. They seem to be increasing rather than decreasing, is that also your observation?

While I can’t speak of precise numbers, which are best provided by organisations like the Border Violence Monitoring Network, my experience as a legal professional involved in investigations, litigation and advocacy projects offers a more nuanced perspective on the issue of pushbacks at Europe’s borders.

Rather than focusing on statistics, my work allows me to examine specific cases in detail, providing insight into both individual instances and the broader rhetoric surrounding them. What emerges from this close-up view is a disturbing trend: the normalisation of pushbacks has become so pervasive that discussing it almost feels commonplace.

The Aegean Sea region serves as a stark example of this phenomenon. For years, a systematic practice of pushbacks has been in place, with the Covid-19 pandemic marking a significant turning point. During this period, we witnessed a surge in pushbacks, often justified under the guise of public health and safety measures. These actions have contributed to the current situation where such practices are largely accepted in the political sphere.

> **"The normalisation of pushbacks has become so pervasive that discussing it almost feels commonplace [and is] deeply concerning. It reflects a shift in how European borders are managed and raises serious questions about the erosion of longstanding principles of refugee protection."**

This normalisation of what are essentially human rights violations is deeply concerning. It reflects a shift in how European borders are managed and raises serious questions about the erosion of longstanding principles of refugee protection.

Since your 2016 publication *Humanity at Sea*, do you think pushbacks have become more systematised than what you observed then?

Indeed, the landscape of maritime migration and human rights has changed significantly since my 2016 publication *Humanity at Sea*. That book examined events from the mid-20th century through the 2015 Global Migration Crisis, which was largely triggered by the Arab Spring and the Syrian refugee crisis.

The core argument of *Humanity at Sea* was that maritime migration presented a critical test for European human rights principles. It questioned how judicial bodies, governments, and individuals would uphold the fundamental concept that human rights apply to all people, regardless of citizenship. This perspective was admittedly Eurocentric, based on the European Union's self-proclaimed foundation on human rights principles.

In retrospect, I believe governments have not risen to this challenge in the way we had hoped. Instead, we've witnessed an erosion of what we thought were firmly established norms, such as the principle of non-refoulement – the practice of not forcing refugees or asylum seekers to return to a country where they are likely to face persecution.

As international lawyers, we often discuss 'customary international law' – norms that governments uphold because they believe them to be legally and morally binding. Non-refoulement was considered one such norm, even achieving the status of 'jus cogens' – a fundamental principle of international law. However, recent events have called into question the strength and universality of this principle.

Looking back, I realise my perspective in 2016 may have been overly optimistic, despite acknowledging some grim realities even then. We were already witnessing the abandonment of lives at sea off the Italian coast, in Australia and in the Caribbean. However, the sheer scale and systematic nature of border violence that we see today was not anticipated.

So yes, pushbacks have indeed become more systematised. The magnitude of border violence has reached levels that, frankly, we did not foresee in 2016. This shift represents a significant challenge to the international human rights framework we once believed was firmly established.

Collectively, we seem to be less shocked by these violations. There even seems to be a sense of fatigue along with this normalisation. Would you agree?

You're correct in observing a growing fatigue and normalisation surrounding these human rights violations. However, the situation in the context of migration is more complex, presenting what we might call a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, we're witnessing a concerning trend of desensitisation. People are becoming less alarmed and less interested in these violations as they become more commonplace. This normalisation is a troubling development in itself.

On the other hand, paradoxically, we're also seeing a 'spectacularisation' of the refugee crisis. Images of refugees in perilous situations at sea have dominated front pages for years. This creates a peculiar cultural dynamic where we're simultaneously fascinated by these dramatic visuals yet unmoved to address the root causes.

> **"We've developed a capacity to observe extreme human suffering without feeling compelled to change the policies that create these situations."**

This contradiction reveals a disturbing aspect of our media consumption. We've developed a capacity to observe extreme human suffering without feeling compelled to change the policies that create these situations. It's as if these images have become a form of entertainment or even perverse enjoyment for some, allowing viewers to witness dire conditions without feeling personally responsible for the human consequences.

This dichotomy – between fatigue and spectacle – presents a significant challenge for those working to address the refugee crisis and protect human rights. It underscores the need for a more nuanced approach to raising awareness and motivating action, one that goes beyond shocking images to inspire genuine engagement with the underlying issues.

I understand you are the president of Border Forensics. Can you explain what this organisation does?

Border Forensics, where I serve as president, is an agency dedicated to investigating and reporting on border violence. Led by filmmaker and research director Charles Heller, our organisation grapples with a fundamental ethical question: how do we effectively document and communicate tragic events at borders without contributing to the spectacularisation of human suffering?

Our work involves producing reports, images, and even 3D reconstructions of catastrophic events. However, we're acutely aware of the fine line between informing the public and inadvertently creating content that could be consumed as a spectacle. This is a complex challenge that requires constant self-reflection and critical analysis.

We're concerned that the very images and reports we produce to shed light on border violence could potentially become part of the dynamic that allows such violence to continue. It's an existential issue for us, balancing the need to inform with the risk of desensitising our audience or, worse, feeding into a perverse fascination with human suffering.

One of our recent projects that I think really shows what we're about is *The Nador Melilla Trap*. It's a report and film we put together with some fantastic partners. We dug into the whole mess of what's happening between Spain and Morocco, trying to unpack how race plays into border violence there. I've got to say, I'm pretty chuffed with how it turned out. It's the kind of work that keeps us on our toes, you know? We're always trying to strike that balance between giving people the full picture and not crossing lines we shouldn't. It's tricky stuff, but we keep at it, hoping we're doing more good than harm in this complicated world of border politics.

> **"On the one hand, the law serves as a critical tool to hold governments and private actors accountable for human rights violations. On the other hand, it can sometimes be used to legitimise and facilitate severe forms of violence."**

You write about the illegality of certain government actions, but is this changing with the EU, the US and Australia increasingly having transparent and formal agreements with third nations to manage migration, that somehow sanitises their direct involvement or responsibility?

This question touches on a fundamental issue in international law. On the one hand, the law serves as a critical tool to hold governments and private actors accountable for human rights violations. On the other hand, it can sometimes be used to legitimise and facilitate severe forms of violence.

We're at a crossroads where we must ask: Do our legal tools still effectively counter this violence, or has the law evolved in a way that hinders progressive efforts for change? Many practitioners, myself included, believe we've seen a closing of doors in recent years.

A pivotal moment was the 2020 'ND & NT versus Spain' decision by the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights. This ruling gave Spain broad latitude to remove people in ways that many human rights advocates consider pushbacks or refoulement. It's raised serious concerns about the effectiveness of our legal tools.

Our recent work at Border Forensics examines this region, investigating what we term border apartheid. As these international agreements create a more hostile environment for advocacy, those of us using the law must rethink our approach.

> **"I believe we need to shift the focus towards local dynamics rather than relying heavily on international courts like the European Court of Human Rights, which are under increasing political pressure."**

I believe we need to shift the focus towards local dynamics rather than relying heavily on international courts like the European Court of Human Rights, which are under increasing political pressure. Additionally, fostering closer relationships with diaspora communities could be crucial. These communities have a vested interest in protecting themselves and their loved ones – a perspective that hasn't been central to human rights law in migration issues before.

This shift in strategy isn't just about adapting to changing legal landscapes. It's about finding new ways to uphold human rights when traditional legal avenues seem to be narrowing. By engaging more directly with affected communities and focusing on local contexts, we might find more effective ways to address migration-related human rights issues in this evolving legal environment.

I'd like you to explain the idea of 'floating sanctuaries' that you promoted in 2022 in your article on the ethics of search and rescue at sea.

The idea of 'floating sanctuaries' emerged from research I conducted with Julia Mourão Permoser on the ethics of search and rescue (SAR) operations at

sea. We were grappling with the ethical dilemmas faced by SAR activists, who are often accused of inadvertently aiding smugglers or collaborating with harsh government policies.

Our interviews revealed a complex, two-faced dilemma. Activists worried about potential indirect cooperation with smugglers, but even more so about unwitting collaboration with European governments whose policies they often view as inhumane.

> **"'Floating sanctuaries' [are] temporary zones at sea where international human rights norms take precedence, momentarily suspending the influences of both smugglers and governments. These fleeting spaces, lasting perhaps a few days, allow rescuers to focus purely on saving lives."**

This led us to propose 'floating sanctuaries' – temporary zones at sea where international human rights norms take precedence, momentarily suspending the influences of both smugglers and governments. These fleeting spaces, lasting perhaps a few days, allow rescuers to focus purely on saving lives.

However, the reality is that even the most noble act of Good Samaritanism at sea isn't immune from moral complexity. No matter how well-intentioned, rescuers may find their hands metaphorically bloodied by unintended consequences or implications of their actions. The sanctuary, while aspirational, is always imperfect.

This imperfection is what makes the concept so compelling. It acknowledges the messy reality of humanitarian work while striving to create spaces where the focus can be on saving lives and upholding human rights, even if just briefly. It's an existentially unclear choice, fraught with potential moral hazards, but one that I believe offers a valuable framework for navigating the ethical minefield of search and rescue operations at sea.

So are you also gaming the system and weaponising or radicalising rescue in your own way through 'floating sanctuaries'?

As a researcher and legal advocate rather than a direct participant in search and rescue operations, I view this question through an analytical lens. However, I acknowledge that my research does support this movement.

The idea of gaming the system exists on a continuum. Some activists believe they're upholding the true values of the system, even as governments manipulate it. Others, like the Alarm Phone organisation, see themselves as modern-day equivalents to those who helped slaves escape during the slave trade era. They don't align with the system at all, viewing it as destructive and seeking to use its rules against itself.

This approach brings to mind Audre Lorde's famous statement about the master's tools never dismantling the master's house. Lorde tells us this strategy will never truly succeed in dismantling oppressive systems. However, activists often interpret this differently in practice. They believe that while they may not be able to completely dismantle the system, they can still achieve meaningful, local, strategic gains by using the system's rules against itself. It's an approach that acknowledges the limitations Lorde points out while still striving for tangible improvements within the existing framework.

Interestingly, we found a collaborative spectrum among these groups. Some claim to be enforcing existing laws, while others openly aim to subvert the system. Yet in practice, these organisations often work together, facing similar dilemmas and forming coalitions despite their different approaches.

So, are some people using the rules against the system? Absolutely. But they're doing so in an informed manner, often with the goal of challenging what they see as a deeply exploitative and unjust system, even if they can't completely overturn it.

The concept of 'floating sanctuaries' doesn't aim to radicalise rescue per se. Rather it provides a framework for understanding how rescuers navigate complex ethical terrain. It acknowledges the tension between working within a system and subverting it, offering a temporary space where humanitarian principles can take precedence. This approach reflects the complex reality these activists face, where they must navigate between idealistic goals and practical necessities in their efforts to assist migrants and challenge unjust border policies.

In another publication called *Weaponizing Rescue*, you wrote about how the physical infrastructure of rescue has been weaponised. What did you mean by that?

In our piece *Weaponizing Rescue*, which I wrote with Niamh Keady Tabbal, we explored how equipment meant for rescuing people is being used to do the exact opposite. This whole thing kicked off during the pandemic when Türkiye and Greece were butting heads over migration.

We stumbled across this weird situation where rescue rafts were being used to dump migrants at sea rather than save them. Greek authorities were allegedly using these rafts to push back folks who'd made it from *Türkiye*, basically leaving them to drift back across the Aegean.

At first, we thought, 'No way, that can't be right.' So, we rolled up our sleeves and did some serious groundwork in Greece. We collected a ton of evidence – pictures, videos, people's stories – and even chatted with some folks who'd been through this nightmare. We got some invaluable help from Tommy Olsen, who runs this one-man show called Aegean Boat Report, and a group called Consolidated Rescue Group. These people have been tracking this stuff like hawks for years.

What we uncovered was pretty shocking. This wasn't just a one-off thing, but a regular occurrence. So, we started asking ourselves, 'How did we get to a point where stuff meant to save lives is being used to basically maroon people at sea?'

> **"On paper, there's all this official commitment to rescue people at sea. But in reality, there's a push to keep migrants out, sometimes using pretty extreme tactics. So you end up with this crazy situation where life-saving equipment is being used in ways that could actually endanger lives."**

What it boils down to is this weird clash between policy and politics. On paper, there's all this official commitment to rescue people at sea. But in reality, there's a push to keep migrants out, sometimes using pretty extreme tactics. So you end up with this crazy situation where life-saving equipment is being used in ways that could actually endanger lives.

It's like a dark joke, really – rescue gear being used to potentially harm people. It shows just how messed up things can get when migration politics collide with basic human decency. The really frustrating part is that people in power know this is happening, but for some reason they can't or won't do anything to stop it.

Do you think governments are effectively doing what the electorate want them to do, even if the electorate can't stomach admitting it? Maybe that explains why these practices continue to remain unchallenged.

There's definitely a layer of hypocrisy at play here. The European Union has this techno-bureaucratic facade, but underneath there's a strong current of populist sentiment tapping into some pretty basic instincts of exclusion. The whole 'they're threatening our culture' or 'they're taking our jobs' narratives.

The tricky part for us advocates is figuring out how not to feed into this dynamic. It's tempting to just ignore the populist will and try to hold governments accountable based on their lofty ideals. But that approach might miss the mark entirely because it's not addressing the real root of the crisis.

Can we actually tackle the real driver? It's why I alluded above to the importance of building stronger connections with diaspora communities and European citizens with migrant backgrounds. We need to build capacity not just on the legal, techno-bureaucratic side, but also on the political front. If there's any hope of keeping the framework of refugee protection alive, we need both these angles. Focusing on just one won't cut it.

The continuation of these harsh practices unchallenged suggests a gap between what the public might privately desire and what they're comfortable openly supporting or witnessing. It's a form of collective cognitive dissonance that allows these policies to persist in a grey area – not fully endorsed, but not actively opposed either.

Our job as advocates is to bring these issues to light in a way that encourages honest dialogue. It's a tall order, but it's crucial if we want to see any real, lasting change in how Europe approaches migration and refugee protection.

Do you see a growing rise in populism more generally? If that's the case, what do you think the implications are for refugees and migrants?

Let me approach this question not just as a migration expert, but also as an Israeli citizen observing current events. We're definitely seeing a rise in right-wing politics across Europe, and with this year's elections, there's a real possibility of populist powers gaining more ground, despite some recent left-leaning victories in the UK and France.

> **"We're witnessing a cultural war unfolding in Europe, the US and beyond. It's a conflict between those calling for accountability for colonial pasts and those aiming to protect what they see as 'Western' or 'European' values."**

The situation has been exacerbated since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October, but the seeds were planted earlier. We're witnessing a cultural war unfolding in Europe, the US and beyond. It's a conflict between those calling for accountability for colonial pasts and those aiming to protect what they see as 'Western' or 'European' values.

The political landscape is increasingly polarised. On one side, we have those advocating for more open migration policies and holding Europe accountable for its colonial

history. This group tends to view the situation in Gaza as genocide and often calls for the end of Zionism. On the other side, we see conservative powers doubling down on colonial legacies, pushing for closed borders to protect 'Western culture', and viewing Zionism as an extension of their worldview.

This polarisation is creating a volatile situation. There's a risk of increased political animosity and even violence, not just in the Middle East but across Europe too. The danger lies in these strict, one-dimensional binaries that don't allow for nuanced discussion or compromise.

For migrants and refugees, this polarisation could have severe implications. Stricter border policies and less welcoming attitudes in many countries are likely to make their journeys even more perilous and their reception more hostile.

The situation in Gaza adds another layer of complexity. Tragically, efforts to protect and relocate Palestinians could be seen as complicity in forced displacement, creating a catch-22 situation for humanitarian efforts.

We're at a critical juncture. These simplified, binary narratives aren't conducive to safety or stability, neither for migrants nor for people in my region. The path forward is fraught with challenges, and I'm under no illusion that there are easy solutions.

However, I believe there's still room for cautious optimism. We need to strive for more nuanced, compassionate discussions that don't ignore complex histories but also don't trap us in cycles of blame and retaliation. It's a daunting task, but small steps in this direction could potentially lead to meaningful change. The work of grassroots organisations, diaspora communities, and committed advocates gives me hope that, even in this difficult climate, there are people working tirelessly for a more just and humane approach to migration and conflict resolution.

"We need to strive for more nuanced, compassionate discussions that don't ignore complex histories but also don't trap us in cycles of blame and retaliation [...] The work of grassroots organisations, diaspora communities, and committed advocates gives me hope that, even in this difficult climate, there are people working tirelessly for a more just and humane approach to migration and conflict resolution."

The Americas

Overview

Peter Grant

Across the Americas, from Venezuela and Haiti to Cuba and Ecuador, political instability, economic crisis and deepening insecurity are creating new patterns of migration and displacement, with many people already living outside their country and choosing to move on northwards in response to dwindling economic opportunities and growing anti-migrant sentiment. The large and increasingly diverse mixed migration movements through the Americas, not only encompassing migrants from within the region but also from Africa, Asia and elsewhere, are reflected in the unprecedented numbers travelling through the Darién Gap. In Central America, too, repressive living conditions and the pervasive threat of gang violence are forcing tens of thousands more to flee their country.

Though there are some positive exceptions, in particular countries that have sought to expand regularisation opportunities to their large immigrant populations, there has also been a marked shift towards containment and exclusion. From Panama's proposed crackdown on irregular movement through its territory to increasing interceptions in Mexico, many countries appear to be adopting harsher policies towards migrants – in some cases, with the encouragement of the **United States** (US). The latter, alongside the recent imposition of stricter border policies of its own, is also promoting tighter migration policies in transit countries en route to the US. While these measures have contributed to a significant drop in the number of encounters at its borders, they are unlikely to be sustainable in the longer term without addressing the fundamental drivers of movement in the region.

The Venezuela crisis

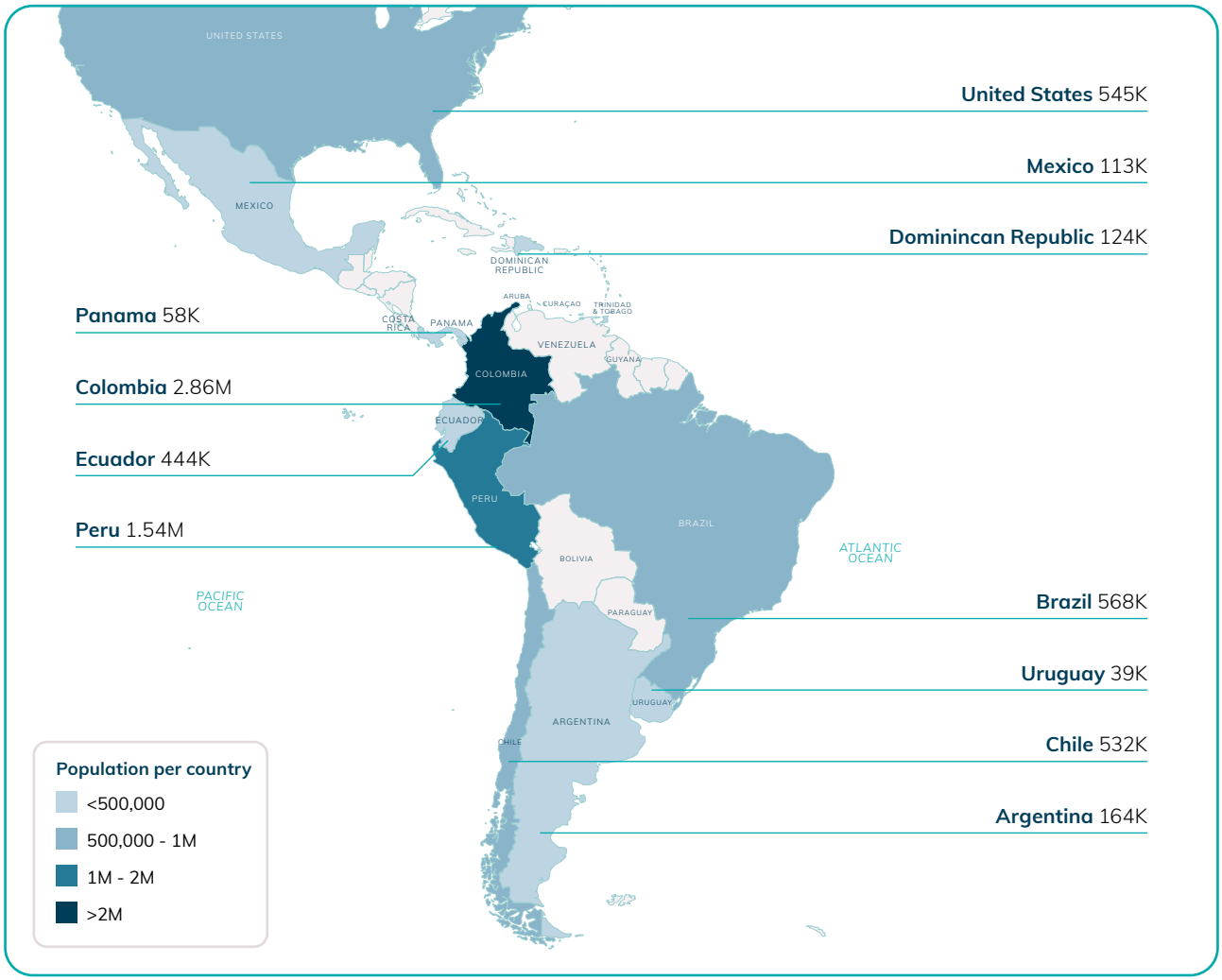
The ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis in **Venezuela** continues to drive more Venezuelans to leave the country, with a net increase – despite some spontaneous and forced returns from host countries in the region – of 661,800 Venezuelan migrants in the Americas during 2023, of whom 504,200 remained in Latin America and the Caribbean.[1] The numbers have continued to rise during 2024, though at a slower pace than before,[2] reaching a global total of 7.77 million as of the start of June 2024: of these, 6.59 million are in Latin America and the Caribbean,[3] with the latter figure projected to increase to 6.82 million by the end of the year.[4]

Within Latin America and the Caribbean, the largest Venezuelan populations are hosted by Colombia (2.86 million) and Peru (1.54 million), followed by Brazil (568,100), Chile (532,700), Ecuador (444,800), Argentina (164,000), Dominican Republic (124,100), Mexico (113,100), Panama (58,200) and Uruguay (39,700).[5] There is also a large and growing population (545,000 as of the end of 2023) in the US.[6]

In some countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, the Venezuelan population has reduced in recent months, as the number of Venezuelans leaving has outpaced new arrivals.[7] As living conditions in many host countries in Latin America and the Caribbean become more difficult, increasing numbers of Venezuelans are moving north through the Darién Gap and onwards to Mexico and the US border.

1 UNHCR (2024) Venezuela situation.
2 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean—Quarter 2 2024.
3 R4V (2024) Refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela.
4 R4V (2024) RMRP 2024 update: Regional refugee and migrant response plan (RMRP).
5 R4V (2024) Refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela.
6 UNHCR (2024) Venezuela situation fact sheet: May 2024.
7 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Op. Cit.

Graphic 1. Major locations of Venezuelan displaced as of May 2024



Sources: R4V (2024) Refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela. UNHCR (2024) Venezuela situation fact sheet: May 2024.

A colder reception in host countries

The situation of Venezuelans varies greatly from country to country, depending in large part on the degree to which regularisation and integration are available to them. Though the majority of Venezuelans now enjoy some regular status – of the 7.77 million worldwide, 4.49 million have been granted residency permits, with 1.2 million and 347,700 recognised as asylum seekers and refugees respectively[8] – a sizeable number are still living irregularly in their host countries, severely impeding their ability to access education, healthcare and livelihood opportunities.[9] Without this recognition, Venezuelans are at significantly greater risk of destitution or exploitation. In some cases, the limited opportunities available to Venezuelans in their original host countries are driving more to migrate northwards towards the US.[10]

To address this, some countries have attempted to promote regularisation. In **Ecuador**, for instance, where a significant proportion of the Venezuelan population lacks legal status, the government concluded a regularisation drive in April 2024 to extend recognition to undocumented Venezuelans in the country. Following the conclusion of this process, 199,930 Venezuelans had received residency permits and another 95,809 had secured visas.[11] The authorities are reportedly preparing a further round of regularisation activities for Venezuelans in the country.[12] However, some Venezuelans could be negatively impacted by the decision of the Venezuelan government to suspend diplomatic relations with Ecuador in April 2024, following the storming of the Mexican embassy in Quito by Ecuadorian security forces.

8 R4V (2024) Refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela.
9 Chaves-González, D. & Delgado, N. (2024) A winding path to integration: Venezuelan migrants' regularization and labor market prospects. Migration Policy Institute.
10 Muñoz-Pogossian, B. and Winkler, A. (2023) The persistence of the Venezuelan migrant and refugee crisis. Center for Strategic and International Studies.
11 UNHCR (2024) Tendencias nacionales de desplazamiento forzado en Ecuador—2024 (acnur.org)
12 El Universo (2024) Una regularización extraordinaria para ciudadanos venezolanos prepara Ecuador.

There are concerns that the closure of the Venezuelan consulate there could create delays for Venezuelans in securing their personal documentation, potentially affecting their ability to access education, healthcare and other services.[13]

When provided with the opportunity to integrate into the local economy, Venezuelans have the potential to bring substantial benefits to their host country: for instance, an April 2024 study by IOM, analysing recent data from **Colombia**, estimated that its large Venezuelan population had delivered $529.1 million of positive economic impact to the country in 2022 alone.[14] While Colombia has continued to maintain an open approach to regularisation – in June 2024, for instance, its government announced that it would grant legal status to as many as 540,000 Venezuelans who are legal guardians to children in the country[15] – there are concerns about how progress in some areas is slowing or being hindered. In particular, there have been worries that the government of Gustavo Petro has stepped back from its previous efforts to proactively integrate Venezuelans into the formal economy, a position that may be explained by its desire to improve relations with Venezuela after years of diplomatic estrangement.

As a result, Venezuelans could become more economically marginalised in Colombia.[16] After almost a decade on the rise, official end-of-year data for 2023 suggests a slight decline (a drop of 1.1%) in the number of Venezuelans in the country compared to 2022. Though this was explained by Colombian officials as a reflection of improved diplomatic relations between Colombia and Venezuela, implying that some Venezuelans had opted to return voluntarily to their country, independent analysts have argued that the difficult conditions in Colombia may be driving secondary movements out of the country – in many cases, northwards towards the US.[17] In November 2023, Petro suggested that the US could prevent this movement by offering Venezuelans arriving in Colombia an "economic stabilisation" stipend to enable them to remain in the country or return to Venezuela rather than continue their journey towards the US.[18]

In **Peru**, meanwhile, home to the second-largest Venezuelan population after Colombia, official policies have become steadily more unwelcoming in recent years. One of the latest steps in this withdrawal of hospitality came on 10 November 2023 with the rescinding of the right of Venezuelan nationals to apply for temporary protection.[19] As a result, refugees who were unable to register before the deadline could be at risk of summary expulsion from the country.[20] This followed months of anti-migrant rhetoric from President Dina Boluarte, who vowed to impose tighter restrictions (including the militarisation of Peru's borders) to curb the "assaults, robberies and other acts of delinquency" that she blamed on Venezuelans, Haitians and other foreign nationals.[21] This move is likely to further erode the rights of Venezuelan migrants who already struggle to access basic services or formal employment due to the difficulties they face in securing legal documentation.[22] As of 2 July 2024, the Peruvian government also requires all Venezuelans entering the country to have a valid passport and visa, reneging on a humanitarian exemption in place since 2019 that allowed entry with only an identification card under certain circumstances.[23]

Part of the narrative linking Venezuelans with criminality in Peru and a number of other Latin American countries is the increasing prominence of the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua, despite the fact that many of its victims are ordinary Venezuelans who may be even more exposed to its depredations if basic protections are rolled back. In **Chile**, where the group has been implicated in a series of high-profile killings,[24] the country's initially hospitable policies towards Venezuelans, Haitians and other immigrant populations have cooled, with policymakers and the general public alike both linking crime to rising levels of immigration.[25] The increasing stigmatisation of Venezuelans within Chile has driven a spike in anti-migrant sentiment, reflected in a number of recent policy proposals. This included provisions in the draft text of the new constitution, published in December 2023, mandating the expulsion of irregular migrants from the country: though the draft itself was subsequently rejected, it reflected a wider shift in public attitudes towards migrants in Chile.

13 Aguilera, N. & Rojas, L. F. (2024) ¿Cómo impacta a los venezolanos el cierre de sus consulados en Ecuador? Voice of America.
14 IOM (2024) Venezuelan migrants drive USD 529.1m boost to Colombia's economy: IOM study.
15 Reuters (2024) Colombia to give legal status to up to 540,000 Venezuelan migrants.
16 Guerrero Ble, M. (2023) A forgotten response and an uncertain future: Venezuelans' economic inclusion in Colombia. Refugees International; Rueda, M. (2024) Venezuelan migrants give up on Colombia as it reduces support policies. The World.
17 Gamba, L. (2024) Colombia sees decade's 1st decline in migration from Venezuela. AA.
18 Reuters (2023) Colombia's Petro says he proposed U.S. pay bonuses to Venezuelan migrants.
19 Amnesty International (2023) Peru: Refugees in Peru face impossible deadline.
20 Amnesty International (2023) Peru: Refugees in Peru risk mass expulsions.
21 Peru Support Group (2023) Boluarte rounds on Venezuelans and other immigrants in Peru.
22 Dupraz-Dobias, P. (2024) Latin America makes it harder for Venezuelan refugees as xenophobia mounts. The New Humanitarian.
23 Voice of America (2024) Perú retira la excepción migratoria a venezolanos menores y en vulnerabilidad y exige visa a todos.
24 Rísquez, R. (2024) Tren de Aragua: cómo extendió su poder en Chile la megabanda venezolana, el primer grupo de crimen organizado trasnacional en operar en el país. BBC.
25 Doña-Reveco, C. (2023) How Chile's welcome turned sour. Mixed Migration Centre.

In February 2024, the government also enacted Law No. 21.655 to amend existing asylum and immigration legislation, apparently with the aim of limiting irregular migration, restricting asylum and enabling removals.[26] In 2023, the introduction of a supposedly voluntary biometric registration system for foreigners resulted in the detention and expulsion of Venezuelans who had failed to register on the system.[27] During 2024, the government conducted expulsions of Venezuelans with an irregular status alongside those convicted of more serious crimes.[28]

Migration and displacement in the Caribbean

The extraordinary uptick in mixed migration from the Caribbean, not only within the islands but also onwards to Latin America and the US, has been driven by a multitude of economic and political forces in the region. This includes the ongoing crisis in Cuba and Haiti – where the rule of law has collapsed as hundreds of criminal gangs have brought chaos and death to the country – both among the top sending countries of migrants to the US.

Haiti's crisis escalates

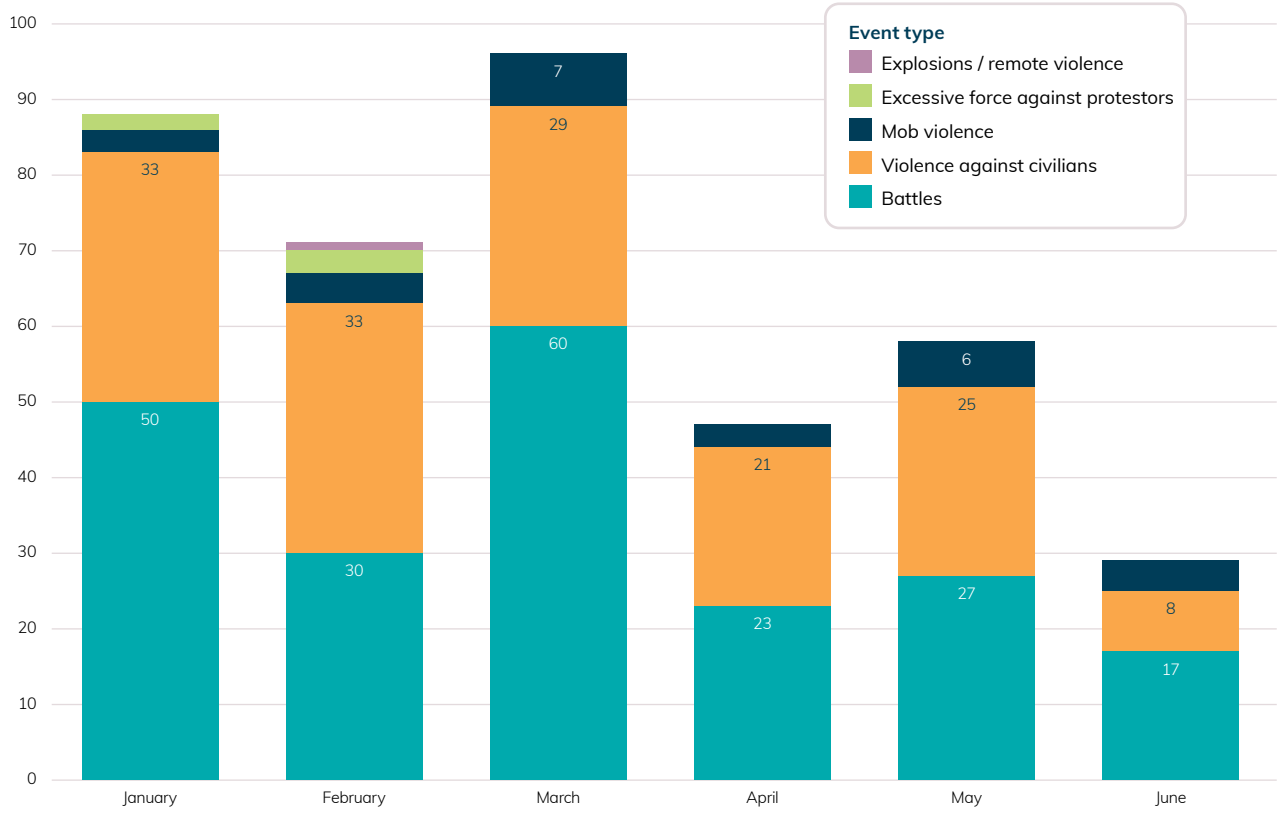
In the case of **Haiti**, the almost complete deterioration of security into widespread lawlessness has continued to drive large-scale internal displacement. According to IOM, the number of IDPs in the country increased by almost 60 percent between March and May 2024 to reach 578,074. Much of this displacement has been driven by intensifying conflict in Port-au-Prince, with many residents fleeing the capital (80% of which is now reportedly controlled by gangs) for rural areas as a result.[29] With 5.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, widespread food insecurity and chronic sexual violence, around one million children are currently out of school and much of the population has little or no access to healthcare.[30]

Despite suffering one of the most extreme emergencies in the region – with a spike in violence in the early months of 2024 that saw around 2,500 people killed or wounded by gangs in the first quarter[31] – Haitians face some of the most restrictive barriers to entry of any country.[32] Extraordinarily, in March 2024 alone, around 13,000 people were deported back to Haiti from neighbouring countries – despite an ongoing siege of the capital by criminal gangs that posed clear dangers to those forcibly returned.[33]

Some of the growing number of Haitian nationals attempting to leave their country are crossing into the neighbouring **Dominican Republic**. In March 2024, following an escalation in violence in Port-au-Prince, thousands of Haitians reportedly travelled to the border to attempt to leave the country, though the tightening of entry restrictions meant many were unable to do so.[34] The large Haitian migrant population in the Dominican Republic has long been subjected to exclusion, discrimination and targeted expulsions that have escalated in recent years as Haiti's crisis has deepened. After a peak of 26,001 confirmed deportations to Haiti in July 2023, the numbers dipped towards the end of 2023 before picking up again in 2024, with 17,333 expulsions in June alone.[35] These harsh official policies are underpinned by widespread anti-Haitian public sentiment and an environment where Black people are at risk of racist violence, harassment and sexual assault.[36]

26 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean—Quarter 1 2024.
27 Global Detention Project (2023) Chile continues to step up anti-migrant efforts amidst growing international criticism.
28 DW (2024) Chile expulsa a 65 personas venezolanas por varios delitos.
29 IOM (2024) Haiti — Report on the internal displacement situation in Haiti — Round 7 (June 2024); Kestler-D'Amours, J. (2024) Who are Haiti's gangs and what do they want? All you need to know. Al Jazeera.
30 OCHA (2024) Haiti.
31 UN Press (2024) Deadly violence in Haiti at record high.
32 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review 2023.
33 IOM (2024) Haitians face deepening crisis as siege in Port-au-Prince stretches on.
34 Martinez D'Aubuisson, J. (2024) Crisis in Haiti prompts thousands to flee to Dominican Republic. Le Monde.
35 IOM Haiti (2024) Statistiques sur les personnes retournées de force en Haïti depuis 2021.
36 Veras, E. (2024) Haitians looking to escape violence and chaos face hostility in neighboring Dominican Republic. The Conversation.

Graphic 2. Violence and civil disorder continues in Haiti but with some reduction – ACLED 2024 mid-year assessment



Global Conflict Index

The Global Conflict Index, updated every six months, ranks every country and territory in the world according to four indicators: deadliness, danger to civilians, geographic diffusion, and armed group fragmentation.

Overall ranking
12th
Data from July 2023 - June 2024

18th deadliest

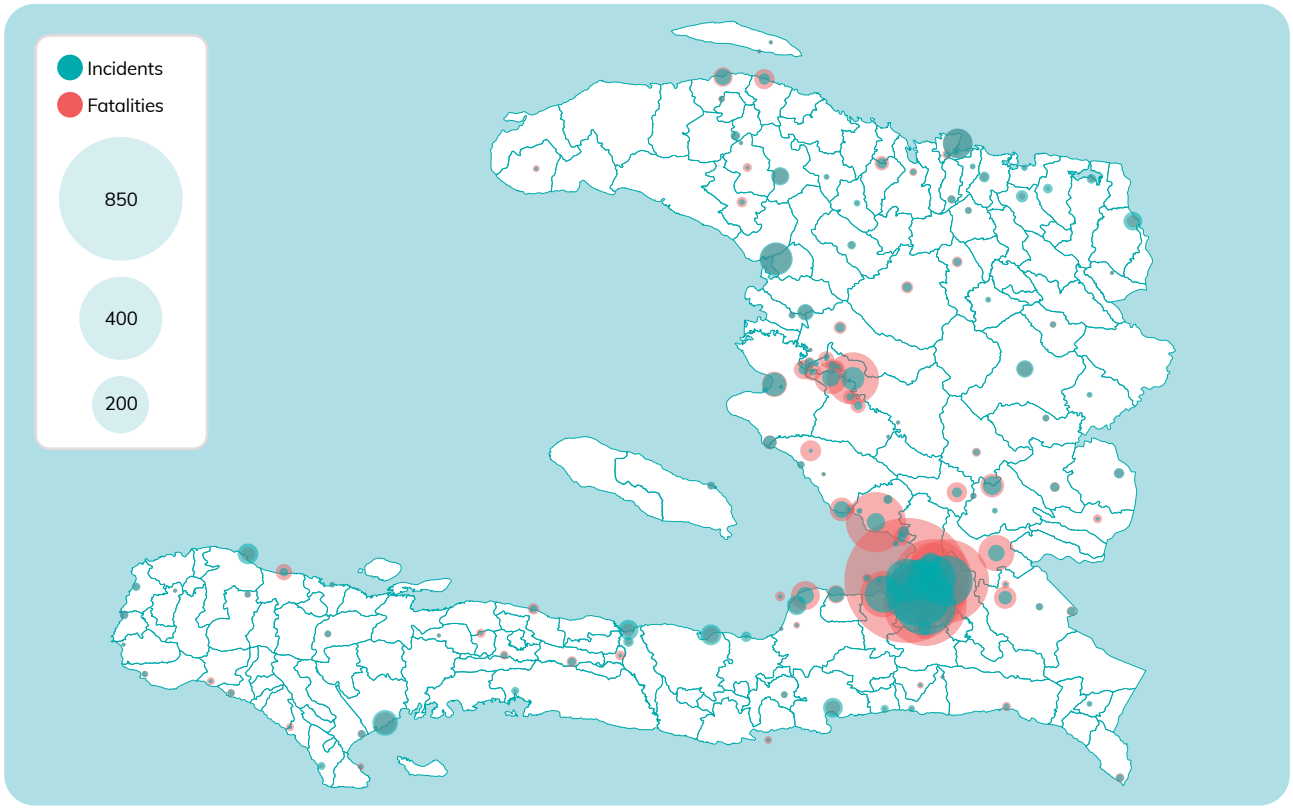
24th most dangerous for civilians

10th most diffuse conflict

12th most fragmented

Haiti – political violence by department

Source (adapted) and credit: ACLED Haiti: Mid-year metrics 2024.



Source (adapted) and credit: Global Initiative Observatory of Violence and Resilience in Haiti.

With few legal pathways available, many others attempt to travel irregularly towards the US via other Caribbean islands such as the **Bahamas**, where a naval blockade is in place to prevent Haitians from travelling through its waters.[37] The danger of the maritime route was illustrated by the deaths of around 40 people off the Haitian coast in July 2024, after a fire broke out on a boat travelling towards the **Turks and Caicos Islands**.[38]

Others have successfully reached US waters, only to be detained by the US Border Patrol, including 118 Haitians intercepted on 27 June 2024.[39] Haitians also continue to travel through Central America, in some cases secondary movements from **Brazil** or Chile, though significant numbers were flying directly from Haiti to **Nicaragua** before the route was suspended in late 2023.

37 Hu, C., Culver, D. & Contreras, E. (2024) In a city cut off from the world, guns and drugs keep flowing. CNN.
38 Wright, G. (2024) Boat fire off Haiti kills at least 40 migrants, UN says. BBC.
39 Hampton, D. J. (2024) U.S. Border Patrol spots 118 migrants fleeing Haiti in a boat off Florida. NBC News.

While Haitian nationals who had been living in the US since 6 November 2022 have been granted Temporary Protected Status (TPA), this did not automatically apply to those who entered the US after this cut-off date. As a result, the US undertook a number of deportation flights during the first half of 2024, prompting UNHCR to call on the US government "to refrain from forcibly returning Haitians who may face life-threatening risks or further displacement".[40] However, in June 2024, following prolonged criticism from human rights groups,[41] the US government announced that not only would the TPS be extended until 3 February 2026 (renewing protection for the 200,000 already recognised with that status whose terms were set to expire in August), but that it would also include those who had been living in the country since 3 June 2024 – a move that provides another 300,000 Haitians with assurances that they will not be deported for the time being.[42]

US sanctions on Cuba in the spotlight as migration talks continue

In **Cuba**, political repression and economic malaise in the wake of Covid-19 have reportedly driven one million Cubans – around 10 percent of the national population – to leave the country between 2022 and 2023.[43] Hundreds of thousands of these have attempted to enter the US through a variety of land, air and sea routes. However, the fast-tracked pathway to permanent residency on arrival in the US that Cuban nationals have enjoyed for decades became more complex in 2023, with the passage of two seemingly opposing policies by the administration of President Joe Biden: the admission of tens of thousands of nationals from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela under a newly announced humanitarian parole programme, in parallel to the expulsion of tens of thousands of others to **Mexico** from the US.[44]

This rise in numbers has also prompted the US government to increase its engagement with Cuba around issues such as the facilitation of deportation flights and visa processing. Ahead of a bilateral meeting on migration in April 2024, the Cuban government called on the US to bring an end to its longstanding sanctions and halt its preferential treatment of arrivals from Cuba – both viewed by Havana as the central drivers of emigration. The US government, on the other hand, argues that the lack of freedoms and human rights in the country, together with the state-controlled economy, is the reason why so many Cubans feel compelled to leave.[45]

Moving north through the Darién Gap

The Darién Gap, spanning northern Colombia and southern **Panama**, is the only land-based route connecting Southern and Central America and is a key part of the journey towards the US. Previously confined to just a few thousand people annually, movement has increased exponentially in recent years, driven in part by the shrinking opportunities available for regular migration northwards. From 6,465 detected crossings in 2020, during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the total rose to 133,726 in 2021, 248,254 in 2022 and 520,085 in 2023.[46] Between January and the end of May 2024, a total of 170,014 migrants were detected entering Panama, slightly higher than the number during the same period of 2023 (166,649).[47]

Besides the net increase in numbers, the composition of those attempting the journey has also diversified over time, with increasing representation of nationals from countries in Africa (such as Angola and Cameroon) and Asia (including China, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Nepal). In terms of nationalities, since 2022, Venezuelans have been by far the most represented among those attempting the journey, accounting for 328,650 (63.2%) detected crossings in 2023 and supplanting Haitians as the most represented group the year before. Venezuela maintained its dominance between January and May 2024, with 109,895 (64.6%) detected crossings, followed by Ecuador (12,128), Colombia (10,963), China (10,171) and Haiti (9,872).[48]

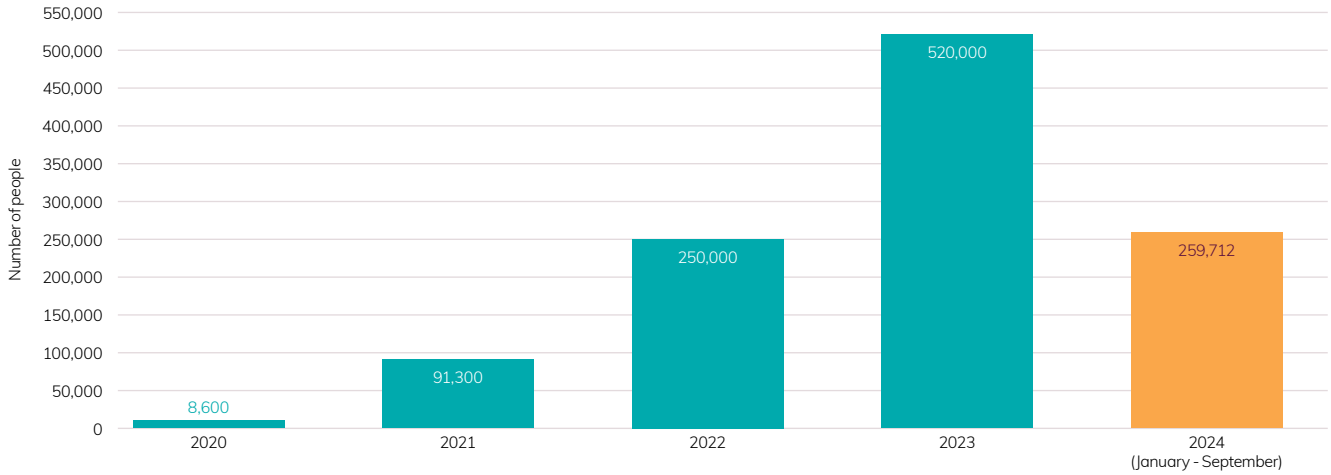
40 Al Jazeera (2024) UN urges US to stop forced returns to Haiti after latest deportation flight.
41 Frelick, B. (2024) Safety in Haiti remains a long way off. Human Rights Watch.
42 Spagat, E. & Santana, R. (2024) Biden administration extends temporary legal status to 300,000 Haitians, drawing a contrast to Trump. AP.
43 Gámez Torres, N. (2024) Cuba admits to massive emigration wave. Miami Herald.
44 Ripley, C. G. (2023) Crisis prompts record emigration from Nicaragua, surpassing Cold War era. MPI.
45 Acosta, N. (2024) Cuba calls on US to ease sanctions on eve of migration talks. Reuters.
46 National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Estadísticas—Tránsito irregular por Darién por año.
47 National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2024 and Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2023.
48 National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2024; National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2023.

Graphic 3. Primary migratory routes in the Americas

The Darién Gap is an obligatory passage along the irregular migratory land route for those who begin their journey in South America. It is a jungle stretch that connects South America with Central America.

Sources: MMC LAC and R4V.

Graphic 4. Migrant crossings through Panama's Darién Gap down 35% in 2024 (up to end September)



Sources: Statista and VOA.

In all these cases, the significant representation of these groups is driven by economic and political insecurity in their countries of origin. In addition to the ongoing crises in Venezuela and Haiti, the number of people leaving Ecuador has soared since the middle of 2022 in response to the country's economic malaise and a surge in gang violence[49] – a trend predicted to continue throughout 2024[50] with more than 80,000 Ecuadorians having left the country in the first half of the year alone.[51] The marked increase in the number of nationals from **China** detected entering Panama – totalling 25,565 in 2023, compared to 2,005 in 2022 and less than 100 in 2021[52] – also reflects a number of factors that intensified in the wake of Covid-19, including the apparent slowdown in the Chinese economy, heightened political repression, and a narrowing in opportunities to migrate regularly to the US through study or work visas.[53] Nationals from Peru are also being detected crossing through the region in increasing numbers, driven by dwindling economic opportunities, political instability and growing insecurity.[54]

The many dangers of the journey

The increase in movement through the Darién Gap is occurring despite the many dangers of the route, a long and arduous trek through a mountainous jungle in areas where armed gangs operate with impunity and where wild animals, disease and flash floods pose additional threats. According to IOM, 2024 so far appears to be one of the deadliest years since records began in 2015, with 97 deaths and disappearances in the first five months compared to 48 in the entirety of 2023.[55] Given the geographic isolation and limited rule of law in the region, it is likely that the actual mortality rate is considerably higher: for instance, according to 2023 4Mi data, 49 percent of women surveyed and 42 percent of men reported that they had witnessed death along the route.[56] Furthermore, many others are subjected to profoundly traumatising assaults and intimidation, including what the organisation Médecins Sans Frontières describes as "an intensified level of brutality and cruelty in attacks of sexual violence", with children among the victims.[57] The failure of both the Colombian and Panamanian governments to ensure the protection of migrants travelling through their territories has created an enabling environment for these abuses to occur.[58]

For the majority of those seeking to move north, however, the land route through the Darién is the only option they have. Nevertheless, some are choosing to avoid the land routes in favour of alternative pathways by sea or air. Smugglers are reportedly using social media to pose as legitimate travel agents, marketing "VIP routes" by boat that traverse the land-based itinerary;[59] however, as illustrated by a deadly capsizing off the Panamanian

49 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review 2023.
50 Madry, K. (2024) Crises in Ecuador, Haiti could fuel migration in 2024, report says. Reuters.
51 Ramírez, J. (2024) Ecuador: La migración en los primeros 6 meses del gobierno de Noboa. Nodal.
52 National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2023; National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2022; National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2021.
53 Peng, J. (2024) Through the Darién Gap: A new path for Chinese asylum seekers to the United States. Wilson Center.
54 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean—Quarter 2 2024.
55 IOM (2024) Missing migrants project: Darien.
56 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Riesgos de seguridad en el Tapón del Darién y asistencia necesitada por personas migrantes.
57 Médecins Sans Frontières (2024) Lack of action sees sharp rise in sexual violence on people transiting Darien Gap.
58 Human Rights Watch (2024) Neglected in the jungle: Inadequate protection and assistance for migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Darién Gap.
59 Alexander, I. (2023) Human traffickers offer 'VIP route' from Venezuela to avoid Darién perils. It's just as dangerous. The Guardian.

coast in February 2024, these maritime crossings are also dangerous.[60] In other cases, people attempt to fly northwards as far as current visa restrictions will enable. This is the case for thousands of nationals from Ecuador – itself a popular transit destination for Chinese migrants due to a bilateral waiver on visa requirements for travellers between the two countries, though this was suspended by Quito from July 2024 to tackle the rise in irregular migration.[61] Similarly, Ecuadorians appear to be exploiting the lack of visa requirements in **El Salvador** to fly there directly with the aim of continuing northwards, with official data showing that less than one in ten of the 43,408 travellers entering El Salvador had subsequently returned.[62] Cubans, Haitians and nationals of various African countries have also reportedly flown directly to Nicaragua, where they do not require a visa or where, if needed, they can still obtain visas at a relatively low cost, to bypass the Darién Gap.[63]

The humanitarian impacts of Panama's crackdown on irregular migration

Unsurprisingly, given the scale of irregular migration through the Darién Gap and the knock-on effect this has had in terms of increasing arrivals at the Mexico-US border, there have been previous attempts to curb movement through the region. A tripartite agreement between Colombia, Panama and the US – announced in April 2023 and rolled out shortly afterwards – despite vocal criticism from human rights groups, saw the mobilisation of an air, sea and land operation to disrupt criminal organisations at the border.[64] Yet even this intervention proved insufficient to halt the rise in numbers, with poor coordination between Colombia and Panama and the stranglehold of criminal gangs in the area contributing to its failure. For both countries, the challenges of preventing onward movement are considerable: besides the potential risks of a growing foreign population stranded in transit, restricting movement carries the very real risk of triggering a humanitarian crisis. This was illustrated in February 2024 when, following the arrest of two boat captains by the Colombian coastguard on charges of human smuggling, thousands of people were left bottlenecked at the coastal towns of Necoclí and Turbo, raising fears of a major health emergency.[65]

However, the election of José Raúl Mulino as Panama's new leader in May 2024 has brought a substantive shift towards increased securitisation. Mulino, having campaigned on a promise to end irregular migration through the country, subsequently announced details of a proposed memorandum of understanding with the US to reduce irregular migration.[66] On 1 July, shortly after the finalisation of the agreement, with the US committing to cover the costs of repatriation, Panama announced that it expected to begin deportations in the space of two to three months.[67] Nevertheless, given that Mulino stated that irregular migration was ultimately "a United States problem" as the majority of migrants in Panama were only transiting and the country "can't forcibly repatriate them", then the numbers expelled from Panama will likely be significantly reduced.[68] The scale of migration through Panama also means that the logistics of implementing the terms of the agreement would be very challenging.[69]

Critics of the agreement have argued that, so long as the drivers of migration through the Darién persist, movement across the area will likely continue regardless – even if further restrictions force migrants to pursue more remote and hazardous routes through the jungle or by sea. Any long-term solutions to the crisis will, therefore, need to encompass greater emphasis on the rights and protections of those journeying through the region, as well as the needs of local communities affected by this movement.[70] Even if the Panamanian government continues to clamp down on movement through the region, this is unlikely to curb the underlying momentum north. As a result, large numbers could be trapped for protracted periods on the Colombian side of the border, with a greater proportion forced by the new restrictions to engage smugglers to transport them, further entrenching the power of criminal organisations in the region.[71] The first flight returning migrants from Panama to Colombia under the agreement was reported in August 2024, though for now, it seems unlikely that

60 AP (2024) A migrant smuggling boat capsizes off Panama, leaving at least 5 people dead and 1 missing.
61 Solano, G. & Tang, D. (2024) Ecuador stops waiving visas for Chinese nationals because of an increase in irregular migration. AP.
62 González, M. A. (2024) Secuestros, robos y corrupción, los riesgos de la migración ecuatoriana por El Salvador. Primicias.
63 Diaz, L. & Botts, J. (2023) African migrants bound for US use Nicaragua to bypass Darien perils. Reuters.
64 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review 2023.
65 Runde, D. & Bryja, T. (2024) Mind the Darién Gap, migration bottleneck of the Americas. Center for Strategic and International Studies; Taylor, L. & Landis, A. (2024) Over 3,000 stranded as boat captain arrests halt Darién Gap migration. The Guardian.
66 Zamorano, J. (2024) José Raúl Mulino sworn in as Panama's new president, promises to stop migration through Darien Gap. AP.
67 Reuters (2024) Panama to start deporting migrants from Darien Gap within months.
68 Solis, A.(2024) Panama president says repatriation of migrants crossing the Darien Gap will be voluntary. AP News.
69 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean—Quarter 2 2024.
70 Agren, D. (2024) Critics express skepticism over U.S.-Panama deportation agreement. National Catholic Reporter; Runde, D. & Bryja, T. (2024) Mind the Darién Gap, migration bottleneck of the Americas. Center for Strategic and International Studies.
71 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean—Quarter 2 2024.

Venezuelans will be returned directly from Panama to Venezuela, as diplomatic relations between the two countries are currently strained.[72]

Migration through Central America

Central America has long been a significant source of mixed migration northwards towards the US, with gang violence, deepening poverty and climate change all contributing to this movement. However, in recent years, the region has also evolved into a major area of transit: while in the past migration and displacement in the region were predominantly made up of migrants from countries within the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), the composition has recently become far more diverse. Besides large numbers of nationals from crisis-affected areas elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, such as Venezuela and Haiti, increasing numbers of people originating from countries in Africa and Asia are also travelling through the region on their way north to the Mexico-US border. This shift is illustrated by the fact that, while 97 percent of those apprehended at the US border a decade ago were Mexican or Central American, the proportion has now almost halved to 52 percent.[73]

Nicaragua serving as gateway to the north for African and Asian migration

Since 2018, increasing political repression and economic decline under the rule of President Daniel Ortega have driven hundreds of thousands of people – some estimates suggest more than one million[74] – to flee Nicaragua, primarily for Costa Rica and the US. As of the end of 2023, some 1.5 million Nicaraguans (around 22% of the population) were living outside the country.[75] With recent studies suggesting that as much as half of the population would like to leave, it is likely that emigration from Nicaragua will continue.[76]

However, Nicaragua has also emerged as a stepping stone for irregular migration transiting through its territory, enabled by its visa-free arrangements with countries including Cuba and Haiti. A large proportion of nationals from these countries intercepted at the US-Mexico border in 2023 appear to have used this route, flying from Havana or Port-au-Prince to Managua before heading on north, though at the end of October 2023, Haiti suspended charter flights to Nicaragua.[77] The country is also serving as an important gateway for people from countries in Africa (such as Mauritania, Cameroon and Senegal) and Asia (including Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam) to reach the Americas.[78] Amidst heightened diplomatic tensions with the US, Ortega has been accused of "weaponising" migration to increase pressure at its borders.[79] In May 2024, the US government imposed fresh sanctions on senior officials in Nicaragua, citing the country's "permissive-by-design" migration policies as a key factor.[80] Authorities are reportedly selling four-day visas to arrivals at the airport, generating a lucrative income stream while compelling migrants to move on quickly northwards.[81]

US softens stance towards El Salvador amidst migration concerns

In El Salvador (see *Thematic snapshot* on page 78), as in much of Central America, chronic gang violence has long been a significant driver of emigration, with tens of thousands seeking to escape the country's long-standing insecurity. However, in March 2022, following the massacre of 87 civilians – apparently selected at random – by criminal organisations over the space of one weekend, the government launched an unprecedented crackdown. After declaring a 30-day state of emergency, repeatedly extended ever since, authorities arrested more than 70,000 suspected gang members. The effects have been mixed: while security has improved, enabling citizens to move more freely in areas that were previously off-limits because of gang activity, these measures have come at a price in terms of democracy and human rights. Many suspects have been detained by police arbitrarily, based on their appearance or where they live, with little or no respect for due process.[82] The majority remain incarcerated, including thousands of people who have no proven affiliation with the gangs, in brutal, life-threatening conditions. Hundreds of prisoners have already died since being detained.[83]

72 France24 (2024) Sale de Panamá el primer vuelo para expulsión de migrantes, financiado por Estados Unidos.
73 Isacson, A. (2024) Weekly U.S.-Mexico border update: Mexico blocks migration, U.S. legislation, migrant removals, nationalities (26 April 2024). WOLA.
74 Aburto W. M. (2024) With prices soaring, most 86.8% of Nicaraguans cannot afford to buy essentials. El País.
75 Reuters (2023) Remittances from Nicaraguan migrants mark new record, passing $4 billion.
76 Voice of America (2023) About half of Nicaragua's population wants to emigrate, study says.
77 Janetsky, M. (2024) Nicaragua is 'weaponizing' US-bound migrants as Haitians pour in on charter flights, observers say. AP; Voice of America (2023) Haiti bans charter Flights to Nicaragua in blow to migrants fleeing poverty and violence.
78 Voice of America (2023) African, Asian migrants seek Nicaragua shortcut to US; Aburto, W. M. (2024) Ortega regime turns Nicaragua into gateway for irregular migration to the United States. El País.
79 Janetsky, M. (2024 Op. Cit.
80 Holland, S. & Rosenberg, M. (2024) US imposes sanctions on Nicaragua over repression, migrant smuggling. Reuters.
81 The White House (2024) Background press call on actions against the Ortega-Murillo regime repressing people and preying on migrants in Nicaragua.
82 Human Rights Watch (2024) El Salvador: Events of 2023.
83 Prison Insider (2024) El Salvador: 26.000 inocentes detenidos y 241 muertos en las cárceles; Morbiato, C. (2023) Detainees in El Salvador's gang crackdown cite abuse during months in jail. The Independent.

The implications of emigration from the country have also been ambiguous. On the one hand, the scale of arbitrary detentions has reportedly driven some civilians to flee out of fear they could be arrested, despite not being involved in criminal activity themselves.[84] Some gang members have also likely fled to the border.[85] At the same time, however, the crackdown – besides gaining the country's current president, Nayib Bukele, approval ratings of over 90% – appears to have had the effect of dramatically reducing emigration levels among Salvadoreans, a development that has been attributed to the improved security conditions.[86] This is despite the fact that El Salvador remains a major country of transit for people from elsewhere en route to the US, with 6.9 million entries and exits recorded in the first half of 2024 alone.[87]

The US government, already concerned about Bukele's human rights records even before the crackdown, initially responded to the wave of arbitrary arrests with condemnation. However, since 2023, it has demonstrated a marked shift in its approach, as concerns around promoting a shared response to irregular migration appear to have superseded its initial concerns around governance and the rule of law. This was signalled by the dispatch of a high-profile US delegation to attend the inauguration of Bukele's second term in June 2024, followed by bilateral discussions around security and migration – a far cry from the Biden administration's snub of the leader during a visit to Washington three years before.[88]

Interceptions on the rise in Mexico

An apparent dip in the number of arrivals at the Mexico-US border in the early months of 2024 has been attributed to a dramatic escalation in interceptions by Mexican authorities at the beginning of the year, shortly after a high-profile US delegation that included the Secretary of State and Secretary of Homeland Security. During the weeks that followed, Mexican security forces set up checkpoints, increased patrols in transit areas and bolstered their presence at the border with the US, resulting in unprecedented numbers of apprehensions in the first half of 2024, with monthly averages between January (120,005) and June (121,536) remaining fairly level – consistently outstripping the previous monthly record of 97,969 in November 2023.[89]

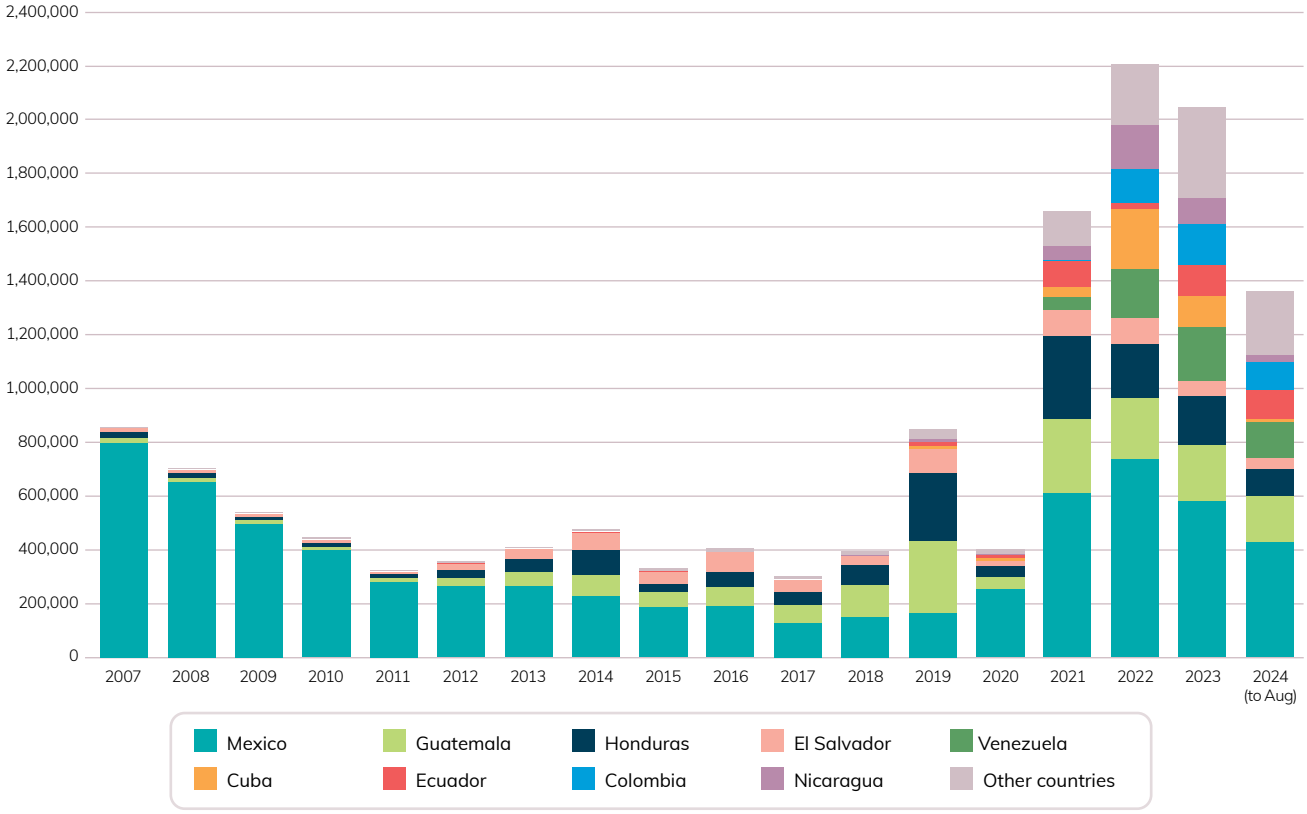
Rather than mass deportations or indefinite detention, a practice prohibited by a ruling of 2023, Mexican authorities appear to be relocating people away from the US border, transporting them en masse to the interior or all the way down to its southern border. As the large majority are neither returning, voluntarily or otherwise, to their countries of origin or being allowed to move on to the US border, hundreds of thousands are likely to be stranded in Mexico.[90] During these operations, there have been frequent reports of abuse by police officials, with migrants beaten, extorted or abandoned. In one incident, on 24 April, around 400 people (including 150 children and seven pregnant women) were removed by migration agents from a train and left in the desert. Other incidents have involved roundups and other violent actions carried out as part of the recent crackdown.[91]

The United States

The number of encounters on the southern US border has risen steadily in the past few years, peaking in December 2023 with the highest monthly total ever recorded – 301,982. However, this trend was reversed from January 2024, with 176,196 encounters, falling further during the year to 104,116 in June 2024.[92] This sharp drop in encounters from the beginning of the year has been attributed to the uptick in interceptions by Mexico, meaning that many of those seeking to reach the US border have been unable to move on or relocate elsewhere in the country.[93]

84 Mohor, D. (2024) The human and humanitarian fallout of El Salvador's gang crackdown. The New Humanitarian.
85 Papadovassilakis, A. (2024) Gangs on the run: How Bukele's crackdown drove gangs underground. InSight Crime.
86 Voice of America (2024) US courts El Salvador's president as migration overtakes democracy concerns.
87 Rivera, K. (2024) Flujo migratorio de El Salvador supera los 6.9 millones de entradas y salidas en 2024. Diario El Salvador.
88 CBS (2024) US dampens criticism of El Salvador's president as migration overtakes democracy concerns.
89 Isacson, A. (2024) Why Is migration declining at the U.S.-Mexico border in early 2024?. WOLA; Martinez, D. & Strickler, L. (2024) "Drastically less": The number of migrants in border towns and some big U.S. cities has plunged. CBC News.
90 Isacson, A. (2024) Op. Cit.
91 Isacson, A. (2024) Weekly U.S.-Mexico border update: Mexico blocks migration, U.S. legislation, migrant removals, nationalities (26 April 2024). WOLA.
92 US Customs and Border Protection (2024) Southwest land border encounters.
93 Verza, M. & Clemente, E. H. (2024) Mexico moving migrants away from borders to relieve pressure. AP.

Graphic 5. Annual border encounters by nationality at the US-Mexico border



Source (reproduced): WOLA.

Between January and the end of July 2024, there were a total of 1,140,361 registered encounters on the southern border. The most represented country of origin was Mexico (383,335), followed by Guatemala (104,697), Venezuela (97,819), Cuba (87,058), Ecuador (72,895), Colombia (69,406), Honduras (65,108) and Haiti (60,331).[94] While Mexicans have always accounted for a significant proportion of those detected at the border, most were young men seeking to migrate for economic opportunities. There has, however, been a marked increase in the number of families from the south of the country fleeing intercommunal fighting and organised crime in their home states. This is likely to continue unless the worsening security situation is addressed. Similar drivers of displacement are evident in Guatemala, where violence, poverty and climate change are all contributing to mass movement from the country. Political and economic instability in Cuba, Venezuela and elsewhere are also leading to an uptick in movement towards the border.[95]

With the end of President Joe Biden's term approaching, analysts have pointed out that his administration has, in many ways, replicated the policies of his predecessor, Donald Trump, disappointing hopes that he would usher in a more humane approach to managing migration. Projections suggest that Biden may match or even exceed the number of deportations carried out under Trump.[96] Furthermore, of the estimated three million expulsions carried out at the border under Title 42 – the controversial measure imposed by Trump in March 2022 at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, but maintained under Biden until May 2023 – the majority were carried out under Biden. In the 12 months after Title 42 was finally rescinded, the government accelerated deportations under the normal provision (Title 8), removing or returning 775,000 people in this period – among the highest levels for years.[97]

Biden's asylum ban

On 4 June 2024, the Biden administration announced a new executive order that effectively suspended the right to asylum for the majority of people apprehended at the US-Mexico border. Under its conditions, at periods when the average number of daily encounters reaches 2,500, asylum will be suspended until the average daily number of encounters falls to a threshold of 1,500. Anyone entering irregularly will be quickly deported to

94 WOLA (2024) US-Mexico border: All CBP encounters by country.
95 Freeman, W., Holmes, S. & Barmgautner, S. (2024) Why six countries account for most migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border. CFR.
96 Freeman, A. (2024) Biden on track to exceed Trump, Obama in deportations in first term, data shows. CBS Austin.
97 Chishti, M. & Bush-Joseph, K. (2024) The Biden administration is on pace to match Trump deportation numbers—Focusing on the border, not the U.S. interior. Migration Policy Institute; Gooding, D. (2024) U.S. Immigration officials deport record number of illegal migrants. Newsweek.

their home country or turned back to Mexico, with the exception of unaccompanied children and victims of trafficking.[98] Thousands of removals were reported in the weeks following the ban, with record-breaking numbers of deportations carried out.[99] However, the ability of authorities to undertake deportations depended significantly on the availability of flights to different countries, meaning some nationalities were at greater risk of deportation than others.[100]

The move prompted widespread criticism, with UNHCR highlighting that the new restrictions "undermine the fundamental right to seek asylum".[101] Human rights organisations also pointed to the heightened risk that those expelled back to Mexico face at the hands of criminal gangs.[102] The government was accused by Human Rights Watch of "catering to fearmongering against immigrants" in an effort to appear "tough" on border security.[103] While, in principle, asylum claims will be able to continue through the CBP One app – a system that became mandatory in 2023, whereby prospective asylum seekers schedule an appointment at an official port of entry – the asylum ban will likely only exacerbate the backlogs, delays and exclusionary categorisation of many asylum seekers from non-priority groups.[104] The asylum ban, which has been compared to some of the harshest policies implemented under Trump, was almost immediately subjected to a legal challenge by a consortium of advocacy groups.[105]

Safe Mobility Offices

Biden has arguably pursued a "carrot and stick" approach to migration management throughout his administration, combining stricter protocols around the processing of asylum claims from those entering the US without authorisation while offering (albeit still limited) legal pathways for migration.[106] One example of this is the implementation of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs), beginning in April 2023 and now operating in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Guatemala. According to official data, as of the end of May 2024 "200,000 have reportedly registered on the platform, 21,000 have been approved for some kind of legal status and 9,000 have moved".[107] Though SMOs demonstrate the potential benefits of a safe and regular migration pathway, the numbers to date do not come anywhere close to offering a viable alternative to the majority of those in need of protection. Importantly, they also exclude various groups (such as migrants in transit) who are among the most vulnerable. Their reliance on online registration is both a strength and a weakness, offering a relatively accessible platform to those able to use it, but potentially excluding others without the skills or resources to engage in this technology. Despite its innovative approach, the benefits of SMOs are being undermined by the increasingly restrictive measures being adopted in other areas of US migration policy.[108]

The politics of immigration

Despite the severity of current asylum and immigration policy, there continues to be a highly politicised debate between the Democrat and Republican parties, with the latter pushing for even more extreme approaches to border management. This has been illustrated during discussions around the extension of military assistance to Ukraine, an area where the Biden administration has been repeatedly obstructed by resistance from elements within the Republican party, who have tried to make this aid provisional on the imposition of stricter migration policies, including the rollout of nationwide expedited removals for anyone who entered the US irregularly over the past two years.[109] Though the aid package was ultimately passed in April 2024, after a long delay but without the required conditions attached, the framing of the discussion as a political quid pro quo risks setting a dangerous precedent where human rights protections are bartered away to exact foreign policy concessions.

The political divisions surrounding immigration have repeatedly played out in the courts, particularly in relation to legal petitions and policy proposals launched by Texas and other Republican-aligned states in opposition to the federal government. This included a challenge launched by more than 20 Republican-controlled states who contended that the humanitarian parole programme was costing them millions in health care, education and other costs. The measure, introduced in 2023 by the Biden administration permitting the legal entry of up to 30,000 nationals from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela every month, provided migrants from these countries with a legal pathway to enter the US – though it should be noted that it accompanied legislation that also allowed the US

98 Hesson, T. & Rosenberg, M. (2024) Biden imposes sweeping asylum ban at US-Mexico border. Reuters.
99 Gooding, D. (2024) Op. Cit.
100 Spagat, E. (2024) Some nationalities escape Biden's sweeping asylum ban because deportation flights are scarce. AP.
101 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR expresses concern over new asylum restrictions in the United States.
102 Asencio, C. (2024) Two weeks of the Biden border proclamation and asylum shutdown. Human Rights First.
103 Human Rights Watch (2024) US: Order limiting asylum will harm people seeking protection.
104 Human Rights Watch (2024) "We couldn't wait": Digital metering at the US-Mexico border; Asencio, C. (2024) Op. Cit.
105 Kim, S.M. & Santana, R. (2024) President Joe Biden faces first lawsuit over new asylum crackdown at the border. AP.
106 Schacher, Y. (2023) Biden's approach to migration management in the Americas. Mixed Migration Centre.
107 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) The influence of Safe Mobility Offices on mixed migration in Latin America.
108 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Ibid.
109 Frelick, B. (2023) Refugees in the US shouldn't pay the price for aid to Ukraine. Human Rights Watch.

to expel the same number of people from these countries into Mexico. The case was dismissed by a court in March 2024, meaning that, at the time of writing, the programme remains in place.[110]

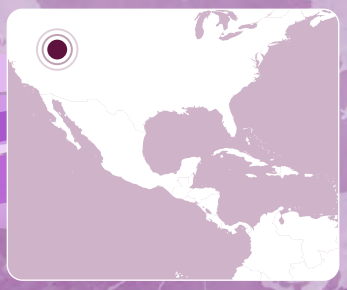
Another case that has brought Texas into direct conflict with the federal government is Senate Bill 4, legislation enacted by Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican and close Trump ally, that imposes much heavier penalties on people who enter the country irregularly, with repeated offenders potentially subject to 20 years in prison.[111] In March 2024, after various legal rulings, the Supreme Court authorised Texas law enforcement to enact the policy before a federal appeals court upheld an earlier injunction against the law.[112] At the time of writing, the legal battle over the legislation was still ongoing.[113] If the legislation is ultimately implemented, however, it could serve as a precedent for other states to develop their own laws criminalising irregular migration, enabling them to conduct deportations from their territories.[114]

[See *Thematic snapshot, Donald Trump's election victory: mixed migration under attack* on page 192]

110 Lozano, J. A. (2024) Program that allows 30,000 migrants from 4 countries into the US each month upheld by judge, AP.
111 García, U. J. (2023) Gov. Greg Abbott signs bill making illegal immigration a state crime. The Texas Tribune.
112 Serrano, A. & García, U. J. (2024) Texas' new immigration law is blocked again. The Texas Tribune.
113 Serrano, A. (2024) Texas, Biden administration take their battle over new immigration law to federal appeals court. The Texas Tribune.
114 Debusmann, B. (2024) How would Texas' controversial SB4 immigration law work? BBC.

From Venezuela to Utah's 'sanctuary state'

"Here, everyone has opportunities."



I am a 39-year-old man from Venezuela, I am a metallurgical engineer. I first moved to Colombia, where I tried to practise my career, but it was impossible. Then I came to the US, where I have a lot of family who always told me to come.

I flew from Bogotá to Mexico and crossed the border. It was hard. I was detained both in Mexico and in Texas, for over two months. Now I live in Pleasant Grove, in Utah, and work in a car parts distribution store.

When I came here, I lived with an aunt, but I've now been living alone for three years in rented rooms. I want to make my status legal so I can buy a house and bring my three children here. I do everything to achieve this. I pay all my taxes and do everything legally.

I am still in the asylum process and waiting for the court call. I have a TPS [Temporary Protected Status], which is a measure of protection against any law that might come out about spontaneous deportation. When I get asylum, I can get residency and then citizenship. I don't want to go back to Colombia. I would like to return to Venezuela, but right now it's impossible.

Utah is a Mormon state and there is very little racism here. There's a lot of unity. People reach out to you and help you find a job. I haven't suffered any xenophobia. There are also lots of Latin people here.

Education is good, too. I have friends who brought their children, and they were already studying the next day. In some parts of Utah, there were cases of violence, bullying and aggression against migrant children, but it's not common.

People call this state a 'sanctuary state' because here they do not persecute migrants. Here, everyone has opportunities. To be stopped by the police, you have to commit an infraction. In four years, I have only been stopped by the police once because I was driving while I was on a video call and didn't have a valid licence. They only gave me a fine.

But my friends in other states, like Texas, Louisiana, Missouri and Georgia see more discrimination, often because of what politicians say.

Last year, the governor of Texas spoke badly about migrants, mainly Venezuelans, saying they caused discord with the natives. Then, in the summer, there was a group of migrants sitting on the side of the road, and a man came, saw them and drove his car over them. Intentionally. The governor washed his hands of it. But obviously everybody knows that this resulted from what he has sown in the population. It is an example of the negative things that those speeches have brought.

In Colombia, I experienced more xenophobia and didn't have any job opportunities. Here, you can get a work permit easily. In a couple of years, you can achieve a good economic status if you work hard, learn English and adapt to the customs.

While I lived in Colombia and Venezuela, I was mugged and even almost killed once. Here, in winter, when it is very cold and the car is freezing at dawn, you leave it on outside the house with the key inside, and nothing happens. In Colombia, you can't go out holding your cell phone because you could be robbed or even killed.

I have worked with a lot of gringos, and have gotten along well. I don't know if it's because I have a light skin complexion. But I have dark-skinned friends, and they also get along well. In this state, there are many laws against racism... Maybe that's why.

Politics influences how people view migrants. Trump used to have slogans about migration in general, but now he's targeting Venezuelans. Yes, many Venezuelans in the US committed crimes, but sometimes people generalise and blame everything on us, even when the criminals weren't Venezuelans.

I don't get involved in politics. I only focus on listening to what interests me, which is the immigration part. I'm interested to see when they introduce laws that can harm or benefit me. For example, when TPS came out, they said, "Those who have entered during this time can apply." I investigate and inquire about issues that are convenient or problematic for me.

Biden opened the borders, but it got out of hand. There was no filter. Criminals came in, and he messed it up. That's where his popularity fell. When the border issue got complicated after refugees from Venezuela, Haiti, Ukraine and other countries arrived, the negative focus was only on Venezuelans.

Now Trump is also going against legal migrants, so I am scared because I am in the process of becoming legal. I hope he doesn't win the elections, because he is very racist and his campaign is specifically targeting Venezuelans.

Smuggling and trafficking gangs – focus on Venezuela's Tren de Aragua *megabanda*

In recent years, the movement of 6.5 million[1] Venezuelans into neighbouring countries in South America has instigated an unexpected and violently grim international expansion of a homemade Venezuelan criminal enterprise: the Tren de Aragua. Not only has the 'mega-gang' (*megabanda*) expanded geographically along with the migrants, but its members prey on their fellow countryfolk abroad, greatly profiting from their vulnerability and flight from Venezuela. This criminal infrastructure is directly associated with exploiting the Venezuelan exodus[2] that peaked between 2018 and 2022.

In the last decade, this *megabanda*, or large criminal network, has grown from a prison gang limited to the state of Aragua, Venezuela, to a transnational threat with an estimated 5,000[3] members and a wide criminal portfolio.[4] According to some sources, Tren de Aragua's power extends across Venezuela, where it controls illegal gold mines, drug corridors and part of the clandestine border crossings (*trochas*), through which thousands of migrants cross the border with Colombia. Their criminal activities are often concentrated in border areas where they profit from controlling crossings used by hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan migrants, including the Venezuela-Colombia border between Táchira and Norte de Santander, the Peru-Chile border and the Bolivia-Chile border.[5]

Outside of Venezuela, Tren de Aragua has established permanent cells in Colombia, Peru and Chile, with reports of its activities in Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia, Panama and Costa Rica, where it reportedly practises varying degrees extortion, arms trafficking, bribery, loan sharking, drug trafficking, kidnappings-for-ransom, money laundering, contract killings, car theft, migrant smuggling and human trafficking. According to The Armed Conflict Survey 2023,[6] the gang plays a particularly dominant role in human trafficking and human smuggling in Latin America. The gang followed migrants leaving Venezuela and established bases and cells in urban zones[7] with large Venezuelan migrant populations, including Bogotá (Colombia), Lima (Peru) and Santiago (Chile). Despite a surge in the arrest of gang members,[8] the group continues to control its operations and recruit members and allies from behind bars,[9] becoming a growing headache for national authorities.

In 2024, new reports have emerged of Tren de Aragua operating in the US[10] – again, following increases in the number of Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers arriving as a result of new 'humanitarian parole'[11] programmes tailor-made for Venezuelans. Reportedly, the gang runs multistate human trafficking rings,[12] forcing immigrant women into prostitution, amongst other crimes. As of June 2024, US authorities have reported over 100 criminal cases[13] involving Tren De Aragua gang members.

Tren de Aragua has taken advantage[14] of the minority and irregular status[15] of Venezuelans in foreign countries, where their exploitation is less visible and where victims are less inclined to contact local police who themselves may not prioritise crime among irregular migrants, or may already be corrupted by the gang. Once the gang gains a foothold, it branches out into other income-generating enterprises in the criminal economy as listed above, including human smuggling.

1 R4V (2024) Refugiados y migrantes de Venezuela.
2 Insight Crime (2023) Venezuela Security Policy: The Criminal Exploitation of the Migrant Crisis.
3 Al Jazeera (2023) Venezuela takes control of gang-run jail, 'dismantles' Tren de Aragua.
4 Insight Crime (2023) Tren de Aragua.
5 Ibid.
6 Mia, I. (2023) The Armed Conflict Survey 2023. IISS.
7 Cárdenas, J. D. & Loaiza, L. (2023) Security Challenges Facing the New Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia. Insight Crime.
8 Buschschlüter, V. (2024) Founder of Venezuela's most feared gang arrested. BBC.
9 Insight Crime (2019) Venezuela's Tren de Aragua Gang Seeks to Grow Inside Brazil Prisons.
10 Strickler, L., Ainsley, J., Martinez, D. & Winter, T. (2024) 'Ghost criminals': How Venezuelan gang members are slipping into the U.S. NBC News.
11 Urizar, A. G. & Camacho, C. (2024) Understanding Immigration Relief Options for Venezuelan Nationals in the United States. Fragomen.
12 Romo, R., Morillo, B. & Weffer, L. (2024) This is the dangerous Venezuelan gang infiltrating the US that you probably know nothing about but should. CNN.
13 Nguyen, V (2024) Suspected members of Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua believed to be connected to criminal cases in Illinois and Indiana. NBC Chicago.
14 Insight Crime (2023) Venezuelan Migrants Remain Easy Prey for Organized Crime.
15 Amnesty International (2023) Americas: Growing exodus of Venezuelans highlights failure of Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile to comply with obligations.

In general, human smuggling in South America and through Central America is not as widely practised as in certain other parts of the world, because people mostly move by themselves. A February 2024 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) analysis[16] based on more than 3,000 interviews conducted in Costa Rica, Honduras and Mexico in 2022 and 2023 found that two out of every five survey respondents hired smugglers during their migration journey. Respondents who reported using smugglers mostly identified them as service providers who helped them to cross borders irregularly and to travel within transit countries. More than half said smugglers had helped them achieve their migration goals. Only 20 percent of those who used smugglers identified them as potential perpetrators of abuse. In the same month, another MMC report[17] found that 86 percent of those interviewed said the Darién Gap was the most dangerous transit area on their journey, with over half reporting having experienced robbery and physical violence, 29 percent of women interviewed having suffered sexual violence and almost half of all those interviewed having witnessed death while trekking on this treacherous route. In addition, 53 percent reported that the perpetrators of violations included 'armed gangs' and 88 percent said they included 'local community' members – although it is not clear if 'local community' perpetrators also refers to local criminal gangs.

Evidently, there are particular hot spots of transit where those on the move encounter gangs, where using a 'smuggler' is not voluntary, and where human trafficking[18] and modern slavery risks are high. These include, *inter alia*, departure from Venezuela,[19] the Darién Gap[20] and the US-Mexico[21] border, which represent particularly intense intersections of mobility and organised crime. Tren de Aragua is known to have exploited Venezuelan migrants[22] systematically, charging them extortionate fees and smuggling them into countries where they are then trafficked[23] for sexual exploitation. Clearly, there are numerous other gangs operating throughout South and Central America, and although Tren de Aragua has asserted itself in some territories and cities, it competes with other gangs and is barred from operating where other gangs are stronger.

Tragically, the exploitation of those on the move by unscrupulous organised gangs has become all too common around the world. Moving in marginal spaces and often clandestinely, avoiding authorities and shunned or exploited by local communities, migrants and asylum seekers fall prey to violent gangs who thrive in such spaces and enjoy almost total impunity. In this case, Tren de Aragua exemplifies such gang practices, but the phenomenon is extraordinary insofar as its growing power and geographical presence have been directly dependent on a single – massive – case of displacement, as well as its evolution now resulting in the gang becoming a national security concern in multiple countries.

16 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Secondary actors: the role of smugglers in mixed migration through the Americas.
17 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Security risks in the Darien Gap and assistance needed among migrants.
18 Asmann, P. & Dudley, S. (2023) Human Trafficking on the US-Mexico Border: Family Clans, Coyotes, or 'Cartels'? Insight Crime.
19 Insight Crime (2024) Venezuelan Women at Risk From Expanding Trafficking Rings.
20 International Crisis Group (2023) Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap.
21 Asmann, P. & Dudley, S. (2022) Desperation in the Desert: The Industrialization of Migrant Smuggling on the US-Mexico Border. Insight Crime.
22 Insight Crime (2024). Op. cit.
23 Otis, J. (2021) Venezuelan Migrants Fall Prey to Sex Traffickers After Fleeing Their Collapsing Country. The Wall Street Journal.

Interview

‘We reap what we sow’ – politicised borders and exclusionary migration policies in the US

The militarisation and politicisation of the US border continue to represent a contentious topic in the migration discourse across the country – and beyond. And with seemingly bipartisan border policies across different administrations, there is little hope that the conditions of refugees and asylum seekers trying to cross into the US might improve with the upcoming presidential elections, even in the case of a Democratic victory, explained **Nicole Elizabeth Ramos**, before the results of the US election.

Nicole Elizabeth Ramos is the director of the Border Rights Project at Al Otro Lado, an NGO where she conducts human rights monitoring at US ports of entry, as well as providing legal orientation and accompaniment to asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border and engaging in advocacy and litigation against US border policies that violate the right to seek asylum. She also teaches a course on border enforcement policies and movement lawyering at the Temple University Beasley School of Law, where she is an adjunct professor.

US President Joe Biden promised to change the migration asylum system. Did he achieve that in your opinion or are you disappointed by him?

I'm not disappointed in the Biden administration – they're doing exactly what we expected them to do. We never entered this presidency with any hope that he was going to comply with his campaign promises of a more humane immigration system and reforming asylum at the border. All that's happening comes as no surprise.

Is that partly because both the Democrats and the Republicans follow similar and bipartisan common practices when dealing with migrants and asylum seekers?

The Democrats are not more benign. The rhetoric and the words that they use to describe immigrants, or what they perceive as the problem, are different from the words that Republicans use. And so it sounds more palatable to moderate and liberal Americans, but US border policies across administrations are

exclusionary. They don't exist to improve the process for asylum seekers or other immigrants. They're done to keep out as many people as possible. We must also remember that Biden was the vice president during the Obama years, when we saw this explosion of family detentions – imprisoning mothers and their babies in detention centres – which, to many across the world, was horrifying. Under the Obama administration, there were very high rates of deportation as well. We saw the skyrocketing of prosecutions for illegal re-entry. Therefore, across both Republicans and Democrats, we're seeing this criminalisation of migrants and policies that are implemented to make the process at the border as onerous as possible to dissuade people from even wanting to come.

> **"US border policies across administrations are exclusionary. They don't exist to improve the process for asylum seekers or other immigrants. They're done to keep out as many people as possible."**

Can you tell us more about your Border Rights Project for migrants in Tijuana?

At the Border Rights Project, we provide legal orientation to asylum seekers from diverse linguistic communities, working with whoever walks through our doors. Ensuring language access to legal orientation is a cornerstone of our work and is supported by our multilingual staff, contract interpreters and volunteer interpreters, many of them working remotely. We support asylum seekers throughout migrant shelters in Tijuana, providing information about current policies at the border that might impact their ability to seek asylum, and identifying cases of asylum seekers where we can engage in further advocacy to hopefully shorten their wait time at the border.

The team also conducts human rights monitoring at the ports of entry in Tijuana, where staff and teams of volunteers are on-site to observe interactions between asylum seekers, Mexican immigration officials, the National Guard, the municipal police, and US Customs and Border Protection officers. The evidence gathered supports Al Otro Lado's impact litigation. We also conduct human rights monitoring digitally via an online survey, available in Spanish, Haitian Kreyol, French, English and Russian, where we ask asylum seekers a series of questions about their interactions with different types of officials as well as about their living conditions and the barriers they might be facing to food security, shelter, medical attention and education. We regularly triage the needs of asylum seekers at the border, both in-person and via the online survey, to ensure that we are reaching the most at-risk individuals and working with them to submit humanitarian parole requests to enter the United States to seek asylum.

You have worked on several class actions on behalf of migrants. Have you won any of them?

We filed our first class action in July 2017, and we won that case in September 2021. However, that win is being appealed by the government. We are also currently involved in litigation against CBP for the CBP One policy. The core argument behind our border litigation is that it is illegal to turn asylum seekers back at a port of entry, that they must be processed upon arrival and that things like waitlists, whether in physical format or digital, violate that right. Despite winning our first case, the ruling could not take immediate effect. We won in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Title 42 provisions and a closed border, which our complaint did not contemplate. And so the decision was held in abeyance until the lifting of Title 42. That gave the government time to roll out the smartphone platform, CBP One, which asylum seekers are required to use in order to access the asylum process.

That seems to be an important and historic win. Have you filed any new complaints since then?

Last summer, we filed a lawsuit against CBP [the United States Customs and Border Protection] for the use of CBP One, arguing that this is just an extension of the waitlist – the metering policy that they previously instituted, which the court found unlawful. The only difference is that it's a metering list in the cloud, as opposed to a physical list being held by Mexican immigration officers, who still remain very much involved in the process. When people arrive for their appointments, Mexican immigration checks migrants' documents and appointment notices, which is really problematic for people fleeing the Mexican government or organised crime actors who regularly collaborate with the Mexican government.

In just a couple of weeks, a whistleblower against the government will have his appointment.[1] This man has been in hiding for over a year now. I and another staff member – and three of my reactive dogs! – are going to accompany him to make sure that he just doesn't get picked up off the street. So to have that level of involvement from members of a government that has a well-documented history of human rights violations and participation in organised crime and with such unfettered access to asylum seekers is a huge problem, especially when people are attempting to flee from the very government that employs the same officers who are checking their documents.

1 This interview was conducted in June 2024.

Some are hailing CBP One App as an innovative positive development, but you clearly see it as just another obstacle. Is that correct?

It's absolutely an obstacle. It's only available in three languages, but the border is such an incredibly linguistically diverse place. Even in Mexico there are over 100 indigenous languages. Last year, we served asylum seekers speaking 70 different languages in Tijuana and the open-air detention sites that have sprung up on the US side of the border in San Diego County. The result is that you have thousands of these people who are cut off from the only process through which they can seek and be eligible for asylum.

In the case of linguistically vulnerable asylum seekers, if they don't come into contact with an organisation that has access to language resources, they either need to cross the border without inspection – and then, maybe, end up in one of these open-air detention sites, places where migrants have literally died as a result of those dire conditions – or they can pay someone else to make the appointment. In those cases, maybe the person that they paid does the job of creating an account and securing an appointment, or maybe they just take the migrants' money and there's no legal redress. This gap caused by the lack of language access creates another cottage industry for organised crime, outside smuggling, kidnapping and extortion. The more the US externalises asylum processing at the border, the more opportunities it creates for these gaps in protection to be exploited by bad actors that the US government claims to be combatting.

Are you equally critical of the Safe Mobility Offices? Are they also another mechanism designed to delay and divert attention?

Every measure that the US takes with asylum seekers getting to the northern border of Mexico is about delay and detention. They use the words facilitate, assist and combat human trafficking. But, as experience on the ground from civil society has shown them, the impact felt by asylum seekers is always one of increased danger, not of decreased risk.

Is there a danger that too many groups and categories of those on the move are making asylum claims and that this, as a result, might "dilute" the importance of asylum as a whole?

That's not the correct way to see the problem. Let's take climate refugees as an example. Under the Cartagena Declaration, a person impacted by climate change or natural disasters could be eligible for international protection. However, the US has not signed onto the Cartagena Declaration, despite the clear evidence of global warming, climate change and the country's role in the destruction of ecosystems across the planet. Much of that destruction is coming from places like the US and Canada in the Global North, and the impact of our consumption patterns is felt in the Global South. Our patterns of over-consumption have in large part created the crises from which people are fleeing. In essence, we're receiving the victims of our own policy. The same could be said for a lot of folks who are coming from Latin America and the Caribbean, fleeing unstable governments and economic situations, partly created by our training of military, police and political type folks at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia.

> **"Our patterns of over-consumption have in large part created the crises from which people are fleeing."**

This place used to be dubbed the School of the Assassins. Now it's the Western Hemisphere Institute for Democracy, something that sounds more benign, but if you look at, for example, Honduras, and the coup in 2009 and then the installation of President Juan Orlando Hernandez, you have School of the America's footprints all over it. The US implicitly supported that coup. We have caravans of people fleeing Honduras during the Trump years, and people are wondering, 'Why are all these people coming to the border?' They're thinking, 'Oh they are probably just coming because the Honduran economy is bad.' In Trump's words, they were coming 'to bring crime'. And today, Juan Orlando Hernandez is sitting in a US jail for his involvement in international drug trafficking, among other crimes. We, the United States, create the victims that come to us. We also support transnational companies as well as US companies that go to these places in the Global South, take out resources, destabilise regions and displace people from their lands.

And when those people come to us, we call them 'economic migrants' and accuse them of coming to the US to steal our jobs and way of life. However, we don't bat an eyelid at folks from Canada, the US, the UK, France and so on going to places like Mexico or Panama and becoming digital nomads or retiring there, not always complying with local immigration law, and just coming and going on tourist visas, or overstaying a tourist visa, while buying land, working and not paying taxes. We don't fault those people, whom we refer to as 'expats', for wanting a better life, wanting to get more for their dollar or wanting a change of pace. We applaud them. We say, 'You are brave for going out of your comfort zone and chasing a different life.' On the other hand, we criminalise the people who are coming to the same colonial and capitalist centres that have stripped the resources from their homelands and destabilised their governments.

No one wants to go to a place like the US or the UK, where the food is not as good as their homeland, the

weather is not as nice, the culture is not nearly as warm and there's little sense of community. There is no cultural identity centred around language, art and music, like the identity of their homeland. No one wants to go to a place that is unwelcoming, like the US. People migrate to places where they are not wanted in order to survive. That is the most basic human instinct there is, and we criminalise it.

> **"People migrate to places where they are not wanted in order to survive. That is the most basic human instinct there is, and we criminalise it."**

Haiti, particularly, is a nation that seems to have got the worst end of everything, but it appears that the US is not alone in its harsh treatment of Haitians. Why do you think they're being singled out and seemingly rejected by everybody?

I believe Haitians are still being punished for being the first black republic to free itself, and the Haitian revolution spurred revolutions against slavery across the globe. What I also think is interesting about Haitians, despite how terribly the world has treated them, is that they were one of the first countries to accept Jews leaving World War II and provide them with a refuge. The mercenaries who were part of carrying out the assassination plan of Haiti's president were trained by the US at the School of the Americas. It was an assassination that was, in part, funded by a company in Florida. And so it's completely fascinating and disturbing that the US, while having this participation in the destabilisation of Haiti, takes no responsibility. They continue to send people on deportation flights back to Haiti, despite our involvement in destabilising the country over decades.

Generally, are children still being separated from their parents during the asylum or deportation process at the US border?

We do continue to see family separation, although at a lower rate compared to what we saw under the Trump administration. We do see, for example, spouses who are legally married, as well as common-law spouses who have children together. In these cases, we see one spouse being sent to an adult detention centre, thousands of miles away, typically in the southeastern US, and they'll be forced to go through their proceedings in detention, with no meaningful access to counsel, and they will frequently be deported back to their home country. We will also see young adults separated from their families. They may have just turned 18 years old the day before. They might have never lived apart from their parents before, and yet they could be sent to an adult detention centre and separated from the only family they have ever known. We also see these separations in the cases of elderly grandparents who may have never lived apart from their children and grandchildren. They fall into a kind of black hole in the immigration detention system, from the moment they enter CBP or Border Patrol Custody. It is almost impossible to locate the missing family members of people who have been split up during the border processing process.

Even though we are attaching notices of representation that indicate we have permission to represent this party, border agents refuse to respond to all of these requests or they tell us, 'Well, we let so-and-so know that you called, and they'll call you back.' So apparently, none of these detained clients has ever wanted to speak to an attorney because we've never gotten a call. And the locator system that ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement] has online, where you can theoretically find someone in detention after they've left border processing and have been sent to an ICE detention centre, is not updated frequently. It can take up to two weeks, sometimes, to find someone in the ICE database, and by that time, it might be too late.

It is our contention that these policies are state-enforced disappearances because they refuse to give any information about where the person is, which obviously creates a lot of anguish for the family, as well as real legal and physical risks, because some of the people they're also detaining are medically vulnerable and are not being given the medication and treatment that they might need to stay alive.

> **"The US government, as internal records show, was aware as far back as 15 years ago that we would be facing record levels of immigration around this time as a result of climate change and envisioned political instability. And the response to prepare for this was militarisation."**

What do you think about the iron-fist approach of governments in places like El Salvador, Ecuador and Honduras? If it's adopted by other states, will it result in less crime and then less mobility? Is it sustainable?

I don't know that it's sustainable because, under Bukele [El Salvador's president], there are lots of people who are being detained without having committed a crime, and who are being held incommunicado for six months or more without even a preliminary hearing. It is true that many have never been arrested for the crimes that they've done for many years but, as a lawyer, you have to defend the innocent, of course. Even for people who have committed crimes or have been found guilty of crimes, there needs to be a minimum standard of institutional care, but the current system is one of torture

and deprivation. And you can torture a population for a good long while, but as history shows, eventually that population figures out how to resist and rebel.

Isn't it reasonable that the US would build a wall? Any other OECD country would arguably do the same, if millions of undocumented people were apprehended whilst crossing their borders clandestinely.

Apprehensions don't always reflect individual people. An apprehension could be someone who has attempted multiple times. So that doesn't necessarily represent the actual number of people. But to respond to your point, the US government, as internal records show, was aware as far back as 15 years ago that we would be facing record levels of immigration around this time as a result of climate change and envisioned political instability. And the response to prepare for this was militarisation. The response could have been, instead, let's invest more in education, in medical care, in social work and systems of receiving, which would have also created jobs, just the way that detention centres create jobs. But we chose militarisation because, ultimately, that is more profitable. A lot of the companies that profited from the wars in the Middle East have turned their technology to developing militarised border technology. I would say, then, that our response is a choice. It's not the choice that I would make, because

> **"The attitude and the politics of the US are focused on wealth conservation at all costs, even if the cost is watching children and families literally die on our doorstep."**

we are humans. We are biologically destined to live in a community and share resources because that benefits our collective survival. But, unfortunately, the attitude and the politics of the US are focused on wealth conservation at all costs, even if the cost is watching children and families literally die on our doorstep.

Do you support open borders?

Absolutely. We are on stolen land, anyway. We are making claims to land that we never had a right to own. And the idea that this border, which was constructed by White men in DC, could limit the migration of people who are indigenous to this land, crossing it back and forth, as they've done for centuries, is offensive. We are not protecting something that belongs to us. We are protecting something that we stole.

> **"The idea that this border, which was constructed by White men in DC, could limit the migration of people who are indigenous to this land, crossing it back and forth, as they've done for centuries, is offensive. We are not protecting something that belongs to us. We are protecting something that we stole."**

In Mexico, do you think the newly elected President Claudia Sheinbaum will make any difference to the welfare of migrants and asylum seekers? And how do you think she might negotiate the relationship with and the externalisation efforts of the US, using Mexico as the enforcer of border controls?

Mexico and the US have a long history of economic cooperation and she's indicated that she's going to continue that cooperation in terms of border policies. Mexico is the biggest trading partner for the US. The importance of needing to maintain that relationship signals that she, like AMLO [out-going president Andrés Manuel López Obrador], is willing to trade dollars and economic impact for the lives of people, including Mexican citizens, who account for around a third of the people that we see seeking asylum each year. Last year, we served over 10,000 asylum seekers through our programme, with approximately 30 percent being Mexican citizens. The majority of those 30 percent are coming from the states of Guerrero and Michoacán, which have completely fallen to narco-violence – with entire towns burned and abandoned, and large groups of people massacred. The Mexican government can't or won't even protect its own citizens. To cooperate with the US government in ways that prevent Mexico's own citizens from escaping a hell that they can't control but, in fact, contribute to – because it is a well-known fact that the political campaigns of Mexico receive contributions from organised crime – is a betrayal of the highest order. I fully expect that Sheinbaum will betray Mexican citizens in the same way that AMLO and Pena Nieto did. In order to make the wealthy even wealthier and those in business more profitable, they will bow to US demands, which also limits Mexico's sovereignty to decide its own border policies.

This year is a big one for elections around the world, with approximately 70 elections taking place globally. Do you see a growing rise in populism? If so, what are the implications for the future of migration and asylum, not just in the US but worldwide?

Yes. It's going to result in it being even more difficult and more deadly for migrants to leave places where they fear persecution or starvation due to climate change and other factors, to get to a safer place where they can sustain themselves and their families. This militarisation

and this rush to create borders and bigger walls is really pushed by the United States. When the Berlin Wall fell, there were 15 border walls around the world, and now there are over 70. The US government sends its personnel from CBP to other countries to train them on how to better enforce their borders. Within the DHS [US Department of Homeland Security], we have a troop of Indigenous trackers called the Shadow Wolves, who take their ancestral knowledge of tracking animals in the desert to teach the Polish border guards how to track refugees in the Polish forest, so they can never make it onto EU territory. And who's hanging out in the Polish forest? Syrians, Iranians, Afghans. So, this rush to militarisation and borders is very much pushed by the US to protect our economic and political interests and who we perceive as the enemy of those interests.

How do you imagine things will turn out if Trump is re-elected?

If Trump returns to power, things will get worse, but regardless of who is in power, we remain very concerned about the cooperation between the US government's frontline officers and right-wing anti-immigrant activists and groups. At Al Otro Lado, we see first-hand evidence of their work. Civil society organisations like Al Otro Lado are subject to harassment and continual surveillance because of what we do. It seems that our work – informing people of what their rights are, monitoring human rights and filing lawsuits – is a threat to the power structure, because we have eyes on them and we can report accurately what's happening. Therefore, we fully expect that, as the border continues to become this hot-button issue driving more right-wing attention, the harassment of our staff by right-wing activists and governments is going to continue and increase.

“This rush to militarisation and borders is very much pushed by the US to protect our economic and political interests and who we perceive as the enemy of those interests.”

Photo credit: Sean Aiden Calderbank / Shutterstock

England: 5 July, Downing Street, London, just after Sir Keir Starmer was elected as the new (Labour) prime minister. Despite immigration and asylum being important but divisive issues, the British voted the Conservatives out – a party that is typically more associated with controlling borders and immigration, but that had failed to do so in its 14 years of tenure. It remains to be seen if Labour can find answers to the 'small boats' dilemma and rising rates of immigration.

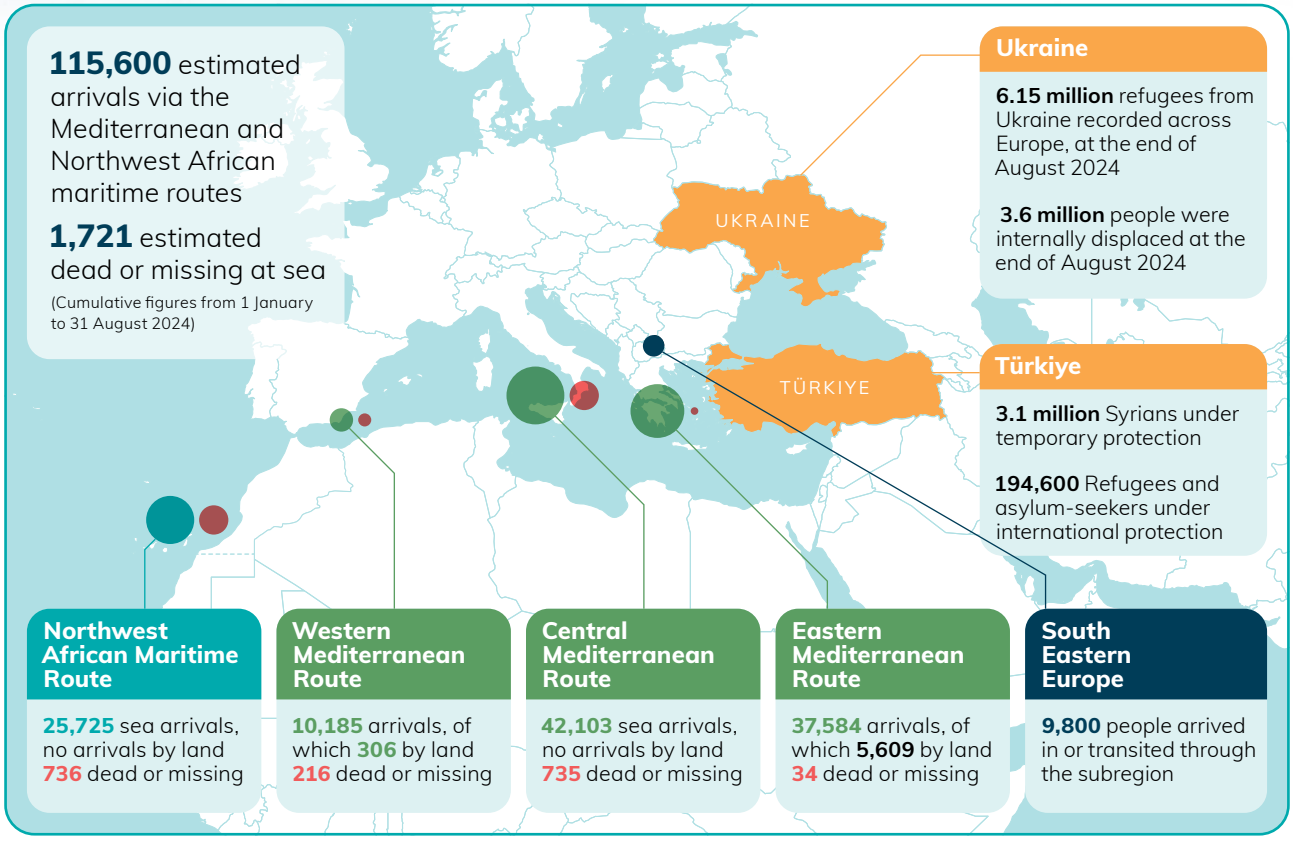
Europe

Overview

Peter Grant

In 2024, irregular mixed migration into Europe has decreased compared to the previous year, but the trends vary across different routes. The Central Mediterranean route, for example, which for years had been the most popular entry point, saw a less significant decline in arrivals. While Italy remained the top destination during 2024 in the first eight months of that year, it was followed closely by Spain and Greece. Spain saw a notable increase, particularly along the Western Africa-Atlantic route, while Cyprus and Malta also received some arrivals. This contrasts with 2023, when Italy accounted for well over half of all arrivals into Europe.

Graphic 1. Mediterranean situation: migrant arrivals and deaths/missing 2024

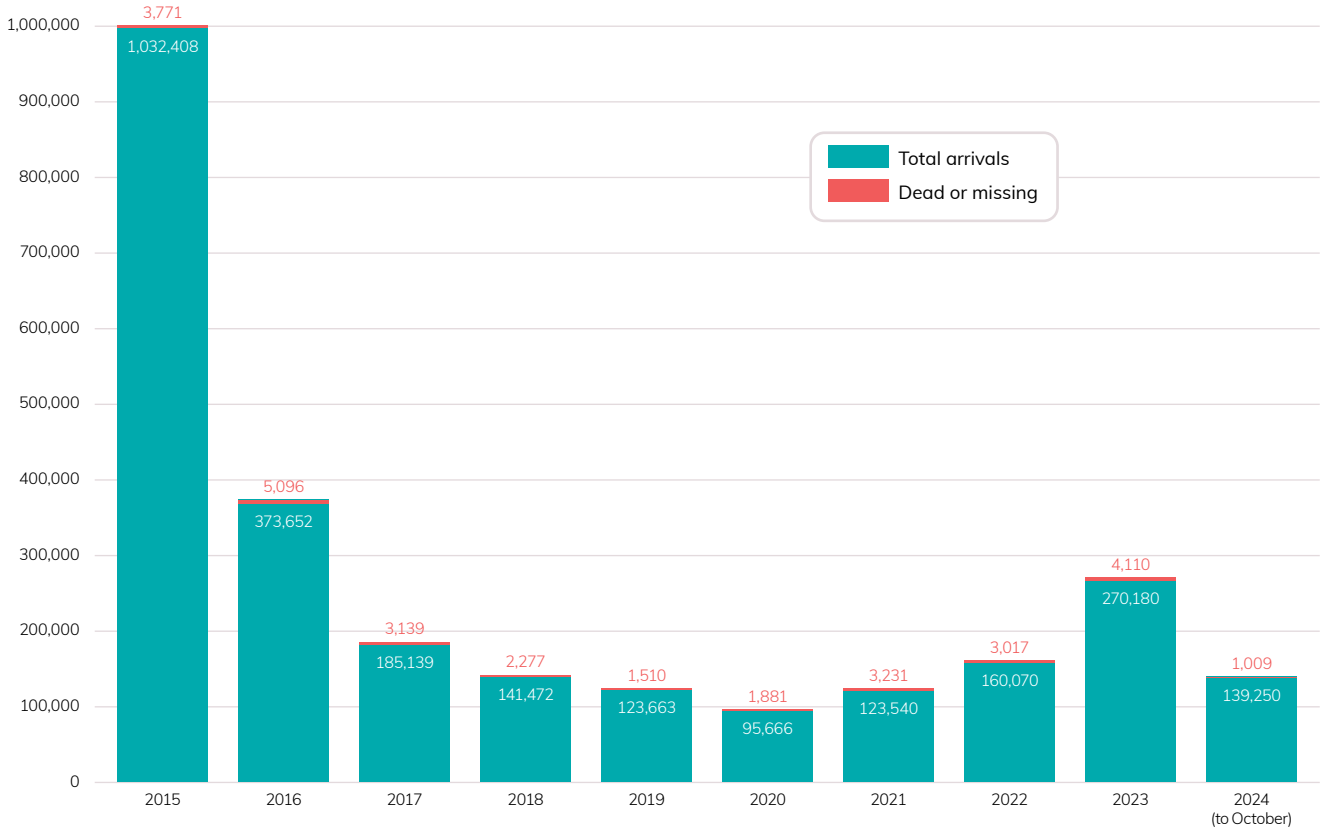


Source (adapted) and credit: UNHCR Mediterranean situation 31st August 2024.

Despite this decline in numbers, migration has not receded as a political issue across Europe. In the shadow of the new Pact on Asylum and Migration, European elections in June 2024 brought significant gains for right-wing parties that campaigned on xenophobic, anti-immigration platforms. At the same time, the EU continues to pursue a policy of externalisation through new agreements with Egypt, Lebanon and Mauritania (discussed in more detail in this report, in the chapters *Keeping Track in Africa* and *Keeping Track in the Middle East*) that prioritise returns to these countries in the face of human rights concerns.[1] The cost of these policies is borne by migrants, who are forced to navigate a system that has institutionalised "death, despair and destitution".[2]

1 Amnesty International (2024) World leaders must commit to protecting Syrian refugees as Lebanon steps up crackdown ahead of Brussels conference; Francavilla, C. (2024) EU deal with Egypt rewards authoritarianism, betrays "EU values". Human Rights Watch.
2 Médecins Sans Frontières (2024) Death, despair and destitution: The human costs of the EU's migration policies.

Graphic 2. Mediterranean: mixed migration and missing migrants 2015 - 2024



Source: UNHCR Situation Mediterranean Situation (unhcr.org).

With no end in sight for the conflict in Ukraine that began in February 2022 following Russia's invasion, the country not only has the largest population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Europe, but also represents its most sizeable refugee population, with millions of Ukrainians being hosted across the continent. The welcome extended to Ukrainians by European countries is in sharp contrast to the increasingly hostile policies imposed on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers originating from outside the continent, in particular Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Pushbacks and other egregious human rights violations by security guards continue to be reported across Europe, including at the borders of Greece and Poland. In the Central Mediterranean, meanwhile, those attempting to reach Italy face heightened dangers due to increasing interceptions by Libyan and Tunisian coastguards, while at the same time search and rescue operations have been severely curtailed.

The EU Pact on Asylum and Migration enters into law

On 10 April 2024, the much-debated and long-delayed EU Pact on Migration and Asylum was finally passed in the European Parliament. Comprising five pieces of separate but interconnected legislation covering different aspects of asylum and migration policy, it was approved by a slim majority of 300 votes in favour on average and 270 against.[3] The following month, it was formally approved by EU member states, though with continued opposition from Hungary and Poland, abstentions from the Czechia and Slovakia, and opposition from Austria to one specific regulation.[4]

The Pact had been under development since January 2020, when it was announced that a new framework would be developed to guide policy across the EU. It soon became clear, however, that while harmonising border security and responsibility sharing were both major concerns, addressing the acute protection gaps facing migrants was a much lower priority.[5] More than four years in the making, the final result has been widely criticised by human rights groups, with Amnesty International condemning it as "a missed opportunity" that "will lead to greater human suffering".[6] Of particular

3 Liboreiro, J. & Genovese, V. (2024) European Parliament narrowly endorses EU migration reform, moving it closer to the finish line. Euronews.
4 Liboreiro, J. (2024) EU completes reform of migration rules despite Poland and Hungary voting against. Euronews.
5 Mixed Migration Centre (2020) Mixed Migration Review 2020.
6 Amnesty International (2024) EU: Vote to adopt the Migration and Asylum Pact 'a missed opportunity'.

concern is the inclusion of tighter pre-screening requirements, accelerated asylum procedures to enable faster deportations and provisions that expand the potential for migrants – including unaccompanied minors deemed to be a security risk – to be detained.[7]

Part of the challenge in elaborating a common asylum and migration policy was the very different perspectives among member states on what it should and should not include. Tellingly, the two regulations that proved easiest for member states to reach a consensus on related to the imposition of standardised security entry protocols (the *Screening regulation*) and finger-printing (the *Eurodac regulation*) of arrivals. While both provisions were approved in June 2022 in the Council with no countries dissenting, the remaining regulations were much more divisive. In particular, the solidarity mechanisms in the *Migration and asylum management regulation* establish a minimum of 30,000 relocations every year from member states with the highest number of arrivals to elsewhere in the EU, and at least €600 million in financial assistance annually. Member states are able to choose, however, what form their contribution takes in terms of resettlement, financial payments or alternative forms of support such as capacity building or the provision of personnel.[8]

For Mediterranean countries such as Italy and Spain, receiving a disproportionate number of migrants from outside the EU, a central demand was more responsibility sharing within the bloc through resettlement and financial assistance. This was opposed by countries such as Hungary and Poland, who were strongly resistant to being obliged to resettle refugees. Even with the progressive, pro-EU Donald Tusk now in power as prime minister, Poland has continued its opposition to the relocation mechanism, with Tusk announcing that Poland would resist it shortly after the pact was approved.[9] This position has been justified by the fact that Poland already hosts one of the largest populations of Ukrainian refugees in Europe.

Another regulation that was approved in 2024 was the *Common asylum procedure*, which establishes standardised border management practices. Though it includes provisions on the rights and obligations of asylum seekers, much of the focus is on accelerated asylum processes at the EU's external borders, and the return of asylum seekers to 'safe third countries' they have travelled through en route to the EU, such as Morocco or Serbia.[10] Finally, the *Response to the migration crisis and force majeure situations regulation* relates to a context where "mass arrivals" render a country's asylum system "non-functional" and outlines the ways that member states can respond, whether by requesting "authorisation to apply derogations from the common procedure" or "benefit from solidarity measures".[11] The regulation includes contexts where migration has been "instrumentalised for political purposes", meaning it could be used in response to future so-called "hybrid attacks" a term used to describe the situation of migrant arrivals at the EU's borders with Russia and Belarus.[12]

While the terms of the Pact will not come into force until June 2026, allowing a buffer of two years to mobilise and align member states with its provisions, the agreement will likely come under pressure from a number of directions. On the one hand, human rights groups and NGOs representing refugees and asylum seekers, who have been almost unanimous in their disapproval of the new legislation, will likely undertake legal challenges wherever possible. At the same time, the resurgence of the far-right across Europe may also create complicated internal dynamics in some countries that may lead to further contestation. Germany is an interesting case in this regard; while the chancellor, Olaf Scholz, praised the Pact as an "historic, indispensable step",[13] resentment among some of the federal Länder around the terms of its provisions may create pushback in the wake of the gains made by the right wing in the 2024 European elections. At the same time, while frontline states such as Cyprus feel the Pact's provisions on mandatory resettlement do not go far enough,[14] others like Hungary remain strongly opposed to almost any solidarity-based mechanisms.[15]

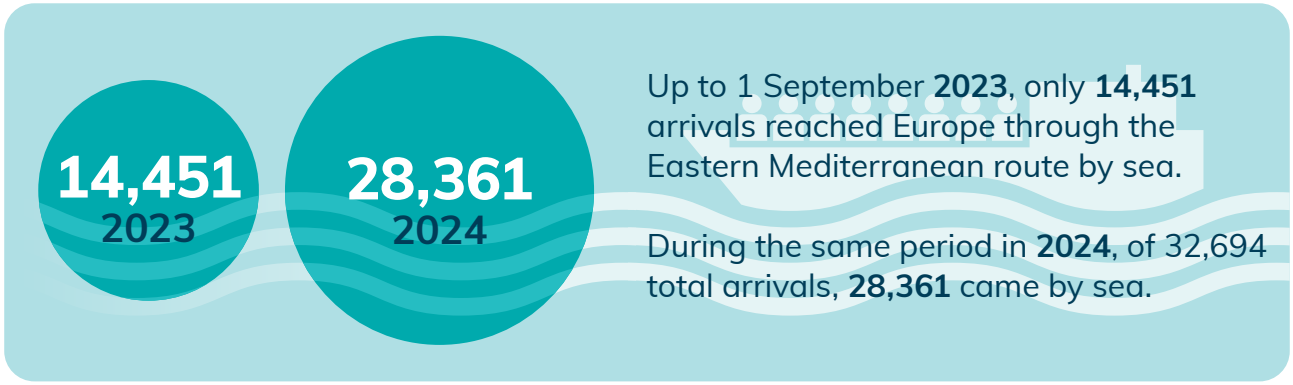
7 The New Humanitarian (2024) EU doubles down on deterrence with new migration pact; Barigazzi, J. (2024) EU backs tough new migration rules, shifting right. Politico.
8 European Council (2024) A new asylum and migration management regulation.
9 Reuters (2024) Poland won't accept migrant relocation mechanism, PM says.
10 European Council (2024) A common asylum procedure; González Enríquez, C. (2024) The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: Context, challenges and limitations. Real Instituto El Cano.
11 European Council (2024) Response to the migration crisis and force majeure situations.
12 González Enríquez, C. (2024) Op. Cit.
13 Al Jazeera (2024) European Parliament passes asylum and migration reforms.
14 InfoMigrants (2024) Cyprus turns tide on migrant arrival trend.
15 González Enríquez, C. (2024) Op. Cit.

Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece

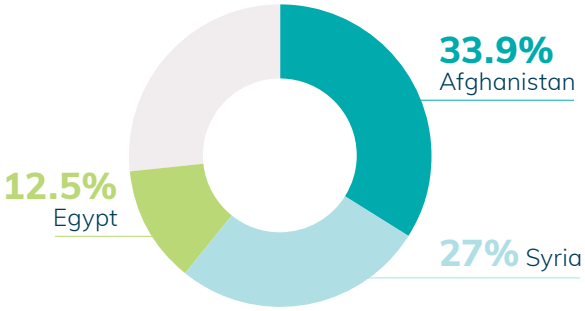
As of 1 September, 32,694 arrivals had reached Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean route: of these, the majority (28,361) by sea.[16] This is almost double the number of sea arrivals (14,451) detected during the same period in 2023.[17] Among registered arrivals along this route in the first half of 2024, the most represented countries of origin were Afghanistan (33.9%), Syria (27.0%) and Egypt (12.5%).[18]

Despite the continued dangers at sea, the number of deaths and disappearances recorded by IOM on this route reduced in 2023 to 171, less than half the 383 mortalities in 2022. As of the first eight months of 2024, a total of 71 fatalities had been reported, comparable to the 64 reported during the same period of 2023.[19]

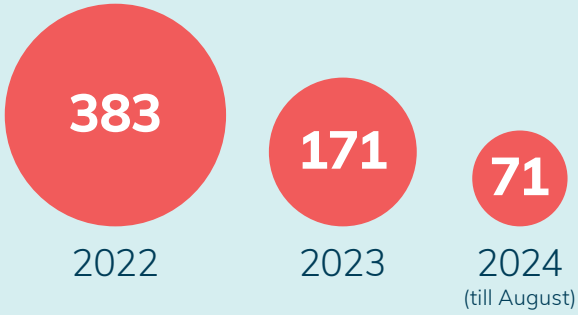
Graphic 3. Eastern Mediterranean route 2024: comparative data



Most represented countries of origin in the first half of 2024



Missing migrants on this route



As of the first eight months of 2024, a total of 71 fatalities had been reported, comparable to the 64 reported during the same period of 2023.

Sources (adapted) and credit: UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Greece. IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Eastern Mediterranean route. UNHCR (2023) Greece sea arrivals dashboard - August 2023.

Human rights violations by Greece

Greece has been criticised repeatedly by human rights groups for its treatment of migrants, including pushbacks, forced returns, beatings and detention. Though by no means an isolated incident, the tragic sinking of a trawler off the coast of Pylos on 14 June 2023 and the deaths of at least 596 people drew attention to the failure of Greek authorities to rescue those on board. Despite official reports that the passengers of the boat had refused offers of assistance, evidence subsequently emerged of substantial delays before the coastguard responded. It was even suggested that Greek naval vessels had potentially contributed to its capsizing by attempting to tow the boat into Italian waters.[20] Despite an investigation being launched into the actions of the Hellenic Coast Guard in the immediate aftermath, more

16 UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Greece.
17 UNHCR (2023) Greece sea arrivals dashboard - August 2023.
18 UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Greece.
19 IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Eastern Mediterranean route.
20 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review.

than a year later the case has barely progressed.[21] An internal report by Frontex concluded that many of the deaths could have been avoided if the Greek coastguard had mounted a more timely and appropriate response.[22]

Even more disturbing, however, are the findings of an investigation released in June by the BBC and concerning repeated incidents of migrants being intercepted by coastguards or masked men and thrown into the sea, resulting in dozens of deaths. According to the BBC's analysis of 15 incidents that took place between 2020 and 2023, 43 people died as a direct result of these actions. Victim testimony also highlighted that some of those left to drown in the water were children.[23] While Greek authorities have repeatedly denied allegations of human rights violations, video footage of one such incident shows coastguards taking 12 people – among them babies – by boat out to sea and abandoning them on a raft.[24] An investigation published the previous month by German media outlets pointed to a similar pattern of violence against migrants, including threats by masked men armed with sticks and an illegal pushback of around 30 people, among them children, onto a dinghy.[25]

An inhospitable welcome from Cyprus

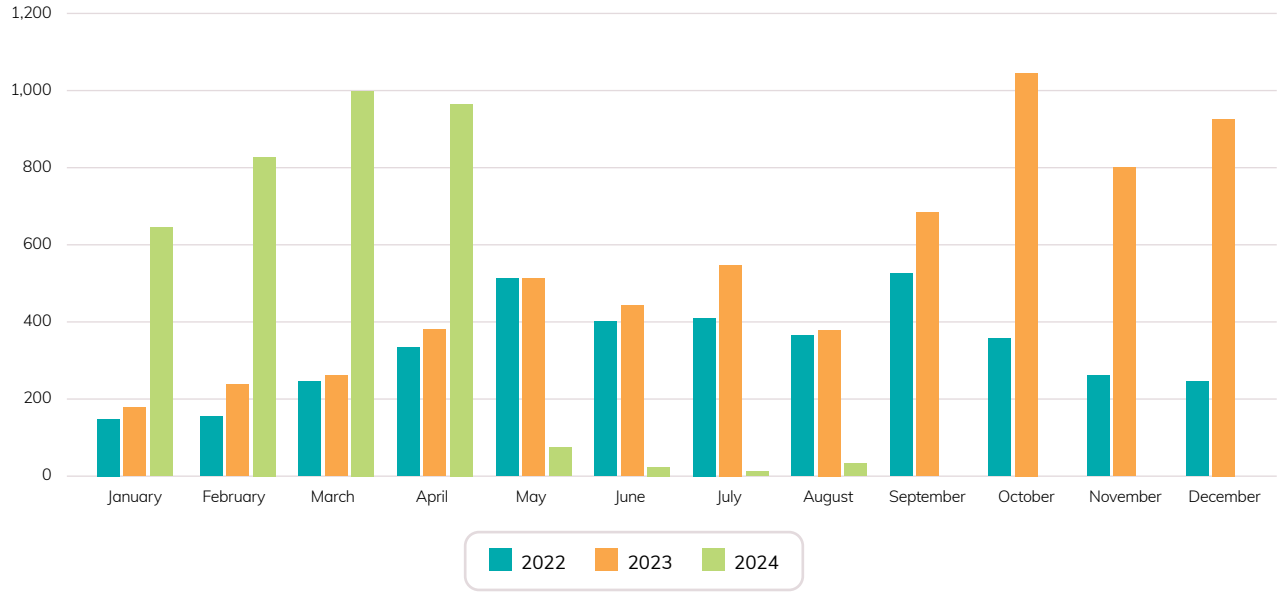
For years, **Cyprus** has received the largest proportion of migrants relative to its total population of any EU country: in March 2024 alone, for instance, it received 124 asylum applications per 100,000 people, compared to 16.4 across the EU as a whole.[26] In response, Cyprus has been adopting increasingly restrictive policies towards arrivals. By the end of 2023, it had become the first EU country to return more rejected asylum seekers than had arrived during the year, with more than 11,000 repatriations.[27] This was double the number undertaken in 2022 and it means that, in absolute terms, Cyprus is now the fourth largest country in terms of repatriations.[28] During 2024, it continued to receive significant numbers of new arrivals, with 4,439 registered arrivals in the first half of the year.[29] At the same time, repatriations and deportations have continued at pace, with around 6,800 migrants leaving the country between 1 January and 22 August.[30] In 2023, significant number of these returns – around two-thirds, according to officials – are attributed to "voluntary returns".[31] However, human rights groups have questioned the extent to which most returns can be characterised as voluntary, given the use of financial incentives to induce already desperate people to leave. With many migrants left homeless and destitute for protracted periods without assistance, increasing numbers – even nationals from conflict-affected countries such as Syria – effectively feel they have no option but to leave.[32]

In April 2024, the government appeared to go a step further when it announced that, in response to the large number of arrivals, it would be suspending asylum applications from Syrian nationals.[33] In the meantime, Syrian arrivals will be forced to remain in Cyprus's crowded reception centres until further notice. Unsurprisingly, Cyprus is one of a number of EU countries that have called for the creation of safe zones within Syria to allow for the repatriation of refugees to their country.[34]

Despite this increasingly unwelcome environment, Syrian nationals – predominantly travelling from **Lebanon** – have continued to attempt the journey to Cyprus.[35] Some have ended up being forced back to Lebanon by Cypriot authorities, with the Cypriot coastguard also accused by NGOs of delaying rescue efforts.[36] In June, reports also emerged that dozens of migrants from various African and Asian countries were stranded in the buffer zone between the Turkish-controlled northern area of the island and the Republic of Cyprus in the south.[37] The UN subsequently called on Cypriot authorities, who have been preventing the group from entering out of concerns that the north-south border could become a "backdoor" for human smugglers, to allow them to claim asylum.[38]

21 Amnesty International (2024) Greece: One year on from the Pylos shipwreck, the Coast Guard's role must be investigated.
22 Wallis, E. (2024) Frontex report into Greek shipwreck suggests more deaths could have been prevented. InfoMigrants.
23 Smith, L. & Steele, B. (2024) Greek coastguard threw migrants overboard to their deaths, witnesses say. BBC.
24 Henley, J. (2024) Greek coastguard's treatment of migrants 'clearly illegal', says ex-officer. The Guardian.
25 Van Brunnersum, S. (2024) Frontex investigates migrant pushback allegations following German media reports. InfoMigrants.
26 Eurostat (2024) Asylum applications—monthly statistics.
27 InfoMigrants (2023) Cyprus turns tide on migrant arrival trend.
28 AP (2023) Cyprus minister says his nation leads EU in repatriations and migrant arrivals are down sharply.
29 UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation.
30 Cyprus Mail (2024) Almost 7,000 people deported or repatriated this year.
31 Cyprus Mail (2024) Cyprus has repatriated 4,491 migrants so far this year.
32 Davis, H. (2024) Worsening conditions in Cyprus push scores to return to Syria. Syria Direct.
33 DW (2024) Cyprus suspends Syrian asylum applications.
34 InfoMigrants (2024) Cyprus and seven other EU states call for more returns of Syrian refugees.
35 Santos, A. P. (2024) Dozens of migrants continue to arrive in Cyprus despite change in policy. InfoMigrants.
36 InfoMigrants (2024) Syrian migrants describe ordeal between Lebanon and Cyprus.
37 InfoMigrants (2024) Cyprus: Migrants stranded in UN buffer zone.
38 Wallis, E. (2024) UN urges Cyprus to start asylum process for migrants in buffer zone. InfoMigrants.

Graphic 4. Sea arrivals in Cyprus by month/year, August 2024



Source (adapted) and credit: UNHCR Document - Cyprus Monthly Arrivals Snapshot - August 2024 (unhcr.org).

Western Balkans

After reaching a peak of more than 144,000 attempted crossings in the region in 2022, movement along the Western Balkans route declined in 2023 in the wake of increasing border restrictions.[39] By the end of 2023, the number of detected crossings had declined to just over 99,000. This trend has become even more pronounced during 2024, with only 8,900 detected arrivals between January and the end of May, a drop of 71 percent compared to the same period in 2023 – the sharpest drop of any migratory route into the EU.[40] The three most common countries of origin among those travelling the route in the first five months of 2024 were Syria, **Türkiye** and **Afghanistan**.[41]

The journey continues to be hazardous for those attempting to reach the EU through transit countries such as **Bosnia**, where migrants are often forced into substandard conditions for protracted periods and subjected to repeated pushbacks when they attempt to cross into neighbouring **Croatia**. In **Serbia**, another significant country of transit along the route, a displacement camp close to Belgrade was reportedly subjected to mass evictions by authorities in February, with some of those living there rounded up and forcibly returned to **Bulgaria**.[42] Around the same time, reports emerged of dozens of people being stripped naked or to their undergarments in near-freezing temperatures and expelled into **North Macedonia**.[43]

Migration management – a prerequisite for countries acceding to Schengen

Bulgaria and **Romania** partially joined the Schengen Area on 31 March 2024, meaning that anyone crossing their internal air and sea borders (land crossings continue to be restricted) will no longer be subject to checks. The accession was only possible after **Austria** ended its opposition, on the provision that both countries would accept the return of asylum seekers who had crossed through their territory into other EU countries.[44] Both Bulgaria and Romania will also undertake EU-funded "border management pilot projects" that include accelerated asylum and return procedures.[45]

Frontex also announced it would be trebling its deployment of personnel at the Bulgaria-Türkiye border to increase security there, despite repeated accusations of pushbacks by Bulgarian

39 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review.
40 Frontex (2024) EU external borders: Irregular border crossings fall 23% in Jan-May.
41 Frontex (2024) Ibid.
42 ECRE (2024) Balkan Route: Migrants Risk Tranquiliser Addictions — Frontex Triples Staff at Bulgaria-Türkiye Border Ahead of Schengen Expansion — Refugees in Serbia Endure Violence & Harassment — Bosnia and Herzegovina's Greenlight for Accession Talks Amid Reports of Violence Along Border with Croatia — Decrease in Irregular Crossings Via Western Balkan Route.
43 Fallon, K. & Tondo, L. (2024) Videos show migrants stripped of clothing in freezing temperatures at Serbian border. The Guardian.
44 Euractiv (2024) Anti-migrant misinformation floods Bulgaria ahead of Schengen entry.
45 Statewatch (2024) Bulgaria and Romania speed up asylum and deportation procedures with EU support.

border guards.[46] Numerous deportees to Bulgaria from other EU countries, such as **Germany**, have also reported mistreatment and abuse at the hands of authorities.[47] Anti-migrant sentiment in Bulgaria appears to have intensified in the build-up to the accession: a widespread campaign of misinformation and xenophobic rhetoric from populist politicians in Bulgaria culminated in protests in Sofia and a series of attacks against foreigners in the capital.[48]

In March, approval was given to begin talks with **Bosnia and Herzegovina** around its future accession, with migration management a major area of discussion. At present, the country is seen as one of the main entry points for migrants to the EU, due in part to the lower entry restrictions for nationals from **China**, **Russia** and Türkiye, who do not currently require visas to travel to Bosnia. More than half of irregular arrivals in Croatia are reportedly from these three countries.[49]

Central Mediterranean route to Italy

According to UNHCR, there were 41,574 registered arrivals into **Italy** from the Central Mediterranean route in the first eight months of 2024, a substantive decline of 64 percent from the total (114,789) in the same period of 2023.[50] The three most represented countries of origin in the first seven months of 2024 were **Bangladesh** (22%), Syria (16%) and **Tunisia** (13%), none of which featured among the top three countries during the same period in 2023: Bangladesh and Syria, in particular, only accounted for eight percent and five percent respectively of all arrivals between January and the end of July 2023. Among those that declined as a proportion of detected arrivals, **Guinea** and **Côte d'Ivoire** – the most represented nationalities during the January-July period in 2023, each comprising 14 percent of all arrivals – represented just seven percent and two percent of arrivals during the same period in 2024.[51]

The Central Mediterranean has long been one of the deadliest migration routes. Between January and the end of May 2024, 749 people died or went missing along this route. This is lower than the 1,080 deaths and disappearances recorded during the same period in 2023, of whom nearly half were victims of the Pylos shipwreck in April 2023.[52] However, when factoring in the dramatic drop in arrivals in Italy during the year, these figures suggest that the proportion of those dying en route relative to those reaching Italy may, in fact, have increased – though it is also the case that a larger proportion of migrants attempting the journey are being intercepted and returned by Libyan and Tunisian patrol vessels.

Italy ratifies controversial detention agreement with Albania

In November 2023, details emerged of a proposed migration agreement between Italy and **Albania**. Under the terms of the agreement, two detention centres would be established in Albania to hold migrants intercepted in Italian waters while their claims are processed by Italian authorities. The policy, developed by Italy as a deterrent to prospective migrants, has been criticised as both costly and impractical, with Amnesty International labelling it "illegal and unworkable".[53] While the Italian government argued that the provisions were distinct from the UK's Rwanda scheme – only those intercepted at sea will be held in the centres, not those who reached Italian soil, and the process will continue to be overseen by Italy[54] – it has nevertheless been criticised by human rights groups for undermining fundamental rights and protections. Among other issues, there are concerns around the implications for search and rescue operations, the risk of automatic detention of vulnerable people, the conditions in which they will then be held and the danger that fast-tracked asylum procedures could lead to the deportation of individuals with valid claims to asylum.[55]

Despite these criticisms, the agreement was subsequently ratified in February 2024. Both centres, located near the Albanian port city of Shenjin, will be run by Italy and hold up to 3,000 people at any given time, expecting to process as many as 36,000 asylum claims annually.[56] The centres were originally scheduled to be operational by May, but at the time of writing delays and rising costs had pushed back the scheduled opening date to the autumn. While the Italian government has stated that only adult men from countries deemed to be "safe" will be transferred to Albania while their cases are reviewed, critics have pointed out that many countries classified as "safe" by Italy have documented

46 ECRE (2024) Balkan Route: Frontex to Massively Increase Deployment on Bulgaria-Türkiye Border Despite Having Previously Ignored Evidence of Pushbacks — European Commission to Strengthen Co-operation on Border and Migration Management with Bulgaria and Romania — Concerns in Serbia About Future of Temporary Protection for Displaced People from Ukraine as Deadline Looms.
47 MacGregor, M. (2024) Anti-migrant mood as Bulgaria prepares to join Schengen area. InfoMigrants.
48 Alexandrova, A. (2024) Anti-migrant violence and scapegoating in Bulgarian media. Media Diversity Institute.
49 Wallis, E. (2024) German Interior Minister visits Bosnia to talk migration. InfoMigrants.
50 UNHCR (2024) Italy weekly snapshot—2 September 2024.
51 UNHCR (2024) Ibid.; UNHCR (2024) Mediterranean situation: Italy.
52 IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Central Mediterranean.
53 Amnesty International (2023) Italy: Deal to detain refugees and migrants offshore in Albania 'illegal and unworkable'.
54 Ngendakumana, P. E. (2023) Italy-Albania migrant deal distinct from UK-Rwanda scheme, Italy's FM says. Politico.
55 Amnesty International (2024) The Italy-Albania agreement on migration: Pushing boundaries, threatening rights.
56 Al Jazeera (2024) Albania approves contested deal to hold asylum seekers for Italy.

records of torture and mistreatment. With asylum claims processed in offshore facilities, and with a clear impetus to clear backlogs through accelerated decision-making, there is a risk that valid protection concerns will be overlooked or disregarded.[57]

The politicisation of migration in Europe

The rise of the far-right across Europe, as evidenced by the results of the June 2024 EU elections, has been driven in significant part by the exploitation of anti-migrant sentiment. Alongside a raft of other fears and grievances, populist parties such as the Rassemblement National (RN) in **France** and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany secured striking electoral gains on nationalist platforms explicitly opposed to immigration and multiculturalism.

The dynamics of this resurgence are complex, particularly in a country such as Germany, where a large proportion of the voting population has a migrant background. Despite its xenophobic and racist elements, with members referring to non-ethnic German citizens as "passport Germans" and leaked discussions around the "remigration" of millions of citizens with immigrant backgrounds, the AfD has also sought to woo migrant voters and focused its hostility on newly arrived refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, especially those originating from Africa and the Middle East.[58]

The results of the EU elections, as well as recent high-profile victories in national elections by right-wing parties with anti-immigration policies in the **Netherlands** and **Slovakia**, could have significant implications for the future of migration and asylum in Europe. Many centrist political parties have sought to minimise support for the far-right by adopting increasingly hostile migration and asylum policies themselves – in effect, sidelining immigration as a political issue by emulating some of the positions advanced by their right-wing competitors. This is the case in **Denmark**, where the otherwise left-leaning government has put in place some of the most restrictive immigration policies in Europe, including revoking the residency rights of hundreds of Syrian refugees on the basis that parts of Syria are supposedly safe for return.[59] The United Nations has repeatedly stated that conditions in the country are still not conducive for a safe and dignified return, with evidence suggesting that returnees continue to suffer "gross human rights violations and abuses" by government forces, de facto authorities and armed groups.[60] As Denmark does not have diplomatic relations with the Assad government, it has yet to undertake any returns to Syria in practice; however, significant numbers of Syrian nationals have been forced to move on to other countries in the EU to seek asylum there.[61]

Some commentators have attributed the relative strength of the country's political centre, and the marginalisation of the far-right, to the "neutralisation" of immigration as an issue.[62] Other observers, however, draw very different conclusions and argue that the centrist shift towards harsher migration and asylum policies – both rhetorically and in practice – has only served to normalise positions that until recently were regarded as extreme and, in the process, afforded a degree of legitimacy to the far-right fringe.[63] In France, similarly, the centrist government of Emmanuel Macron passed controversial legislation in December 2023 that stripped back a range of rights and protections for migrants and asylum seekers in the country[64] (though many additional provisions inserted under pressure from the far-right were rejected the following month by France's constitutional council).[65] The legislation was widely interpreted as a concession to increasing anti-migrant sentiment, yet it failed to curb support for the far-right, with the RN winning almost a third of the vote in the European Parliament elections, forcing Macron to dissolve his government and call a snap election.[66]

In the case of France, the perception that the centre was ceding important political space to the far-right by mirroring its stance on immigration has been evident for some time. Following Macron's victory in the 2022 presidential elections, one opinion piece stated that "Macron won – and so did the far right", arguing that RN leader Marine Le Pen had successfully "normalised her far-right politics on Islam and immigration" and even "forced her mainstream opponents – Macron among them – to engage with, and in some cases even appropriate, her views".[67] In concrete terms, the proven ability of the far-right to mobilise popular resentment around

57 Sunderland, J. (2024) Italy migration deal with Albania is a costly, cruel farce. Human Rights Watch.
58 Hockenos, P. (2024) Germany's anti-migrant party wants more migrant voters. Foreign Policy.
59 John, A. & Saralegui, M. (2023) Denmark expands controversial Syrian refugee policy despite repeated judicial setbacks. The New Arab.
60 OHCHR (2024) Syrian returnees subjected to "gross human rights violations and abuses", UN report details.
61 Petersen, M. J.& Feith Tan, N. (2022) The dire consequences of Denmark's 'paradigm shift' on refugees. Politico.
62 Ehrenreich, M. (2024) How Denmark keeps the far right at bay. Project Syndicate.
63 Balfour, R. (2024) Normalising the far-right has backfired on migration—next will be climate. EUobserver.
64 Cossé, E. (2023) French lawmakers adopt regressive immigration bill. Human Rights Watch.
65 The Guardian (2024) French court annuls large part of country's new immigration law.
66 Henley, J., Rankin, J. & O'Carroll, L. (2024) EU elections: Macron to dissolve French parliament after crushing loss to far right. The Guardian.
67 Serhan, Y. (2022) Macron won. And so did the far right. The Atlantic.

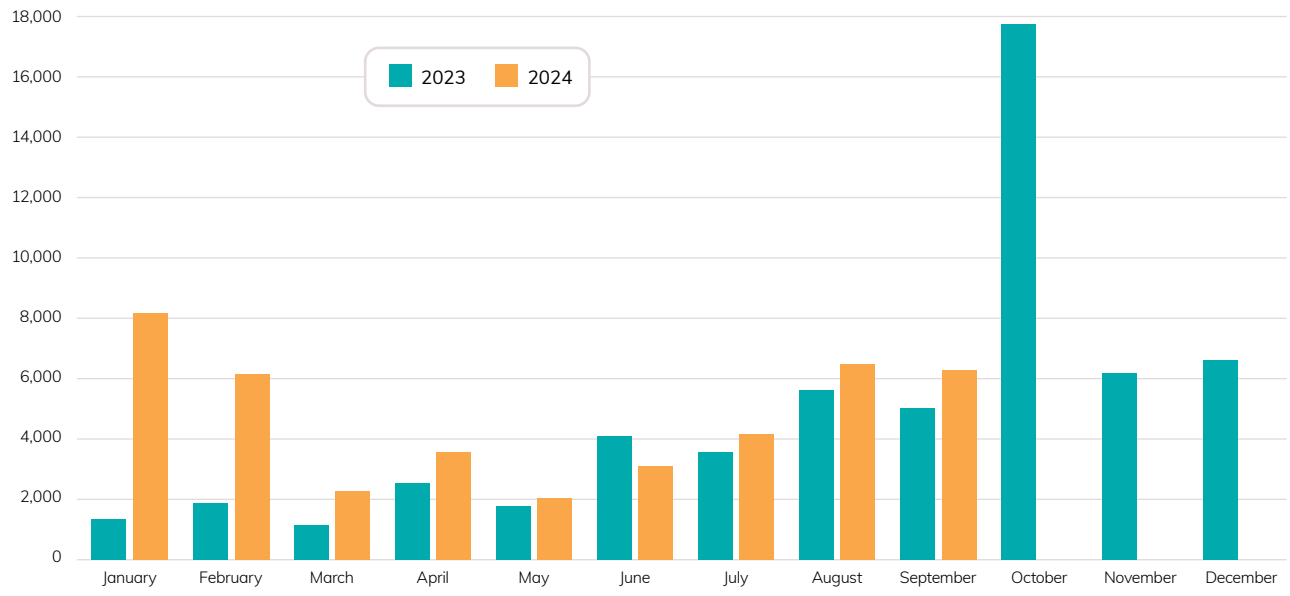
housing and employment against migrants has accelerated the EU's slide towards marginalisation, securitisation and externalisation over the past decade. In the immediate future, it is likely that an emboldened far-right will seek to exploit its position by pushing through an increasingly hard-line position on migration.[68]

Western Mediterranean and Western Africa-Atlantic Routes to Spain

The number of migrants travelling to **Spain** has dramatically increased during 2024. As of 1 September, an estimated 36,062 people had reached Spain, an increase of 63 percent compared to the same period in 2023. Most of these arrivals were by sea (35,756), with a much smaller number (306) of land arrivals from Morocco into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.[69]

The majority of those reaching Spain in the first eight months of 2024 travelled along the Western Africa-Atlantic route, continuing the trend of 2023, when an unprecedented number of migrants (40,330) reached the Canary Islands via this route.[70] Totalling 25,725 from January to the end of August, this represented a 122 percent increase from the same period in 2023.[71] The continued rise in numbers along this route, compared to a significant decline along the Central Mediterranean route, can be attributed in part to the relative lack of surveillance in the Atlantic compared to the Mediterranean.[72] In the first half of June alone, more than 1,800 migrants reached the islands.[73] With overstretched local authorities struggling to respond, asylum seekers have faced a range of issues including the erroneous classification of minors as adults, thereby denying them access to juvenile reception facilities.[74]

Graphic 5. 2023/2024 Refugees and migrants arrivals in Spain



Source: UNHCR Document - Spain Weekly Snapshot - Week 39 (23 - 29 Sep 2024) (unhcr.org).

According to IOM's official figures, a total of 959 deaths or disappearances occurred along the Western Africa-Atlantic route in 2023, with another 712 detected in the first eight months of 2024; July was a particularly deadly month, with 378 fatalities recorded.[75] However, the IOM figures are likely to be conservative estimates: the NGO Ca-minando Fronteras regularly publishes much higher estimates, with a total of 6,007 fatalities along the Western Africa-Atlantic route in 2023.[76] Extrapolating the death toll from these figures and the

68 Chatham House (2024) How will gains by the far right affect the European Parliament and EU?
69 UNHCR (2024) Spain weekly snapshot—Week 35 (26 Aug - 1 Sep 2024).
70 UNHCR (2024) Europe situation: Data and trends—arrivals and displaced populations—December 2023.
71 UNHCR (2024) Spain weekly snapshot—Week 35 (26 Aug - 1 Sep 2024).
72 The Guardian (2024) Hundreds in Canary Islands protest against influx of migrants.
73 InfoMigrants (2024) Landings on Canary Islands up—1,800 migrants in 15 days.
74 Pons, C., Garcia, H. & Suarez, B. (2023) Migrant children treated like adults as record influx overwhelms Canary Islands. Reuters.
75 IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Western Africa / Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.
76 Reuters (2024) Migrant arrivals to Spain's Canaries jump by over 1,000% in January.

number of registered arrivals, the crossing appears even more deadly. Ca-minando Fronteras estimated that 4,808 migrants – averaging 33 each day – perished along the route. **Senegal**, formerly the primary point of embarkation, was overtaken by **Mauritania**, which accounted for 3,600 of these deaths.[77]

Along the Western Mediterranean route from North Africa, meanwhile, 10,337 crossed into Spain by sea (10,031) or by land (306) in the first eight months of 2024.[78] At least 238 people died or went missing along the Western Africa-Atlantic route between January and the end of May 2024, compared to 123 in the same period of 2023. The total for the whole of 2023, however, was much higher (959), including 356 fatalities in November alone – the second-highest monthly figure recorded along this route.[79] As with the route to the Canary Islands, the number of deaths and disappearances estimated by Ca-minando Fronteras is much higher: for instance, in the first five months of 2024, the organisation recorded a total of 246 deaths or disappearances on the route between North Africa and mainland Spain and the Balearics, more than double IOM's figure for the same period (111).[80]

A cold front in North and Central Europe

Despite receiving far lower levels of mixed migration than states in the Mediterranean region such as Greece, Italy and Spain, countries across North and Central Europe continue to adopt increasingly restrictive migration and asylum policies. This has been driven in part by a rise in support for populist parties and the far-right, with tensions evident not only in countries with longstanding anti-immigrant agendas such as **Hungary**, but also in Germany and other states that have been relatively open towards migrants. Germany, in particular, is even reportedly looking to replicate the third-country asylum processing models of Italy and the UK.[81]

From Finland to Poland, borders with Russia and Belarus remain closed

Before **Russia**'s invasion of **Ukraine** in February 2022, one of the most visible signs of the growing political tensions emerging in Europe was the situation at the Belarus-Poland border. As a reprisal for the perceived support of the EU to pro-democracy protestors, from the summer of 2021, authorities in **Belarus** allowed thousands of migrants to cross into **Poland**. Polish authorities responded by closing the Polish side of the border, leaving many vulnerable men, women and children stranded in the border zone between the two countries without food, medical assistance or adequate shelter. This vast, inhospitable environment, with deep forests and freezing winter temperatures, is described as a "death zone" by those refugees who have managed to traverse it. According to the organisation Human Constanta, at least 94 people have died in this area since the crisis began – though the true number is likely to be much higher, given that many deaths go unreported.[82]

In Poland's national elections in October 2023, the centrist alliance Civic Coalition secured a victory over the right-wing Law and Justice party after eight years in power. There were widespread hopes that the advent of a more progressive government, led by Donald Tusk, would result in a more humane approach to the crisis – even though Tusk himself had made border security and anxieties around immigration a focus of his own campaign.[83] Since then, however, there has been little improvement in the situation as reports of violence and brutality by both Belarusian and Polish border guards have continued, as well as illegal pushbacks of migrants – at least 6,000 documented incidents between July 2023 and January 2024 alone[84] – from Polish territory into the buffer zone.[85] In May 2024, Tusk announced the border would be further strengthened in response to what he described as "hybrid warfare" by Russia: to the dismay of activists, no mention was made of the plight faced by those trapped in the border areas, and who are most affected.[86]

77 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2024) Right to life monitoring: First five months 2024.
78 UNHCR (2024) Spain weekly snapshot—Week 35 (26 Aug - 1 Sep 2024).
79 IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Western Africa / Atlantic route to the Canary Islands.
80 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2024 Op. Cit. IOM (2024) Missing Migrants Project: Western Mediterranean route.
81 DW (2024) Germany to examine asylum processing in third countries.
82 Holt, E. (2024) Conditions worsen for Belarus migrants stuck in 'death zone' on EU border. IPS News; Human Constanta (2024) [Illegal pushbacks and rights violations have become a widespread tool for managing migration to EU countries].
83 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Quarter Mixed Migration Update: Europe—Quarter 3 2023.
84 Notes from Poland (2024) Poland publishes data on thousands of migrant "pushbacks" at Belarus border for first time.
85 Holt, E. (2024) Conditions worsen for Belarus migrants stuck in 'death zone' on EU border. IPS News.
86 Gera, V. (2024) Polish activists criticize Tusk's government for tough border policies and migrant pushbacks. AP.

Though it has not attracted the same levels of media coverage, a similar situation has emerged at the border with **Lithuania**. The Lithuanian government, having constructed a wall on its border with Belarus in 2022[87] and subsequently legalised pushbacks in 2023,[88] announced further border entry closures in February 2024, amidst rising tensions with Russia and its ally Belarus.[89] As at the border with Poland, migrants are the worst affected: there have been unofficial reports of covert pushbacks and migrant deaths, most of them unacknowledged by the authorities.[90] There have also been repeated attempts by migrants from Belarus into **Latvia**, where a border fence is still under construction, with reports of an increase in numbers in the first months of 2024.[91]

Similarly, tensions are rising in border areas between EU member states and Russia, with **Estonia** accusing Russia, in November 2023, of "state-orchestrated" attempts to send migrants across its border.[92] The same month, **Finland** announced it would temporarily close its borders to prevent what it described as a "Russian hybrid operation",[93] with the government announcing, in April 2024, that the suspension would be continued indefinitely. Despite just two people crossing the border to seek asylum between February and mid-May, the government presented a proposal to pass emergency legislation to prevent the entry of asylum seekers in contexts where "instrumentalisation" by other states is deemed to be occurring. Amnesty International condemned the proposal as a "green light for violence and pushbacks at the border".[94]

The UK's Rwanda Bill goes into law – before being swiftly abandoned

The number of migrants crossing the Channel from **France** to the **UK** has risen in recent years, though the total of 29,437 in 2023 was a significant drop from the peak of 45,755 the year before. To date, the figures for 2024 are so far higher than those for 2023, with 13,195 arrivals as of 26 June – more than the total for the same period in the previous four years.[95]

The arrival of small boats has become increasingly politicised, with the Conservative government repeatedly promising to "stop the boats". This context informed the announcement of the so-called "Rwanda plan" in April 2022, whereby anyone entering the UK irregularly would automatically be transferred to **Rwanda** to have their claim processed there: even those deemed to have a valid need for protection would not be eligible to return to the UK, but would instead be granted asylum in Rwanda. This controversial proposal has been widely criticised by activists and human rights groups, not least its designation of Rwanda as a safe third country, and was repeatedly delayed by various legal roadblocks.[96]

In response, the UK government passed the *Safety of Rwanda (Immigration and Asylum) Bill* in December 2023. Despite the persistence of protection concerns, this legislation designates Rwanda as a safe country, preventing anyone transferred from being able to challenge their removal on the basis that Rwanda is unsafe in general: instead, they would need to prove that the country was unsafe for them specifically (for example, if they belonged to a group targeted by Rwandan authorities or were known critics of the government there).[97] Following the passage of this legislation, there were in principle as many as 52,000 asylum seekers in the UK who were potentially eligible for relocation to Rwanda. However, it emerged that the government had lost contact with almost two-thirds (3,557) of the 5,700 people initially identified for removal.

In practice, the Conservative government stated that any transfers under the scheme would not begin until late July – some weeks after a scheduled general election that they were widely expected to lose. Following a landslide victory, Labour prime minister Keir Starmer announced that the Rwanda policy was now "dead and buried", though much of his criticism was framed as concern over its effectiveness rather than human rights, describing it as a "gimmick" that has "never been a deterrent".[98]

Ukraine

Ongoing insecurity and conflict in Ukraine, following Russia's illegal invasion in February 2022, have resulted in one of the largest displacement crises in the world. Escalating attacks by Russian forces, including targeted attacks on civilian infrastructure, have left an estimated

87 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2022) Lithuania finishes building wall On Belarusian border to stem flow of illegal migrants.
88 VOA (2023) Lithuania legalises migrant pushbacks.
89 AP (2024) Lithuania to close 2 more checkpoints with Russian ally Belarus as tensions along the border rise.
90 Ramirez, G. & Xu, T. (2024) 'No water, I think I'll die, I love you': Story of migrant who died on Lithuania-Belarus border. LRT.
91 ETIAS (2024) Belarus-Latvia border sees surge in Illegal crossing attempts.
92 Bryant, M. (2023) Estonia accuses Russia of weaponising immigration at Europe's borders. The Guardian.
93 Bryant, M. & O'Carroll, L. (2023) Finland closes entire border with Russia after tensions over asylum seekers. The Guardian.
94 Amnesty International (2024) Finland: Emergency law on migration is a "green light for violence and pushbacks at the border".
95 BBC (2024) How many people cross the Channel in small boats and how many claim asylum in the UK?
96 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review.
97 Walsh, P. W. (2024) Q&A: The UK's policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. The Migration Observatory.
98 Al Jazeera (2024) Keir Starmer says scrapping UK's Rwanda migrant deportation plan.

14.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.[99] This includes a sizeable displaced population: within Ukraine, in addition to more than 4.7 million returnees, there are over 3.5 million IDPs. Though dispersed across the country, the areas with the most significant IDP populations are Dnipropetrovska and Kharkivska Oblasts in the east, where the fighting is most intense, as well as Kyiv and its surrounding areas.[100]

The majority of Ukraine's IDPs – 82 percent – have been displaced for more than a year, with the average time of displacement in the country currently numbering 591 days.[101] The protracted nature of their situation has forced many to adopt a range of coping strategies, including accepting low-paid employment, cutting back on energy and food consumption, and moving to substandard housing.[102] Their prospects for return in the immediate future are uncertain: while survey data published in February 2024 suggests that more than two-thirds (68%) wish to return one day, only a very small fraction (5%) reports planning to do so within the next year.[103]

Calls for more assistance for countries with larger refugee populations

As of June 2024, there were almost 6.6 million Ukrainian refugees worldwide, the majority (six million) in Europe, with the largest populations in Russia (1.27 million), Poland (0.96 million) and Germany (1.17 million).[104] At a time when European countries have become increasingly restrictive towards migrants, the EU's response to the crisis in Ukraine has been notably generous, with the introduction of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) within a week of the invasion, offering Ukrainians immediate protection and access to services.

In practice, however, the numbers of Ukrainian refugees have been distributed unevenly, with a wide variety of considerations – language, existing social networks and the financial support available – affecting the decision to settle in a particular country. As a result, the responsibility sharing between countries remains unbalanced: **Czechia**, for instance, has been hosting more than 35 refugees per 1,000 citizens, though in France this figure falls to just one refugee per 1,000 citizens.[105] While Ukraine's refugee population continues to be supported within the EU, with the TPD extended in June 2024 until March 2026,[106] Germany, Poland and Czechia – between them hosting more than half of Ukrainian refugees within the EU – have called for assistance from Brussels to help cover the disproportionate financial costs they face.[107]

99 OCHA (2024) Ukraine situation report.
100 IOM (2024) Ukraine — Internal displacement report — General population survey: Round 16 (April 2024).
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 UNHCR (2024) Lives on hold: Intentions and perspectives of refugees, refugee returnees and IDPs from Ukraine #5: Summary findings.
104 UNHCR (2024) Ukraine refugee situation.
105 Cokelaere, H. & Caulcutt, C. (2024) Why Ukraine's refugees aren't going to France. Politico.
106 European Council (2024) Ukrainian refugees: Council extends temporary protection until March 2026.
107 Nienaber, M. (2024) Germany, Poland ask EU to help pay for hosting Ukraine refugees. Bloomberg UK.

A 'safe and quiet' life in Switzerland

"People here are not hateful, but the media can brainwash them."

I come from Mongolia and I have lived there most of my life. I studied international law and worked in the country for six years in HR [human resources]. Seven years ago, I went to Austria to do my master's degree in law.

I was 27 with a student visa. Austria is expensive, and it was difficult to work and study at the same time. I didn't speak German and failed my language courses. I thought, 'I can't go on like this'. I stayed in Vienna for another year but then decided that I needed to save money.

One of my friends was working in Switzerland and suggested joining her. I quit my studies and moved to Geneva to work as an au pair. I've been here for six years. Here in Switzerland, everything is expensive but they also pay better. Education is good, especially for immigrants. Children can go to school for free.

I don't have a permit, but I can get a lot of social help. I can go to the hospital. There's the Red Cross and Caritas. But looking for a job is difficult and I only find work through word of mouth. I tried applying online but never heard back. Once you have a job, everything is nice. When I reach 10 years, I can ask for Permit B because then they decide on my status. I have not been home for seven years and still have to wait another three before I can go.

Back home, I help my family every month. I helped to pay for my siblings to study abroad.

Now Geneva feels like home. Swiss people are very quiet, while Asian people are more active. I have Mongolian friends here, and would like more international friends, but don't know where to find them. When we go out, people are all in little groups. It's not like in my country.

Older people, in particular, are difficult. On the tram, when I'm talking on the phone in Mongolian, they look at me badly. It was hard during Covid. I felt like things changed a lot. One time I was walking, and a guy was walking towards me with his dog. I was going straight, and he was coming towards me from another street. He saw me, and because I'm Asian he turned around and went back. During Covid, the media influenced people a lot. You could see videos on social media of Asians as zombies. The media can brainwash people. But then, even Mongolian people made funny jokes, wearing shirts that say, "I'm not Chinese, I'm Mongolian". Now, things are better.

A lot of my friends work as au pairs. You have difficult families sometimes. They want you to work for long hours and don't give you food. The first family I worked for were the worst people I ever met. I didn't speak good English and didn't understand them. I lived with them and took care of the two children. They paid me 1,800 CHF[1] per month. The hours were impossible. I started at 7am, took care of the children, made them breakfast and brought them to school. Then I came back and cleaned. I finished at 8pm. I had one day off every two weeks. They shouted at me. I worked for them for one year because I needed money. Then I found another job and studied English. Now I work normal hours with nice people. Now I know the law and the minimum wage, I can say no to working with bad people. I know I can go to social help, and that there are organisations that would help me.

Generally, I feel safe. I'm afraid to travel or go on the train because someone could find out that I don't have a permit. Otherwise, in public it's OK. I cannot go to the border or leave. If they catch you [with irregular status] they don't detain you and force you to leave the country like elsewhere. You pay a fine, it can be 2,000-3,000 CHF.[2]

I think people here are tired of immigrants but at the same time they show up for them, they are not hateful. Lots of French people work here and Swiss people's opinions on migration are influenced by politics, but also by their own experience. As immigrants we are happy, but Swiss people are not happy. They are influenced by social media and politics.

I think people have a smile on their faces, but wish we would all go back, even though nobody ever told me so. Here it is like the countryside. It's not exciting or joyful, but it's good if you want a safe and quiet life. I'm happy here.

1 Approximately $2,100.
2 Approximately $2,300-3,500.

The Netherlands' politically 'manufactured' migration crisis

In July 2024, following elections in November 2023, the new Dutch government was officially sworn in. It consists of a coalition of four parties: the far-right, anti-Islam Party for Freedom (PVV), the centre-right Liberals (VVD), the New Social Contract (NSC) party – recently established by former Christian Democrat Pieter Omtzigt – and the right-wing and populist Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB).

Interestingly, though, the PVV leader Geert Wilders – who came first in the election with 23.7 percent of votes[1] – abandoned his bid for the position of prime minister because, in his own words, he could "only become prime minister if *all* parties in the coalition support it. That was not the case."[2] After months of talks among the four party leaders, it was decided that none of them would take a position in the newly formed government, but that they would continue leading their parties as members of parliament. For this reason, they selected Dick Schoof, a former civil servant not affiliated with any party, as the country's new prime minister.

Wilders' party was allocated a range of ministerial positions, including – crucially – one for asylum and immigration, which has long been the PVV's primary concern. Whilst some of the party's most extreme anti-migration reforms – such as banning mosques and the Quran, closing Dutch borders and bolstering deportation schemes, all in line with the vision for "less asylum and immigration. Dutch people first"[3] – might not come to fruition now that his leader finds himself in a coalition, what remains certain is that Wilders' focus on migration and asylum won't shift.

The hard-right's framing of migration as a 'crisis'

Mirroring a Europe-wide trend from recent years, the topic of migration is widely politicised and sensationalised in the Netherlands, with Wilders going as far as to state that the country is battling with an "asylum crisis".[4] The available data, nonetheless, paint a different – and a lot less alarming – picture: not only is the number of asylum seekers entering the Netherlands currently at its lowest level since 2020,[5] with official 2024 figures likely to reach 50,000 entries (the same as in 2022 and 2023), but it is also very average compared to other EU countries. With two first-time asylum applications per 1,000 people in 2023 – equal to the average in the rest of the EU – the Netherlands was overtaken by 10 other European countries with higher relative numbers of asylum seekers.[6] In this context, talking about an asylum "crisis" seems like a far cry from reality. It could be argued, however, that there is something of a 'self-inflicted' asylum reception crisis, since, contrary to all advice and even rational economic analysis, reception capacity has been kept very low by consecutive governments.

Arguably, one of the reasons why Wilders' fixation with the concept of a crisis is so popular in the Netherlands is because he heavily campaigned for migration to be seen as the key driver to other, more pressing, issues that the country is contending with – namely, the endemic housing shortage, the ever-rising cost of living and access issues to its healthcare and education systems. In particular, the connection between housing and migration was a pervasive one throughout the PVV's electoral campaign, resonating especially with both young and even first-time voters,[7] who view the difficulty in securing housing and the alleged "prioritisation" of housing for foreigners as a failure of the Dutch government – and one that Wilders' party and ideals might provide the ideal solution to. However, with asylum seekers on average making up around 10 percent of net migration to the Netherlands, even if there is an association between housing shortage and migration, it is more related to other migrant categories, such as expats, foreign students and labour migrants, which most of the coalition partners are less keen to reduce in volume.

Besides the causal association between housing and migration, the PVV's leader also presents migrants and asylum seekers as "threats" to Dutch society, culture and identity, invariably defining Islam as "not a religion but an ideology"[8] that aims to foster and spread terror and hatred, and that is not compatible with the values of the Netherlands. Similarly, in past speeches, Wilders referenced the Islamic headscarf as a "head rag" that

1 Deloy, C. (2023) The radical right largely ahead in the Dutch general election. Fondation Robert Schuman.
2 BBC (2024) Dutch anti-Islam populist Geert Wilders abandons PM bid.
3 Ibid.
4 Pascoe, R. (2024) This hard-right Dutch government is a lot worse than a mess. Dutch News.
5 Dutch News (2024) Asylum applications drop to lowest weekly level since 2020.
6 Meijer, B. H. (2024) Dutch aim for migration clampdown as government sees "asylum crisis". Reuters.
7 Cokelaere, H. & Hartog, E. (2024) How Geert Wilders turned all corners of Dutch society into far right voters. Politico.
8 Boztas, S. (2023) Offensive, hostile and unrepentant: Geert Wilders in his own words. The Guardian.

"pollutes" public spaces – and that, as such, should be banned or taxed.

Ironically, the Netherlands is currently facing a very real problem with pollution, in the form of farmers' nitrogen emissions.[9] In 2019, a court found that the nitrogen emissions from Dutch farmers – which mainly come from livestock – were in violation of EU nature-protection laws. However, since then, nothing has been done to solve this issue; with farmers vehemently opposing previous government proposals, and with the Farmer Citizen Movement currently in power as part of the coalition, hopes that this situation might be adequately addressed and solved are slim – particularly as the current government continues to be primarily preoccupied with the migration "crisis". In addition to years of inadequate housing policies, this nitrogen emission crisis also contributes to the lack of available houses, as it has become difficult to get permits to construct new properties. Reportedly, the Netherlands faces a shortfall of one million new homes by the start of the next decade.[10]

Proposed policies to tackle the migration and asylum 'crisis'

Why is the Dutch government so determined to talk about "crisis" when referring to migrants and asylum seekers? The main reason is that, by declaring an "asylum crisis", the coalition hopes to be able to derogate from the country's *Aliens Act* (*Vreemdelingenwet*), a law that protects the rights of asylum seekers, and temporarily bypass both the parliament and the senate, which would only review new laws and measures *after*, instead of *before* they are implemented. The emergency mechanism the government wants to invoke is normally meant for situations of acute disaster, such as a war or natural calamity, and should not be brought into the discourse due to "political unwillingness".[11] Whilst human rights advocates and organisations like the Dutch Council for Refugees[12] have been expressing their concerns and rejecting the idea of a real "crisis", in September 2024 the Dutch government announced its intention to implement an array of rigid measures aimed at migrants and asylum seekers.[13]

These include stricter border controls, a moratorium on all new asylum applications, a halt to the country's open-ended asylum permits and harsher regulations for those who have been granted asylum for family reunification purposes. In parallel, the coalition also communicated that it is starting to work on a new law that would greatly limit the services and facilities offered to asylum seekers, as well as suspend all decisions on any new asylum applications for up to two years. At the time of writing, the coalition parties are discussing potential alternatives to the emergency law. In addition, the Dutch government also sent a letter to the European Commission to request an opt-out from European migration and asylum legislation (similar to Denmark's), while fully realising the very low likelihood of getting this approved as it would require a European treaty amendment and consent from all other EU member states.[14] Finally, just ahead of the European Heads of State Summit in Brussels on 17 October, the Dutch government announced it is exploring a plan to send rejected asylum seekers to Uganda; with the increasing focus of the EU on so-called 'return hubs' outside the region, this plan was relatively well-received by most member states.[15]

Implications for mixed migration

Should all these proposed policies be implemented, the conditions for asylum seekers and their families in the Netherlands could deteriorate further. The country has already been struggling with years of budget cuts to its refugee and asylum system and facilities, with the only registration centre in the north of the country strained to meet the requests of asylum seekers, hundreds of whom were ultimately forced to sleep rough or transported to hotels and other temporary accommodations all over the country. Although this was the consequence of a deliberate policy and budgetary choice, the sight of people sleeping rough reinforces the sense that the system is overwhelmed and in crisis. Marjolein Faber, asylum minister and member of Wilders' PVV, declared her intention to stop entirely the state's contribution to the accommodation of migrants and refugees as of 1 January 2025, adding that she is "advocating for deportation, not subsidised housing".[16] In September, she also proposed to place signs in asylum centres in multiple languages saying, "Here, we are working on your return", even though many asylum seekers who might have fled war or persecution are ultimately granted asylum. Her proposal was rejected by parliament and even by other coalition members, but it represents yet another symbolic

9 The Economist (2024) The Netherlands' new hard-right government is a mess.
10 Dutch News (2024) More permits for new homes in NL, but they are getting smaller.
11 Cokelaere, H (2024) Dutch government announces 'strictest asylum policy ever'. Politico.
12 Dutch Council for Refugees (2024) Declaring an asylum crisis: unjustified and with major consequences.
13 Meijer, B. H. (2024) Op. Cit.
14 Henley, J. (2024) Dutch government led by far-right PVV asks EU for opt-out from asylum rules. The Guardian.
15 Reuters (2024) Netherlands explores plan to send rejected African asylum seekers to Uganda.
16 Mellersh, N. (2024) Netherlands ends housing support for rejected asylum seekers. InfoMigrants.

move meant as a way to deter asylum seekers whilst also presenting a harsh approach to the electorate.

The current government also intends to repeal the *Distribution Act* (*Spreidingswet*),[17] the country's very recent legislation developed by the previous government, which was originally aimed at addressing the shortage of reception centres, overcrowding and other problems in a select number of small villages hosting relatively large centres. This will likely further contribute to normalising a context in which migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are left in limbo at the edges of Dutch society. Again, the impact will be visually evident and distressing for Dutch citizens, suggesting the situation is unmanageable.

Family reunification for children of 18 years of age or older will also become more complex, should the new proposals come into effect. Currently, there are already several limitations to the circumstances under which an older child can be reunited with their family – such as whether the child is seriously ill or disabled – but the new measures could turn the entire family reunification process into a near-impossible feat for many more people on the move.

Normalising the endless 'crisis' cycle

Looking at the 2023 general election results, it is clear that many people in the Netherlands feel like they are being faced with a real migration and asylum "crisis". Anti-migrant sentiment has become widespread, legitimised and normalised, whilst the heightened levels of fear and anxiety that these narratives promote are contributing to emphasising xenophobia, distrust and social divisions, rendering any integration efforts of migrants and asylum seekers virtually impractical – and unwanted.

Despite getting into power thanks to an extreme populist, anti-migrant and anti-Islam ideology, it is, nonetheless, unlikely that Wilders will be able to implement his most exclusionary policies, as they will go against Dutch and EU law, whilst potentially also facing the opposition of the other parties in this fragile coalition.

Even if any of the new proposed policies to tackle the "asylum crisis" should go ahead, they will probably not achieve what they promise – an ending or, at least, resolution to this "crisis" – because it is precisely by constantly keeping the issue high on the agenda and at crisis level that far-right, populist and nationalist parties continue to hold on to power. By shifting the focus from pressing issues and policy failures, such as the housing shortage, the farming situation and problems with the healthcare and education systems, to the easy scapegoat that migration has come to embody, parties like the PVV can comfortably keep on steering the discourse in their favour, winning votes and presenting themselves as undisputed guardians of national identities under threat.

17 Dutch Council for Refugees (2024) Op. Cit.

Photo credits: Troy Walker / Shutterstock

UK: Just weeks after Labour took over government in July, 29 riots and protests erupted in multiple cities across the UK (with the exception of Scotland) purportedly against migrants and asylum seekers ("Stop the boats" was one of the main slogans and chants at these demonstrations) but triggered by social media misinformation about a stabbing incident in which three children were killed and ten other people injured. By the end of the riots, almost 1,300 people had been arrested. Here, a far-right protester is pictured with a Union Jack mask in Leeds. [See *Keeping track in Europe*, page 87; *Normalising the extreme*, page 264 and the *Thematic snapshot* on page 165].

Interview

Migrant-led NGOs: fresh perspectives for actionable change

Despite the rise of populist movements, the global discourse around migration is changing for the better, states **Anila Noor**, with organisations such as the UN and the European Commission encouraging migrants and refugees to bring their much-needed perspectives to the table. In this scenario, migrant-led NGOs like New Women Connectors could prove instrumental in fostering change.

Anila Noor is a Pakistani refugee activist and independent researcher based in the Netherlands. After obtaining a master's degree in conflict and peace studies and an MSc in gender and women studies, Anila went on to work for over 12 years in NGOs and research institutions in Pakistan, focusing on women's rights, forced migration and integration policies. Anila is also the founder of New Women Connectors, a movement striving to mainstream the unheard voices of migrant and refugee women living across Europe.

This year is a big one for elections around the world. Do you see a growing rise in populism? And if yes, what are the implications for the future of migration and asylum? Not just in Europe, but generally?

Yes, as humans, some of us feel threatened by the events that are unfolding. Migration, migrants or newcomers are being used as a threat. Right-wing parties are using migration as a threat. And obviously even in the Netherlands, in Germany, in France, we see we have these kinds of populist parties. They are winning because we have a gap in dialogue, in understanding. We lack more mechanisms where we can nurture understanding and see that migration is not a threat. Certain behaviours, certain types of racism and systematic discrimination are all threats that we need to change. And because we are not talking with each other but talking about each other, we are just falling into that trap of going against each other.

Do you have a sense of how the context is changing in Europe for migrants and refugees since the time you've been living in the Netherlands? How would you characterise that change?

The context has definitely been evolving, both in a good and also in a very active manner. Different organisations, such as the UN agencies or the European Commission are now realising the importance of involving refugees and migrants, so we have managed

> **"When we are not talking with each other but talking about each other, we are just falling into that trap of going against each other."**

to bring more meaningful participation to the table. But at the same time, migration is still being used as a threat, being used in faulty framing. We still hear bad narratives and see migration being used as a weapon instead of promoting or accepting this normalisation. So, in my experience, some things are positive and some others are negative. It's like push and pull, and both factors are very strong.

What about your native Pakistan? It's been trying to expel the Afghans for years and it continues to do so.

Yes, but it is just politics. And I want to highlight two points. One, when we try to understand the South Asian context, we can't and should not compare that to the situation of Western developed countries, because Western developed countries have endorsed themselves as human rights defenders. As wealthy countries, they also have more power than these developing countries. I'm not defending Pakistan at all, but I'm just trying to give the political context. So, in developing countries everywhere, the issue of migration becomes so heavy because these nations are already struggling when it comes to economics and how to integrate new migrants.

> **"Different organisations, such as the UN agencies or the European Commission, are now realising the importance of involving refugees and migrants, so we have managed to bring more meaningful participation to the table."**

When the first migrations started from Afghanistan in the 1980s, we saw big support from and for Pakistan. I mean, Pakistan got big support from UNHCR, from different countries and institutions and it started to be political from that time. International power politics, even. And because Pakistan never signed the refugee convention, that's why UNHCR stepped up. I wish I could answer your question, but it's a big question because it's linked to the history of war, of terror, of the international war against terror as well as the failure of the Pakistani government and its relationship with the powerful military in Pakistan. It's all connected and too much for this interview: it's very complex. And on top of this, even though there have been three generations of Afghans living in Pakistan and for most people it's very normal to have Afghans in Pakistan, at the same time there is 100% discrimination, cultural discrimination against refugees. They have never really been accepted as integrated. Integration wasn't really talked about by ordinary Pakistanis. The way we are talking about refugees, their rights, and integration here in Germany didn't happen in Pakistan, and now these efforts to remove Afghans are again linked to big politics but, personally, I'm against their forced removal or expulsion.

How has it been for you and other refugees since anti-Muslim Geert Wilders came to power in the Netherlands earlier this year? Is he managing to implement the things that he threatened to do?

Well, we already felt this coming because of what's been happening in recent years in the Netherlands. One day, I'd really like to sit with him to understand why he's so afraid of migrants. I think these parties are again using fear and emphasising the differences between us to get the votes. They're thinking, 'They do not look like us; they don't speak Dutch; they don't eat like us; they don't wear clothes like us – they are different'. And when there are differences, people can feel threatened by each other. So this is happening around us, but as to how much he will be able to implement, I just don't know.

> **"These [populist] parties are again using fear and emphasising the differences between us to get the votes. […] And when there are differences, people can feel threatened by each other."**

Do you think Wilders' ideas are commonly held in Holland?

No. I don't think they are. I travel a lot and I've met many people in the States, in the UK and around Holland and elsewhere. I personally have never met anyone who endorses these anti-Muslim ideas, especially in Holland. It's the political system that brings in these people. But it is embedded in European systems. We need to address the system that's helping these people come into power. That's why we at New Women Connectors are advocating for systematic change, exploring how we can break down systems which enable populist leaders to win.

But you have proportional representation in your democracy in Holland. What do you want to change in that system?

It's not so much that, but as newcomers, maybe we lack a full understanding of why political participation is very important. There are so many young people who feel they have no hope and yet they're not using their

vote. And these populist parties, they're very good at promoting themselves and ensuring a high turnout of their supporters. Meanwhile, the good people are just sitting silently in their homes, not going to use their votes.

> **"I have never met anyone who endorses these anti-Muslim ideas, especially in Holland. It's the political system that brings in these people. But it is embedded in European systems. We need to address the system that's helping these people come into power."**

What changes have you seen since 7 October and Hamas' attack on Israel?

I belong to a Pakistani/Kashmiri Muslim background. My forefathers, they came to Pakistan from India-occupied Kashmir in 1947. So we were living in Pakistan as a first-migration generation, and as Muslims, we feel strong solidarity with Palestinians, so what has been going on has been very sensitive for me personally. The events feel like a re-enactment, like a re-happening for us. It's not like we see it happening for the first time. So, it's like trauma. Oh my God, not again! As a woman-led, refugee-led organisation, at New Women Connectors we found ourselves in a very difficult situation where we really want to protest openly, we really want to say something, but as Muslims in Europe we fear a backlash, like we can't even openly express our freedom of speech. We are trying to say we really need a ceasefire right now, but our voice feels like it's been censored. So, this is very heavy for us.

Do you think different groups of refugees experience different levels of protection?

Yes. There is definitely a hierarchy and discrimination between different refugee groups in the world. Some get all the attention and others get almost none. Some are top of the news headlines while a larger group are almost forgotten. We appreciate the openness they offered Ukrainian refugees all over the world, from Australia to Canada, from the US to Europe, accepting six million Ukrainian people without a question. Meanwhile, they're still deporting Afghans, sub-Saharan Africans and other groups. It is kind of shocking the different treatment they get. But what we say is that the West should open their borders, their doors and their hearts to anyone who requires protection. I think anyone can imagine what would've happened if Ukraine was a Muslim country.

Cities are widely seen as more progressive, more diverse and more accepting of multiculturalism. Do you have any comments on your experience about the difference between refugee integration in rural areas compared to cities?

Well, the functions of cities are quite different compared to those of rural areas. In the cities everything is happening: there are businesses, there are shops, there are shopping malls, there are big NGOs. So, with so much happening, most migrants and refugees tend to go there. It's easy for them to get jobs, because the range of opportunities is higher in cities. They might become a chef, or they can open a shop or do deliveries, or open a barber or hairdressing shop, this kind of thing. But in rural areas, there's less economic activity. And there are also multicultural spaces in cities. I never lived in rural areas in Holland, but from my understanding and observation, rural areas have their own very limited routine of life. Some cities develop refugee policies that are actually in defiance of national policies. There is also this concept of 'sanctuary cities'. I think in the Netherlands we have Utrecht and they are establishing this also in Amsterdam, and we have a few human rights defenders who create sanctuary cities for a limited period of time in special circumstances, which is also good. We actually need more of those.

As a refugee-led NGO, what are the measures of success in your work?

Well, I think we are part of a social movement, and especially one with a feminist lens. It's very hard to prove your success because social movements normally effect change at a slow pace. We are like a small snail moving. And we are trying to give impact and effect to influence how we are changing the narrative, how we are changing the understanding, how we are changing the perspective, how we are changing the colours of the ocean!

So it's very hard. I always say as a founder of New Woman Connectors, people don't understand what we are doing. I give you an example. After more than 18 years of being involved in the development sector from South Asia to Europe, I really found for me, this UN system is a main gatekeeper. I will be very blunt. We really need to change the UN system.

I really want to make it more open, more accessible, less European-centered and less men-centered. If you go into the UN, you will find they are 99% White men. White old men who are heads of these departments. In my opinion, they are reproducing exploitation, re-exploiting to keep the power in certain groups. What I observe from most of the people who have the power is that they are from privileged backgrounds. It's not easy for me or even for you to easily know the system. So how can we change it if we don't know how this system is running?

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about migrants and refugees in Europe in the long term? Do you think the situation is going to become more open or more closed?

According to my personality, I'm very optimistic, I'm a very hopeful person. And I like to keep the energy very positive. I think what's happening now is quite positive, I will not say it is going to change in one day or one decade, but the pressure is on us as refugee migrant leaders – we have the responsibility to make good partnerships and build good coalitions with relevant parties. We can change together, but we can't change alone.

> **"The pressure [is] on us as refugee migrant leaders – we have the responsibility to make good partnerships and build good coalitions with relevant parties. We can change together, but we can't change alone."**

Photo credit: Alexandros Michaildis / Shutterstock

Italy: Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni won Italian elections in 2022 with, amongst other issues, a strong anti-migrant agenda. Since then, Italy has made deals to reduce irregular migration, obstructed NGO rescue boats from rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean but also regularised thousands of migrants in Italy and opened new channels for safe and legal labour migration to Italy. Meanwhile, Meloni has also brokered a deal with Albania to process asylum seekers there, which has attracted interest and praise from other political leaders, including the UK's new Labour prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer.

Asia

Overview

Peter Grant

The plight of displaced Afghan populations living in neighbouring countries has always been hard, but the situation for millions has deteriorated dramatically since both Pakistan and Iran escalated the pace and scale of deportation. Pakistan, in particular, announced in October 2023 its plans to return millions of Afghan nationals across the border, beginning with those lacking documentation – a significant portion, given the difficulties many face in securing the necessary paperwork to remain – then extending in phases to include residency card holders and refugees. The move could result in the return of millions of Afghans, some of whom have never lived in Afghanistan, further complicating the large-scale humanitarian and displacement crisis there and potentially endangering many who may be at risk of persecution by the Taliban.

Myanmar is also experiencing a major displacement crisis that continues to evolve as the civil conflict between the *junta* and armed resistance groups develops, spreading into new areas of the country. Against a backdrop of deepening repression, including the passage of a new military conscription law, many civilians are seeking to flee into neighbouring countries such as India and Thailand – who are increasingly responding with heightened border security and forced returns – as well as China. The insecurity also adds a further threat to the remaining Rohingya in the country who were not displaced by previous waves of violence and now risk being forcibly conscripted into the military or armed groups. Across the border in Bangladesh, living conditions for the more than one million Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar continue to deteriorate, with a surge in criminal gangs operating in the camps. As a result, more Rohingya are attempting the dangerous journey on to Malaysia, Indonesia and elsewhere, despite the increasingly inhospitable environment in these countries.

Afghanistan

While conflict-induced displacement in **Afghanistan** has largely ended since the de facto authority's takeover, other forms of violence and repression continue to drive people from their homes. This includes an escalation in forced evictions in cities such as Kabul, with the aim of forcing hundreds of thousands of IDPs who have been living in informal settlements there back to their areas of origin.[1] Even with an end to the fighting and the significant difficulties they currently face, most IDPs are reluctant to relocate back to their place of origin – in some cases, areas they have not lived in for years or decades – given the absence of financial assistance, limited livelihood opportunities and the difficulty of returning to damaged or occupied properties.[2]

Alongside conflict, environmental shocks such as flooding have been a frequent cause of mass displacement in Afghanistan. In October 2023, a series of earthquakes in Herat – already hosting one of the largest displaced populations in the country – resulted in 380,000 internal displacements, making it one of the country's most serious natural disasters in recent years.[3] Months on, around 24,800 households were still living in tents or damaged buildings,[4] with the recovery likely to be protracted. With almost 50,000 buildings damaged, including more than 13,000 homes completely destroyed, the UN has called for $403 million in funding to support recovery efforts.[5] Securing this funding, however, will prove a challenge in a context where some 23.7 million people in the country are in need of assistance at a time when international support has dramatically reduced.[6]

At the same time, beginning in late 2023, Afghanistan has seen a massive uptick in the number of returnees from neighbouring countries, with more than 645,000 forced to leave **Pakistan** and **Iran** in the final quarter alone.[7] Hundreds of thousands have continued to cross into Afghanistan during 2024, reaching an estimated 400,000 people by June,[8] with projections suggesting

1 IDMC (2024) Afghanistan.
2 Sayed, N., Khan, H., Basit, M. & Sadat, M. (2024) Why are IDPs in Kabul reluctant to return to their places of origin following the Taliban's takeover? Researching Internal Displacement.
3 IDMC (2024) Op cit.
4 Zahidi, B. (2024) Thousands of Herat earthquake survivors still live in tents and damaged shelters, UN reports. Kabul Now.
5 UN Afghanistan (2024) UN reports staggering US$ 402.9 million in recovery needs following last year's earthquakes in Herat, Afghanistan.
6 OCHA (2024) Afghanistan.
7 ECHO (2024) Afghans returning from Pakistan share their fears of an uncertain future.
8 Gul, A. (2024) Taliban: Pakistan, Iran expelled over 400,000 Afghan refugees so far in 2024. Voice of America.

that an estimated 1.46 million more Afghans may return from Pakistan and Iran over the course of the year.[9] Many of them will likely join the 6.3 million people – one in seven Afghans – already facing long-term displacement in the country,[10] placing further pressure on a country already wrestling with widespread poverty and a spiralling humanitarian crisis.

An end to protection for Afghans in the region

For decades, protracted crisis and insecurity in Afghanistan have contributed to the settlement of millions of Afghan nationals in neighbouring countries, a phenomenon accelerated by the de facto authority's seizure of power in August 2021, and the exodus of hundreds of thousands more across the border to Pakistan and Iran. By 2023, an estimated 8.2 million Afghans (4.5 million in Iran and 3.7 million in Pakistan) were being hosted in these two countries, comprising a combination of registered refugees, residency card holders and others without documentation.[11]

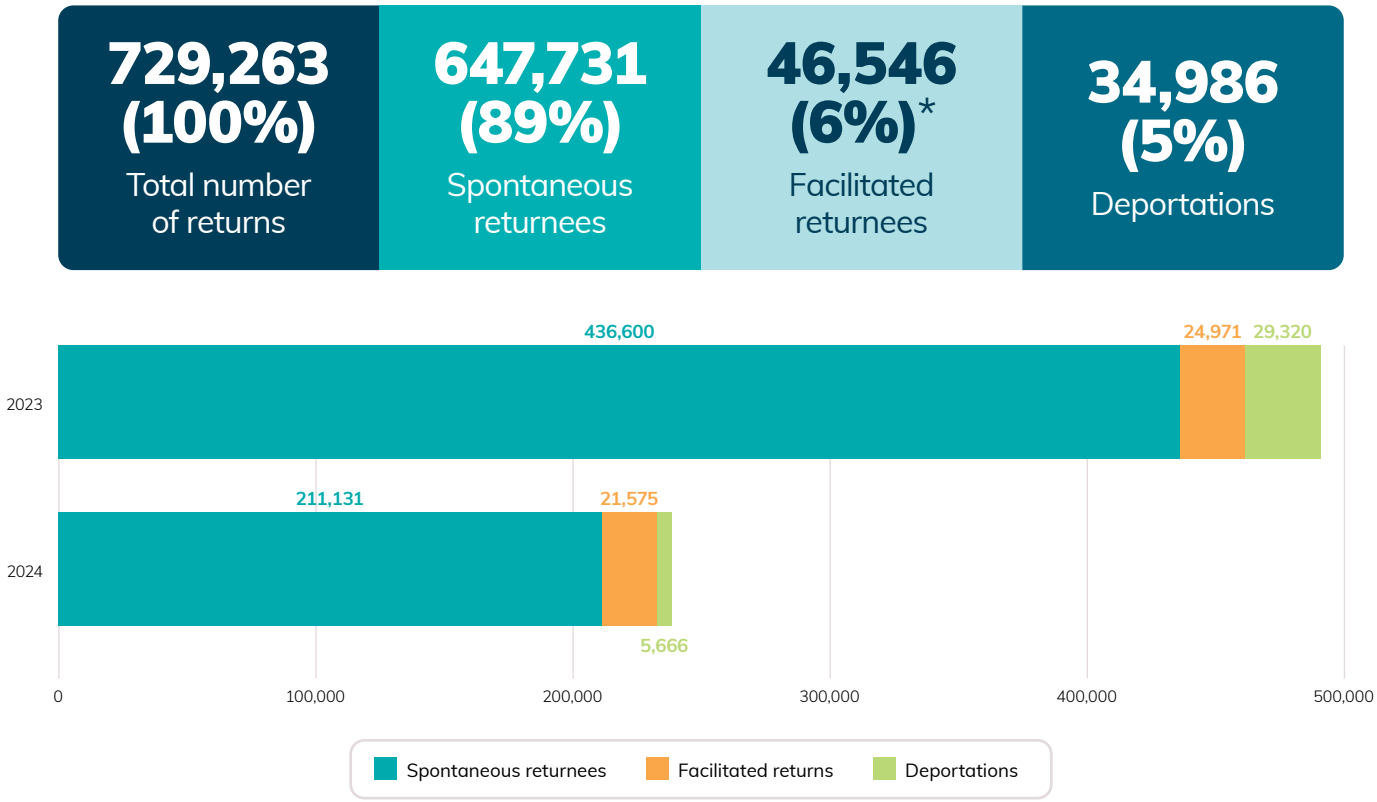
In Pakistan, while large-scale deportations of undocumented Afghans have taken place for years and authorities have repeatedly threatened to rescind the rights of refugees in the country, the October 2023 announcement of the so-called *Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan* represents a fundamental turning point for its Afghan population. Ultimately, if fully implemented, the proposal envisions the return of almost the entire Afghan population in Pakistan. While the Pakistani government justified the policy as a necessary move to protect its lagging economy and national security, it appears in large part to have been driven by the deterioration in relations between Kabul and Karachi since the de facto authorities took power, with the latter blamed for failing to curb the insurgent activities of the militant group Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP).[12]

The implementation of the policy has been planned in several phases, with the first phase targeting undocumented Afghans to leave Pakistan with a deadline of 1 November 2023. Pakistani authorities also announced penalties for anyone who provided support to this group – for example, employers and landlords who provided work or accommodation – with dedicated hotlines set up for locals to report "illegal foreigners". This environment contributed to a reported increase in official harassment and social discrimination towards Afghan residents, encouraging many (including some who in principle had legal documentation allowing them to remain for the time being) to leave before the deadline.[13] By the beginning of May 2024, at least 600,000 Afghans had reportedly returned from Pakistan, meaning that around one million others without documentation remained in hiding in the country. Their already difficult situation before October 2023 has been compounded by the announcement, making access to livelihoods, healthcare and other services even harder than before.[14]

The second phase, originally scheduled for April 2024 but subsequently delayed, would extend the expulsions to Afghans with Afghan Citizen Cards (ACCs), issued by Pakistan and previously affording Afghans the right to live in the country. This could affect up to 800,000 additional Afghans who will no longer be able to legally remain in Pakistan.[15] The third and final phase of the plan will reportedly extend the deportations to the estimated 1.3 million holders of UNHCR-issued Proof of Registration (PoR). The legislation has been condemned by Amnesty International as a violation of international refugee and human rights law.[16] In July, shortly after they officially expired, the government announced that PoR identity cards would be extended for another year until 30 June 2025.[17] However, Pakistani authorities maintained that the announcement did not signal that its deportation programme in general had been suspended, with a government spokesperson stating that the second phase targeting ACC holders would resume "at an appropriate time".[18]

9 OCHA (2023) Humanitarian needs and response plan 2024: Afghanistan.
10 OCHA (2024) Afghanistan: Humanitarian update, December 2023.
11 UNHCR (2023) Regional refugee response plan for Afghanistan situation 2023.
12 Bahiss, I. (2023) Pakistan's mass deportation of Afghans poses risks to regional stability. Crisis Group.
13 Ibid.
14 Butt, R. & Jawad, A. (2024) Millions of Afghans made Pakistan home to escape war. Now many are hiding to escape deportation. The Diplomat.
15 Al Jazeera (2024) Pakistan to start second phase of Afghan deportations.
16 Amnesty International (2024) Pakistan: Government must stop ignoring global calls to halt unlawful deportation of Afghan refugees.
17 Greenfield, C. (2024) Pakistan extends Afghan refugee registration cards for one year. Reuters.
18 Ahmed, M. (2024) Deportation of Afghan migrants to continue, Pakistan government says. The Diplomat.

Graphic 1. Returns to Afghanistan from Pakistan September 2023 - September 2024



*The number refers to holders of Proof of Registration (PoR) facilitated through Voluntary Repatriation Centres (VRCs) who crossed the border during the reporting period.
Source (adapted) and credit: UNHCR.

While Pakistani authorities claimed that the vast majority of returns were voluntary, in practice most of those who left did so reluctantly, in a context of violence and intimidation. With many reportedly stripped of their assets or forced to sell them at rock-bottom prices in the narrow timeframe before the 1 November 2023 deadline, returnees to Afghanistan often have little or no resources to speak of.[19] Confronted by deteriorating economic and humanitarian conditions, many of those forced to return – some of whom have never set foot in Afghanistan until now – are struggling to adapt and identify new livelihood sources in an economy that is already unable to deliver adequate employment to the majority of the population. In addition, thousands of former journalists, government officials, human rights activists, LGBTQI+ community members, ethnic minorities and other at-risk groups face a very real threat of persecution and harassment from the Taliban on their return.[20]

There are also concerns that neighbouring Iran, home to an even larger Afghan population, could follow suit. Since 2021, as anti-Afghan sentiment has intensified, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have been systematically expelled by the authorities: in 2023, the total number of deportations was 651,000, an increase of more than a third from 485,000 in 2022. Almost half of the deportations of Afghans by Iran in 2023 were undertaken in the final quarter of 2023, following threats from the government that it would impose a crackdown on undocumented Afghans in the country.[21] In December, it was announced that Afghans would be banned from living, working or travelling in 16 of Iran's 31 provinces.[22]

Though, at the time of writing, no formal proposal had been put in place, border entry restrictions appear to have tightened, with some arguing that the long-term drift of Iranian policy appears to be heading in a similar direction as Pakistan.[23] In May 2024, Iranian authorities announced plans to construct a wall along the border with Afghanistan, making it harder for refugees, asylum seekers and other marginalised groups to enter the country, including Afghan women seeking the

19 Bahiss, I. (2023) Op Cit.
20 Davies, C. (2023) Afghan Hazara refugees live in fear of being deported by Pakistan. BBC.
21 Gul, A. (2023) Taliban: Iran deports almost 350,000 Afghans within 3 months. Voice of America; DRC (2024) Afghans increasingly forced to return from Iran, an overlooked population in dire need of protection.
22 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2023) Afghans banned from 16 provinces In Iran As forced exodus continues.
23 D'Souza, S. M. (2023) An Iranian reversal on Afghan refugees. The Diplomat.

educational opportunities they are denied at home as a result of Taliban restrictions.[24] Afghans faced further challenges during presidential elections in July 2024, when immigration, border control and the refugee population became central issues of debate between the candidates.[25]

Too little, too late for Afghans awaiting resettlement?

Following the fall of the Afghan government in August 2021, more than 1.6 million people fled the country, many fearing retribution from the de facto authorities. The majority crossed the border into Iran and Pakistan, including hundreds of thousands in need of resettlement in a safe third country. However, despite statements of solidarity from numerous EU governments in the wake of the de facto authority's takeover (in particular those who, until recently, had been part of the NATO-led deployment in Afghanistan), the actual number of approved resettlements fell far short of these commitments in the months that followed.

In May 2023, the International Rescue Committee drew attention to what it described as EU's "staggering neglect" towards Afghans in need of protection, reporting that just 271 Afghans had been accepted for resettlement in 2022 – 0.1 percent of the estimated 270,000.[26] By August 2023, two years after the de facto authority's return, just 329 had been resettled in the EU, across just four countries. This suggested that the EU would fall far short of the UN's recommended target of 42,500 Afghans resettled in the region by 2026.[27]

The large-scale deportations undertaken by Pakistan and Iran make it even less likely that the EU and other stakeholders will be able to meet their moral responsibilities to the hundreds of thousands of Afghans still in need of protection. Amidst calls for EU member states to step up resettlement in light of the imminent danger facing many vulnerable Afghans in Pakistan at risk of forced return,[28] some countries such as Germany have admitted hundreds through resettlement since the expulsion from Pakistan began.[29] Nevertheless, the speed and scale of resettlement is far below what is required to provide comprehensive assistance to those who need it before they are forced to return to Afghanistan. Some commentators have argued that Western countries bear a share of the responsibility for the catastrophe now befalling Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, given the limited funding and sluggish pace of their humanitarian admission programmes.[30]

The Rohingya crisis

The Rohingya, an ethnic and religious minority in **Myanmar** who have for decades been denied citizenship, are the largest stateless population in the world. They account for more than one million refugees in neighbouring **Bangladesh**, the majority of whom fled in 2017 to escape indiscriminate violence at the hands of the military amid reports of mass killings, torture and sexual violence.[31] Tens of thousands more reside in other countries in the region, including **India**, **Malaysia** and **Thailand**. While those living as refugees in other countries face discrimination, stigma and the threat of deportation, the hundreds of thousands still in Myanmar remain at risk of persecution and severe human rights abuses, with many trapped in brutal conditions in displacement camps or in conflict zones. The impacts of climate change and environmental risks, including cyclones and flooding, present additional vulnerabilities to those already internally displaced or living as refugees in hazard-prone locations across the border.[32]

Escalating displacement in Myanmar

Since the military authorities forcibly seized power in February 2021, Myanmar has seen an escalation in civil conflict between the military and a variety of opposition groups and ethnic armed organisations. This has resulted in the growth of a large IDP population across the country, including areas that had previously been largely unaffected by displacement. As of the beginning of July 2024, there were more than 3.3 million IDPs in the country, the majority of whom (over 2.9 million) have been displaced since the 2021 coup. Around half of the displaced population are concentrated in the northwest, predominantly Sagaing Region, Magway Region and

24 Von Hein, S. (2024) Iran hopes to boost security with Afghan border wall. DW; Glinski, S. (2024) 'Nothing compensates for the stolen years': The Afghan women rebuilding shattered dreams in Iran. The Guardian.
25 Ziabari, A. (2024) Afghan asylum seekers face hostility in Iran. Foreign Policy; Motamedi, M. (2024) Iran presidency still up for grabs as conservatives negotiate pre-election. Al Jazeera.
26 International Rescue Committee (2023) IRC: New research reveals the EU's "staggering neglect" of Afghan refugees.
27 International Rescue Committee (2023) IRC: The EU has resettled just 329 Afghans since 2021, despite deepening humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.
28 Council of Europe (2023) Mass deportations of Afghans from Pakistan: 'Europe can do more through member States' embassies,' says PACE Rapporteur.
29 InfoMigrants (2024) Group of Afghan nationals brought to Germany.
30 Hutchinson, S. (2023) Why Western countries share the blame for the plight of 1.7 million Afghans being deported from Pakistan. The Conversation.
31 UN (2023) UN expert demands accountability for the Rohingya and an end to 'paralysis of indifference'.
32 Danish Refugee Council (2024) Impact of climate change on the migration and displacement dynamics of Rohingya refugees.

Chin State, though there are also sizeable displaced populations elsewhere in the country, including much of the southeast.[33]

More than one million of the total IDP population was displaced since fighting intensified in October 2023 with the launch of an offensive by an alliance of ethnic armed groups against the military, resulting in an increase of 50 percent in the total IDP population over the space of six months.[34] In the volatile and fast evolving context of the conflict – at the beginning of 2024, in its survey of 50 armed conflicts across the world, the organisation ACLED ranked Myanmar as the "most violent" and "most fragmented"[35] – it is difficult to predict future displacement patterns, though there is a risk that the situation could deteriorate further and spread. The International Rescue Committee has designated the situation in Myanmar as one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the world in 2024.[36] 18.6 million people are now in need of humanitarian assistance, amounting to around a third of the country's population.[37]

As conditions become more severe and with no end to the conflict in sight, many are facing the prospect of protracted and repeated displacement. As a result, the situation in the country remains very fluid, with some now seeking to return, where possible, to their homes, while others attempting onward movement towards the border with Thailand,[38] where repeated pushbacks and forced returns of refugee arrivals have been reported.[39] According to official Thai data, around 50,000 migrants have entered Thailand in the three years since February 2021 and the beginning of 2024,[40] with many more reported during the year, including thousands displaced by ethnic Karen rebels in April 2024, during the siege of Myawaddy.[41] The passage of a military conscription law in February 2024 to recruit civilians aged 18 to 35 into the army has also encouraged many young people to seek safety in Thailand.[42]

While few civilians have been left unaffected as the conflict has continued to intensify in much of the country, with the UN Special Rapporteur describing the situation as a "never-ending nightmare",[43] the Rohingya community face additional risks due to its history of persecution. In Rakhine State, even before the outbreak of the new conflict, more than 130,000 Rohingya were already being held in internment centres in appalling conditions.[44] The life-threatening conditions in these camps was illustrated in April 2024 by the deaths of almost 80 predominantly Rohingya IDPs in Sittwe as a result of unclean water, food shortages and lack of access to medical care.[45] Around half a million others, meanwhile, are largely confined to villages within Rakhine (the majority in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships) and unable to travel freely beyond these settlements. The organisation Fortify Rights has described the situation in Rakhine as "mass arbitrary detention", aggravated by the de facto authority's increasing restrictions on humanitarian assistance to these areas.[46]

From the first months of 2024, Rohingya have been forcibly co-opted into the growing violence between the Myanmar army and the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed organisation active in the region. Since then, at least 1,500 Rohingya men and boys were forcibly recruited, primarily by the Myanmar military to fight against Arakan Army combatants – a development that has aggravated the risk of intercommunal violence and reprisals by Arakan community members. Many of those conscripted were reportedly promised citizenship or threatened with reprisals against their families if they did not cooperate. There is also evidence that the Arakan Army has engaged in similar practices across the border in Bangladesh, allegedly abducting Rohingya refugees to fight in their ranks and even selling them to the Myanmar military.[47]

Against this backdrop, the situation of Rohingya has become even more precarious during 2024, as the Arakan Army made major territorial gains against the military. By May, with the Arakan Army having captured the township of Buthidaung and besieged neighbouring Maungdaw, thousands of Rohingya had been forcibly displaced and credible reports emerged of abuse, extortion and mass killings carried out by both the Arakan Army and the Myanmar military.[48] By July, the UN was highlighting the growing risk of "genocidal violence", comparing the situation in Rakhine to conditions preceding the assault

33 UNHCR (2024) Myanmar emergency update (as of 1 July 2024); UNHCR (2024) Myanmar situation.
34 UNHCR (2024) Myanmar emergency update (as of 1 May 2024).
35 ACLED (2024) ACLED conflict index 2024.
36 International Rescue Committee (2023) The top 10 crises the world can't ignore in 2024.
37 ECHO (2024) EU releases €15 million in humanitarian aid for people in Myanmar and refugees on the country's borders.
38 UNHCR (2024) Myanmar.
39 Fortify Rights (2024) Thailand: Prevent forced returns of Myanmar refugees, provide legal status; Human Rights Watch (2024) Thailand: Halt forced returns to Myanmar; Human Rights Watch (2023) Thailand: Recent refugees pushed back to Myanmar.
40 UNHCR (2024) 2024: Refugee preparedness and response plan, Thai-Myanmar border.
41 Strangio, S. (2024) Thailand ready to accept 100,000 refugees, foreign minister says. The Diplomat.
42 Voice of America (2024) 'Can't go back': Myanmar conscription exiles struggle in Thailand.
43 OHCHR (2024) Myanmar: human rights situation has 'morphed into a never-ending nightmare,' says Türk.
44 Crisis Group (2024) War in western Myanmar: Avoiding a Rakhine-Rohingya conflict.
45 Radio Free Asia (2024) Nearly 80 die in 3 weeks at Myanmar refugee camps: aid workers.
46 Fortify Rights (2024) U.N. Security Council: Refer mass internment of Muslims and other atrocities in Myanmar to ICC.
47 Rahman, S. A. (2024) Young Rohingya men abducted, forced into 'human shield' roles by Myanmar military. Voice of America; Head, J. (2024) Myanmar's army massacred Rohingyas. Now it wants their help. BBC
48 OHCHR (2024) Myanmar: Growing human rights crisis in Rakhine state.

against the Rohingya population in 2017.[49] While the Arakan Army has denied responsibility in atrocities against Rohingya, there is widespread evidence of its involvement. This raises further concerns about the prospect of any repatriation of Rohingya in the near future, even if the de facto authorities are removed from power, given the likely dominance this armed group will have in Rakhine.[50]

An uncertain future in Bangladesh

The more than one million Rohingya currently living in settlements in Bangladesh in the coastal city of Cox's Bazar, close to the border with Myanmar, are increasingly confronted by two separate but related problems: dwindling international humanitarian assistance and an increasingly uncertain political climate within Bangladesh. With an estimated 200,000 families concentrated into just 24 square kilometres, Cox's Bazar is "one of the most densely populated parts of the world":[51] an area characterised by a lack of livelihoods, limited access to healthcare and the infiltration of armed groups, with some forcibly recruiting community members to fight with the Arakan Army in Myanmar.[52] Residents are also vulnerable to frequent incidents of flooding and other environmental shocks, including the heavy rain and landslides in June 2024 that killed two children and affected more than 4,000 people.[53] Manmade disasters, such as a fire that broke out in January 2024 and left 7,000 people homeless,[54] are also a regular occurrence. Despite these desperate conditions, insufficient donor funding has forced aid groups to significantly cut even basic food rations, causing a spike in hunger and malnutrition.[55] As of the end of July, only 35 percent of the requested financial assistance for the 2024 joint response plan had been received.[56]

Bangladesh, for its part, while hosting one of the largest refugee populations in Asia, has adopted an increasingly defensive position towards the Rohingya. In February 2024, as renewed fighting in Myanmar raised the prospect of further large-scale displacement across the border, the Bangladeshi government announced that it would not allow any more Rohingya entry, as supporting the existing population was already threatening its own security.[57] The human rights group Fortify Rights subsequently published a report, based on testimony from refugees, accusing Bangladeshi border guards of illegal pushbacks and beatings of Rohingya attempting to flee the violence in Myanmar.[58]

A harsh reception in the region

Given the dangers they face in Myanmar and the lack of prospects in Bangladesh, particularly with rising gang violence in the camps, many Rohingya continue to make the hazardous maritime route to countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, **Indonesia** and **Sri Lanka** – despite the cold reception most receive on arrival there. Around 4,500 Rohingya travelled by boat across the Andaman Sea in 2023 – the highest number recorded since 2015, with 529 recorded deaths or disappearances; according to UNHCR, this meant that "one Rohingya was reported to have died or gone missing for every eight people attempting the journey".[59] Around 2,000 others attempted land crossings into India, Thailand and elsewhere.[60]

One contributing factor to the high number of deaths is the failure of countries such as Thailand to launch prompt sea rescues to boats in distress, with reported pushbacks of vessels that have entered their waters.[61] Recent reports have also highlighted the violence and exploitation Rohingya suffer at the hands of human smugglers, with many subjected to extortion threats during the journey and others dying or disappearing en route.[62]

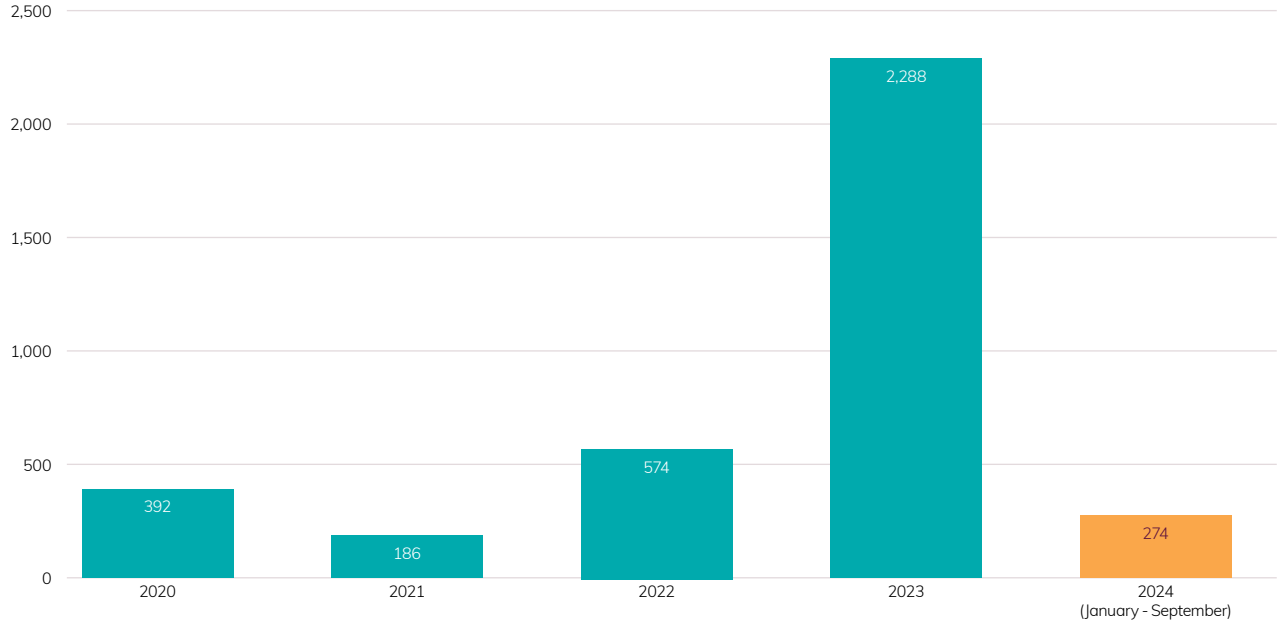
Those who do manage to reach their intended destination often face further challenges on arrival. Malaysia, for instance, has become increasingly hostile in its treatment of Rohingya and other refugees, in recent years: while more than 190,000 people are registered as refugees and asylum seekers with UNHCR, including almost 110,000 Rohingya,[63] Malaysia is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and, therefore, refugees are effectively regarded as undocumented migrants. Many are at risk of official crackdowns or are held indefinitely in detention centres. At the beginning of February 2024, 115 Rohingya and 16 other refugees fled a facility in Bidor, with one man dying on a highway during the escape.[64] The presence of the Rohingya has become

49 Sarkar, A. R. (2024) Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar's restive Rakhine state at risk of 'genocidal violence'. The Independent.
50 Uddin, N. (2024) The fate of the Rohingya may be in the Arakan Army's hands. Al Jazeera.
51 Amnesty International (2024) The inhumane conditions in Cox's Bazar and what must be done to support refugees looking for a dignified, hopeful future.
52 Santana Pérez, D. (2024) Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh pressured to join Myanmar's civil war. The Diplomat.
53 Save the Children (2024) Heavy rain and landslides kill two Rohingya children and affect over 4,000 more with more rain forecast.
54 UNHCR (2024) Nearly 7,000 Rohingya refugees homeless as fire blazes through camp in Cox's Bazar.
55 ECHO (2024) Food ration cuts in Bangladesh: a year of struggles and hope for Rohingya refugees.
56 ICSG (2024) Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis Joint Response Plan 2024 funding update as of 31 July 2024.
57 Paul, R. & Ganguly, S. (2024) Bangladesh will not let in any more Rohingya refugees—minister. Reuters.
58 Fortify Rights (2024) Bangladesh authorities beat and forcibly returned Rohingya fleeing atrocities in Myanmar.
59 Al Jazeera (2024) UNHCR: 569 Rohingya died at sea in 2023, highest in nine years.
60 UNHCR (2024) Desperate journeys: Rohingya refugees in search of protection.
61 Middle East Monitor (2023) Rohingya refugees stranded in Andaman Sea 'can lose lives', warns UN; Human Rights Watch (2022) Thailand: Allow newly arrived Rohingya access to asylum.
62 Ahmed, K. & Hölzl, V. (2024) Death, abuse and torture: traffickers hold fleeing Rohingya to ransom for up to £3,000 a time. The Guardian.
63 UNHCR (2024) Figures at a glance in Malaysia.
64 Al Jazeera (2024) Dozens of Rohingya refugees flee Malaysian immigration detention centre.

increasingly politicised: in March 2024, one official called for stronger restrictions to be applied to the community in the interests of security. Activists, however, responded by urging the government to implement a clear rights-based framework for Rohingya and other refugees in line with established international principles.[65]

Until recently, the number of Rohingya travelling to Indonesia was comparatively small compared to other destination countries, with most of those reaching the country choosing to transit on to Malaysia. However, from mid-November 2023, there was an uptick in movement, with more arrivals in the space of just over a week (1,087 between 14 and 22 November) than in the entire previous sailing season between October 2022 and September 2023.[66] By the end of March 2024, almost 2,000 Rohingya men, women and children had reached Aceh and North Sumatra.[67] In March, the capsizing of a boat carrying 151 passengers, with at least 70 of those on board presumed dead or missing, highlighted the dangers of the route.[68] According to testimony from survivors, the boat was purposefully capsized by the captain and crew, who reportedly tortured and sexually assaulted some of the passengers.[69]

Graphic 2. Rohingya Boat Arrivals in Indonesia (2020 up to September 2024)



Source (adapted) and credit: UNHCR Indonesia - Rohingya Boat Arrivals Emergency Update 20 September 2024.

Driven in part by a targeted campaign of online hate speech and misinformation, Rohingya have received increasingly hostile receptions from local residents, including protests calling for their removal. In December 2023, students in Banda Aceh City mobbed a building where refugees were being held and forced them onto a truck, where they were taken to a different location.[70] A number of boats carrying Rohingya have also been pushed back by Indonesian coastguards or prevented from landing by local residents. These developments prompted Human Rights Watch to urge that Indonesia "not join other Southeast Asian countries that have been pushing back Rohingya boats and letting these desperate people float away to their deaths."[71]

In India, meanwhile, the Hindu nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has adopted an increasingly draconian policy towards Rohingya refugees. The approximately 40,000 Rohingya living in the country have been repeatedly targeted with arbitrary

65 Aiman, A. (2024) Regulating Rohingya undermines Malaysia's human rights stance, says don.
66 IOMN (2023) IOM calls for increased regional support to Rohingyas in search of protection.
67 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR Indonesia—Rohingya boat arrivals emergency update 27 March 2024.
68 Al Jazeera (2024) Bodies of three Rohingya found as Indonesia ends rescue for capsized boat.
69 Tarigan, E. & Gelineau, K. (2024) 'They tortured us': Rohingya survivors of fatal capsize say captain raped girls, purposely sank boat. AP.
70 Ratcliffe, R. & Syakriah, A. (2024) The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees. The Guardian.
71 Human Rights Watch (2024) Indonesia: Protect newly arrived Rohingya refugees.

arrests and detention, prompting the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination to issue a statement in July 2024 calling on the government to end arbitrary mass detention, hate speech and involuntary returns.[72] Anxieties increased following the March 2024 announcement in Manipur of the planned deportation of dozens of Myanmar refugees. The same month, however, the controversial *Citizenship Amendment Act* was passed: this legislation grants nationality to six religious minorities (Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians) in Muslim-majority Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, but does not extend protections to Muslim minorities in other countries, including Rohingya in Myanmar.[73] Critics have argued that the provisions are exclusionary and intentionally "anti-Muslim",[74] aligning with a broader policy of discrimination towards India's Muslim population.

Graphic 3. Rohingya land and sea journey routes, 2022/2023

Source (adapted) and credit: Desperate Journeys: Rohingya Refugees in Search of Protection.

72 OCHR (2024) India must end racial discrimination against Rohingya, cease forced deportation and arbitrary detention, urges UN Committee.
73 Singh, G. (2024) India says new law saves persecuted refugees. Rohingya ask 'Why not us?'. Al Jazeera.
74 BBC (2024) CAA: India's new citizenship law explained.

India ends free movement with Myanmar in its border regions

The border areas between the northeastern states of Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland in India and Chin in Myanmar were, for many centuries, a single contiguous area, occupied by a variety of indigenous peoples and minorities with shared ethnic, cultural and linguistic ties. It was only with the imposition of the border by the British colonial powers that the territory came to be formally divided, arbitrarily separating families and communities in what has been described as the "Forgotten Partition". In the process, an array of overlapping tribal groupings, in particular the Chin-Kuki-Zo and Nagas, were cut off from each other.[75]

Graphic 4. India's border with Myanmar

In practice, locals have continued to cross back and forth to socialise, trade and hunt. This reality was implicitly recognised by the Indian government in 2018, when it declared with the (then democratic) Myanmar government a free movement agreement whereby people could travel 16 kilometres on either side of the border without a visa. However, this arrangement abruptly came to an end at the beginning of 2024, when India announced that it would be ending the arrangement "to ensure the internal security" and "maintain the demographic structure" of its border regions.[76] The Indian government also outlined plans to construct a fence along the entirety of the 1,643-kilometre border.[77]

Since the military seizure of power in Myanmar and the subsequent outbreak of civil conflict there, tens of thousands of refugees have sought safety in India. In principle, then, India's concerns should be as much around humanitarian assistance as they are about security, as reflected in Mizoram's decision to host around 40,000 recent arrivals from Myanmar. The state government there, at odds with the federal government's position, has expressed its resistance to ending free movement in the border areas. Elsewhere, particularly in Manipur, tensions have risen against a backdrop of intercommunal conflict that first erupted in May 2023, resulting in more than 200 deaths and the displacement of thousands. The violence is largely taking place between the Kuki and Naga minorities (who both share close ties with populations within Myanmar) and the Meitei majority (who do not have the same connections across the border): in this context, the large numbers of refugees crossing into Manipur has become politically charged.[78]

Against this backdrop, the Indian federal government has been accused of stoking communal divisions in the border regions, pandering to its predominantly Meitei voter base by framing refugees as a demographic threat – charges that the government denies. Similarly, notwithstanding the conflict in Myanmar and the mass displacement it has created, critics have questioned the government's motives for blaming the situation in the increasingly restive region on "illegal migrants" from Myanmar, rather than on its own failure to restore peace there. Indeed, some security experts have argued that insecurity in Manipur is primarily generated by Indian rebel groups from the northeast who have established camps in Myanmar and launch attacks from there across the border.[79]

While the construction of a fence along the mountainous region of northeastern India may not even be feasible in practice, the militarisation of the border and stigmatisation of Myanmar's refugees is likely to have very real consequences for host and displaced communities alike. Existing divisions have been further inflamed by calls from some political groups and residents to expel arrivals back across the border, while others have condemned the proposal to end free movement. For the many longstanding ethnic and indigenous populations who straddle the border, the imposition of stricter controls on movement could prove socially and economically devastating. For those seeking sanctuary from the fighting in Myanmar, on the other hand, the implications could be life-threatening if they are denied protection or forced back across the border into the conflict zone.

75 Arnan, S. (2024) India's 'Forgotten Partition' and the Myanmar refugee crisis. The Diplomat.
76 Chanchinmawia & Sharma, Y. (2024) 'Separated': Why is India sealing its Myanmar border, dividing families? Al Jazeera.
77 Biswas, S. (2024) India-Myanmar: Why Delhi wants to fence the 'troubled' border. BBC.
78 Chanchinmawia & Sharma, Y. (2024) 'Separated': Why is India sealing its Myanmar border, dividing families? Al Jazeera.
79 Biswas, S. (2024) Op. Cit. BBC; Chanchinmawia and Sharma, Y. (2024) Op Cit.

Labour migration in South and Southeast Asia

Millions of nationals from major sending countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, **Nepal** and the **Philippines** migrate to other regions (in particular the Gulf) and to other countries within the region (such as Malaysia) in search of employment as construction labourers, domestic workers and other low-paying roles. The economic impact of Covid-19 on the migrant workforce put a spotlight on the precarity and lack of protections many faced, from unpaid wages and job insecurity to employer abuse and the threat of deportation. However, while labour migration is now returning to pre-pandemic levels – a record-breaking seven million Asians moved overseas for work in 2023, up from 5.2 million in 2022[80] – the underlying economic and political inequalities between sending countries and receiving countries, particularly in the oil-rich Gulf, persist.

Though receiving countries remain dependent on foreign labour, the demand for paid employment among sending countries is even greater. As a result, richer countries such as **Qatar** (repeatedly accused of presiding over gross labour violations)[81] are generally able to resist external pressure to implement meaningful reforms to prevent rights violations. While some foreign workers in the Gulf have reported negative health impacts from their employment, including recent research suggesting that it may have contributed to reduced fertility among male migrants,[82] significant numbers continue to die from work-related injuries and hazardous living conditions. In June 2024, 50 people – most of whom were Indian migrants – died in a fire that broke out in a dormitory in **Kuwait**: it is believed that the building, managed by their employer, was in contravention of basic health and fire safety regulations.[83]

Though many of the worst abuses have been documented in the Gulf, exploitative practices such as wage theft and passport confiscation also take place in other regions such as the EU, with a recent report highlighting the plight of Filipino workers who left Hong Kong to work in **Poland**.[84] While **Romania** recently authorised a quota of 100,000 non-EU migrants to work in the country, there are reports of Asian workers being recruited under false pretences into poorly paid, exploitative labour.[85] Meanwhile in **Italy**, the plight of undocumented labourers – many of them from South Asia – was highlighted by the death of an Indian farm labourer who was reportedly abandoned by his employer on the side of a road after his arm was severed by agricultural machinery. The man subsequently died of his injuries.[86]

Even within the region, including between countries governed by shared bodies, migrant workers can be easily taken advantage of. For instance, despite both being ASEAN member states, many of the 2.7 million Indonesians working in Malaysia – in particular those employed on palm oil plantations – continue to experience dangerous conditions, wage deductions and other issues.[87]

Pakistani nationals targeted by mob attacks in Kyrgyzstan

The complex dynamics of labour migration, with some countries serving both as sending countries to other regions and receiving countries for migrants from elsewhere in Asia, can result in contradictory outcomes. This was illustrated by the aftermath of violent protests that broke out in May 2024 in Bishkek, the capital of **Kyrgyzstan**, with Pakistani nationals and other foreigners targeted in mob attacks that left a number of them injured and forced hundreds of others to leave the country. While the demonstrations were protesting irregular migration, the main victims were Pakistani students who were legally resident and enrolled in medical programmes: in the aftermath of the violence, more than 3,000 were evacuated from the country.[88]

A senior Kyrgyz official appeared to condone the attacks as justified "to some extent" and drew attention to the government's ongoing crackdown against undocumented migrants. Yet, at the same time, the authorities have been actively recruiting more migrant workers from South Asia to fill the significant labour shortages the country faces in sectors such as the garment industry – in part as a result of the emigration of many Kyrgyz nationals to work in Russia.[89]

Indian migrant workers fill Israel's labour gap

Following the deadly attacks by Hamas gunmen on Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023, and the subsequent launch of a military offensive in Gaza that has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Palestinians there, **Israel** also suspended the entry permits of more than

80 Seno, S. (2024) Philippines, Bangladesh push Asian migrant numbers to record high. Nikkei Asia.
81 MacInnes, P. (2024) Amnesty urges Fifa to publish report on Qatar migrant worker compensation. The Guardian; Human Rights Watch (2024) Qatar, Nepal, Bangladesh: Emir's visits should prioritize migrant worker protections.
82 Pattisson, P. & Rauniyar, I. (2023) Nepal's migrant workers suffering 'alarming' rate of fertility problems. The Guardian.
83 Sebastian, M. (2024) India brings back bodies of 45 workers from Kuwait. BBC.
84 Carvalho, R. (2024) After leaving the grind in Asia, Filipino women find exploitation in Poland. Al Jazeera.
85 García-Ajofrín, L.(2023) Conned, exploited, trapped: Romania's new flock of Asian delivery riders. Al Jazeera.
86 Gozzi, L. (2024) Farm labourer dies in Italy after arm severed by machine. BBC.
87 Hasbiyalloh, B., Denney, L., Adianti, C., Pramono , B. K. (2024) Political economy analysis of Indonesian migrant workers' vulnerabilities to exploitation in Malaysia's palm oil sector. Overseas Development Institute.
88 Murzakulova, A. (2024) Anti-migrant protests expose problems in Kyrgyzstan's evolving migration landscape. The Diplomat.
89 Rickleton, C. (2024) Why mass labor exporter Kyrgyzstan faces migrant worker fear at home. Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty.

150,000 Palestinian labourers living in the West Bank who, until then, had travelled daily into Israel to work.[90] The economic impact of this embargo on the Palestinian population in the West Bank has proved devastating, with close to a quarter (24%) of employment estimated to have been lost as a result.[91] While the situation in the West Bank has become increasingly precarious, with widespread reports of arbitrary detention and torture of Palestinian residents by Israeli forces,[92] the increasingly restrictive conditions imposed on its economy by Israel threaten to trigger a full-scale financial "meltdown".[93]

In the meantime, Israel was left with an acute labour shortage in key sectors, such as agriculture and construction, that it urgently needed to address. Having brokered a labour migration agreement with India in May 2023, Israel sought to recruit tens of thousands of Indian nationals to fill the gap. Despite protests from unions over safety concerns (a recent study suggests that the per capita fatality rate among migrant workers in Israel is 2.5 times higher than in the EU), as well as expressions of solidarity with **Palestine**, many Indian workers have been quick to put themselves forward.[94]

Since then, reports have emerged of widespread abuse and exploitation among newly arrived foreign workers in the country. The enforcement of labour laws, patchy even before 7 October, appears to have become laxer since the outbreak of the conflict. While a hotline exists for migrants to raise complaints with Israeli authorities, in practice many are reluctant to do so out of fear of reprisals from their employers, who still hold much of the power. While a previous bilateral agreement between Israel and Thailand in 2012 sought to remove the potential for predatory agents and middlemen to extract large recruitment fees from Asian workers, the new immigration arrangement with India does not have the same safeguards in place. As a result, given the exorbitant upfront costs of reaching Israel in the first place, Indian workers are generally obliged to remain in the five-year contracts arranged for them.[95]

It remains unclear how significant this shift to Indian labour will be in the longer term: while Israel's need for the return of its Palestinian workforce is clear, with evidence suggesting that tens of thousands of workers are in fact already being let in under "humanitarian" exemptions, right-wing groups continue to oppose any lifting of the ban.[96] Even when this does occur, it is likely to be accompanied by a host of new security protocols and restrictions. Meanwhile, there is no sign of a shortage of demand within India to work in Israel, despite the dangers. The Indian government has called on Israel to ensure the safety of its citizens following the killing of an Indian worker in March 2024 in northern Israel, an area where most local communities have been evacuated due to security concerns after a missile attack by the militant group Hezbollah.[97]

Australia takes a step backwards

Australia has long been criticised for its harsh treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, with many elements of its policies – in particular, its criminalisation and mandatory detention of undocumented arrivals as a means of discouraging others from attempting to enter its territory – now being replicated in different forms across the world. Nevertheless, the first half of 2023 appeared to signal a slight softening in its approach, with the emptying of its offshore detention facility in **Nauru** and the extension of permanent residency and family reunification to thousands of refugees.[98] However, this apparent progress was subsequently reversed from the second half of 2023 onwards, as the government appeared to return to its previous punitive model.

Detention in Nauru resumes

One of the most controversial aspects of Australia's immigration and asylum policy is its long-standing use of offshore processing in Manus Island and Nauru. The policy was initially implemented as a temporary measure, but soon expanded to encompass thousands of people over the subsequent years. The devastating effects of this extended incarceration on those held there has been well documented, with at least 14 people estimated to have died at these facilities from suicide, medical neglect and violence in the space of just over a decade.[99]

While the end of offshore processing in Manus Island was announced in late 2021, with more than 100 former detainees abandoned there by the Australian

90 Sharon, J. (2024) Despite ostensible ban, tens of thousands of Palestinians working in Israel — report. The Times of Israel.
91 ILO (2023) Impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on the labour market and livelihoods in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.
92 Amnesty International (2024) Israel/OPT: Horrifying cases of torture and degrading treatment of Palestinian detainees amid spike in arbitrary arrests.
93 International Crisis Group (2024) Meltdown looms for the West Bank's financial lifelines.
94 McKernan, B. & Ellis-Petersen, H. (2024) 'We do not have many options': unease over Israel's recruitment of Indian labourers. The Guardian.
95 Yang, J. (2024) Israel is desperate to replace Palestinian farmhands. Foreign Policy.
96 Sharon, J. (2024) Despite ostensible ban, tens of thousands of Palestinians working in Israel — report. The Times of Israel.
97 Times of Israel (2024) Indian worker killed in Hezbollah missile attack leaves behind daughter, pregnant wife.
98 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review, p.217.
99 Doherty, B. & Gillespie, E. (2023) Australia to move last refugee from offshore processing on Nauru—but its cruelty and cost are not over. The Guardian; Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review, p.217.

government,[100] asylum seekers and refugees continued to be held in Nauru until June 2023, when the last person was transferred off the island in what was hailed at the time as a milestone. However, in September 2023, reports emerged that people on board a boat intercepted by Australian coastguards had been sent to Nauru.[101] Human Rights Watch condemned this apparent reversal as "inhumane", with one spokesperson arguing that "detention, in any situation, should be used as an option of last resort, not as a deterrent".[102] The numbers continued to climb during 2024 as more intercepted groups were transferred there, with over 100 refugees and asylum seekers held by the beginning of June.[103] According to the testimony of detainees, most have little or no idea how long they will be held there, and many are experiencing deteriorating mental health and are unable to access adequate medical care.[104]

The Migration Amendment (Removal and Other Measures) Bill 2024: a new low for refugee protection in Australia

In November 2023, in an apparent step forward for refugee protections, Australia's High Court ruled that indefinite immigration detention was illegal, overturning a previous 2004 judgment that approved the practice so long as the government ensured refugees were removed as quickly as "reasonably practicable". At the time, the ruling was hailed as a landmark moment for those who had been trapped for years in immigration detention without a clear pathway towards the resolution of their case.[105]

However, this progress was soon reversed by the government's announcement of the *Migration Amendment (Removal and Other Measures) Bill 2024* – legislation that would effectively enable the prosecution and imprisonment for up to five years of former refugees stripped of their status and failed asylum seekers who resisted deportation on the grounds that they feared persecution in the country they are being sent to. This group includes many who would be criminalised for, in effect, administrative misdemeanours, such as failing to secure a passport and other documentation. The law would also enable the government to remove recognition of people who had previously been granted refugee status. If implemented, the legislation could undermine Australia's obligations under international law and expose refugees and asylum seekers to further danger.[106] This effectively amounts to a continuation of indefinite detention for those who resist forcible deportation, regardless of the validity of their concerns of persecution in their home country. The High Court's dismissal of a legal challenge to the legislation in May 2024 was condemned for enabling the government to "continue using indefinite detention to try to coerce people to return to danger".[107]

100 Human Rights Law Centre (2023) As Nauru refugees are resettled, Albanese government must take responsibility for those abandoned in PNG.
101 Karp, P. (2023) Asylum seekers sent to Nauru by Australian government only months after last detainees were removed.
102 Basford Canales, S. (2024) Australia's 'inhumane' offshore detention regime denounced by global human rights organisation. The Guardian.
103 Doherty, B. & Karp, P. (2024) Number of asylum seekers on Nauru jumps as Australia transfers 37 people who arrived by boat. The Guardian.
104 Doherty, B. (2024) 'What is our future?': the Nauru detention centre was empty. Now 100 asylum seekers are held there. The Guardian.
105 Hennessy, A. (2023) Landmark Australian ruling rejects lidefinite immigration detention. Human Rights Watch.
106 Human Rights Watch (2024) Australia: Withdraw punitive migration bill.
107 Human Rights Law Centre (2024) Indefinite detention continues for people who cannot be forcibly deported.

Afghans in India

"Here, we don't really have a future."

I arrived in New Delhi just one day before the Taliban takeover in 2021. I flew legally from Afghanistan, as an asylum seeker. I registered with UNHCR but have not yet received my refugee status. I am here for a short stay and am looking for an opportunity to move to a third country, either through the UNHCR or other pathways. Returning to Afghanistan is not an option, as the situation there is deteriorating.

I don't want to stay here because I cannot obtain Indian citizenship, no matter how long I stay. If it was possible to settle in India, I would have considered it.

I left my country because of collective threats towards me, due to my job and ethnicity. Before the collapse of Afghanistan, the Taliban had threatened those working with foreigners and Western soldiers, especially Hazaras, for being Western supporters. They had warned of collective punishment. So, when the Taliban approached Kabul, I left for India.

Compared to other neighbouring countries, India is safe and has a friendly approach towards Afghan refugees. Other migrants, though, like Chin, Nepalis, and Rohingya, are treated badly. Indian people humiliate them. There were reports in the media about attacks on the camps of refugees from Myanmar. The government beat them and imprisoned them just because they were refugees and Muslims.

When it comes to public services such as transportation and healthcare, I have not felt discriminated against. The general attitude towards Afghans is not bad. But my access to utilities and services, such as water, shelter, school, health, legal protection and police protection, is limited compared to that of locals.

We can only send our children to refugee-run schools because the Indian law doesn't allow them to attend Indian schools.

When it comes to employment, there is a preference for hiring Indian nationals over refugees. Migrants and refugees simply don't have the right to work.

My experience living in India as a refugee has been good, and I find the public to be friendly and welcoming, unlike the government and police. Their laws are very discriminatory. Since arriving here, I have been stopped by the police several times, asking about my documents or my country of origin. When I showed them my UNHCR card they let me go.

I am staying in a neighbourhood in Delhi, where many Afghan refugees live. The location is good, but a bit expensive. I was working as a volunteer with an NGO, but I am currently unemployed and looking for a job.

Afghan women, and especially those who are here alone, are in a difficult situation. They are exposed to many abuses from both locals and other Afghans, or even officials. When people know a woman is alone, they can do whatever they want without being punished.

Local people don't have anti-immigrant attitudes. We are only scared of the police. Sometimes they come here and ask questions about our IDs. If I don't have those documents with me, I'm in trouble. They take me to the police station and hold me there until someone brings the documents. Most of the time, they do this for bribes, and many Afghans pay the bribe as they don't want to go to the police station.

I think Afghan refugees are not a significant political concern for the Indian government. However, recently, the government granted citizenship to many non-Muslim refugees from minority communities across South Asia, just before the elections. That was a political move. They won't include our communities, because we are Muslims. There are more Muslims from other nations and all of us are ignored and not given any future in this country.

The issue of refugees was not a prominent subject in the past election. None of the parties spoke about it and it is not much of a concern for politicians. The Indian government doesn't want to mention refugees, because most of them are Muslims and the government is anti-Muslim.

I think the Indian government's approach towards refugees, especially those from Afghanistan, has changed significantly. Previously, Afghan refugees could obtain stay visas in India, but currently that is banned, and any refugees who apply for a visa reportedly receive an exit order.

And since the Taliban takeover, NGOs supporting refugees have been instructed to reduce their programs. The reason might be the political change in the region and the change in the Indian policy towards refugees.

Indian media don't regularly cover news about refugees unless something significant happens. And if they cover it, it's only bad news related to crimes that some refugees commit. Last year it was rumoured that a migrant had raped a teenage girl in a village. As soon as the media reported the incident, local people started attacking the houses of refugees.

Irregular mobility in Southeast Asia: human smuggling thrives as policy lags behind labour demands

A key characteristic of the thriving but uneven economic success of Southeast Asia is the dependence of almost all Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economies on labour migration between countries,[1] which fall largely into two groups: those with low per capita incomes and excess low-skill labour supply and those with high per capita incomes, low labour supply and a high-skill labour force.

For the past 50 years, countries such as Thailand, the Republic of Korea and Singapore have been experiencing an economic transformation which has brought them from low-income to upper-middle-income status and looks set to continue.[2] This has led to an enduring demand for low-skilled migrant workers from countries such as Nepal, Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines and Vietnam. As a result, in the past 30 years, the number of people moving from one country within the region to another increased by 93 percent – from 35.5 million to 68.5 million[3] – and was further facilitated by the creation, in 1992, of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).[4]

Whilst many are able to move regularly within the ASEAN region, another, increasingly large, group travels through irregular routes – seeking work but also fleeing conflict and persecution, with some individuals being trafficked across borders. The mismatch between labour demand and provisions for regular movement to meet that demand in the region is a policy deficiency seen elsewhere around the world, where policymakers juggle the competing demands of their electorate's tolerance and their economy's need for migrant labour.

Although the central driver of irregular mobility in the region is labour demand in destination countries, the effects of climate change are adding further layers of vulnerability to people's lives, ultimately becoming another migration driver. In an August 2024 review of the available empirical evidence from 63 studies carried out in the region, climate change was identified as a crucial mobility driver for an increasing number of people across Southeast Asia.[5]

Historically, Southeast Asia has been highly susceptible to adverse weather events, which have reached extreme levels in recent years as a result of climate change. In particular, Myanmar, the Philippines and Thailand were among the top 10 countries affected by extreme weather events according to the most recently published Global Climate Risk Index, with Myanmar ranking second (after Puerto Rico).[6]

A better life across the border: regular labour migration in Southeast Asia

Exhibiting a more dynamic economy and attractive life prospects than many of their neighbours, countries like Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia represent compelling opportunities for labour migrants all over Southeast Asia. In January 2023, Malaysia implemented a Second Labour Recalibration Programme which, as of mid-October of the same year, allowed about 518,000 undocumented migrants in the agriculture, construction, farming, manufacturing and services industries to obtain regular work permits.[7]

Thailand, as of April 2023, had an estimated 2.5 million regular migrants[8] residing in the country from Cambodia, Myanmar and **Lao PDR**, with the vast majority – 1.9 million, or 75 percent – hailing from Myanmar. For the most part, these were labour migrants who arrived in the country seeking employment opportunities.

Whilst migrant labour positively contributes to the host countries' economies, the role of remittances is also critical, with many households in the sub-region

1 Southeast Asia comprises 11 countries, 10 of which are member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Timor-Leste.
2 IOM (2022) Asia-Pacific Migration Data Report 2021.
3 IOM (2023) Labour Migration in Asia: What Does the Future Hold?
4 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (n.d.) Economic Community.
5 Thongchaithanawut, M., Borderon, M. & Sakdapolrak, P. (2024) Regional evidence of environmental mobility in Southeast Asia: A systematic review of the empirical evidence.
6 Eckstein, D., Künzel, V. & Schäfer, L (2021) Global Climate Risk Index 2021.
7 ILO (2023) TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note Malaysia.
8 UNDP (2023) Seeking opportunities elsewhere: Exploring the lives and challenges of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand.

dependent on the income provided by remittances from labour migrants. This is particularly true in the Philippines, where remittance levels were nearly nine percent of the country's GDP in 2023, but also derive from many Filipinos working outside the region.[9] Across the region, in 2023, South Asian and Southeast Asian nations received $176 billion (US) in remittances, about 20 percent of the global remittance total.[10] The contribution that these income streams make to poverty reduction in the poorest countries of the region is a significant part of the continued appeal, if not the necessity, of labour migration.

Corruption, violence and impunity: smuggling networks

Whilst the appetite of destination countries for low-wage labour is high – as well as their urgent need to fill low-skilled positions in a range of sectors – regular migration pathways and settlement schemes for labour migrants remain insufficient in Southeast Asia. Despite this, thousands of people each year embark on lengthy, treacherous and sometimes fatal journeys to reach their target destination.

Many people on the move – such as nationals from Myanmar (and especially its Rohingya population) – often travel with no official documents, which immediately exposes them to additional risks and vulnerabilities. These individuals are increasingly looking to smugglers to find safety and achieve what they hope to be a better life beyond their own home borders – or, in the case of Rohingya, overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh.

As a March 2024 report by UNODC based on data collected by MMC highlighted, 83 percent of 4,785 migrants and refugees surveyed in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand turned to smugglers to travel across the region.[11] Whilst the majority of the migrants surveyed cited labour-related reasons as their primary mobility driver, one in four of those smuggled – in particular, Bangladeshis – mentioned climate-related issues.[12]

Whilst smugglers themselves are not always the perpetrators of violations against those on the move, smuggling networks identified in Southeast Asia, which incorporate collusion by state officials, appear to harness a mixture of corruption, violence and coercion to carry out their operations. Bribes and obstructions to criminal investigations and prosecutions, for instance, are common practice and have been cited by one in four smuggled people surveyed by MMC for UNODCs Observatory on Migrant Smuggling, who stated they had to offer their smugglers money, gifts or other favours – in addition to the "official" smuggling fee – in order to use their services. Corruption is endemic among border police and military personnel in the region too, which adds an extra dimension of vulnerability for those relying on human smugglers. Of the smuggled migrants interviewed for the UNODC study, 41 percent stated that they had to give bribes to visa and passport officials, 38 percent to military personnel, 28 percent to immigration officials, 26 percent to non-border police and 24 percent to border police.[13]

Smuggler-related abuses and physical violence were also witnessed or experienced first-hand by a large number of those surveyed – as many as three out of four smuggled people. Types of abuse varied and also seemed to be gender-specific, with a higher percentage of women than men (11% versus 6%) experiencing sexual assault and a larger number of men than women (34% versus 24%) reporting physical violence. An alarming 100 percent of smuggled Somalis reported abuses of various types, followed by Cambodians (72%) and people from Myanmar (68%, many of whom belong to the widely persecuted Rohingya minority). Human trafficking related to what starts as smuggling is also a major problem in Southeast Asia but beyond the scope of this *Thematic snapshot*.

Ending irregularity and precarity?

Labour mobility looks set to continue and possibly increase in the region, alongside climate-induced migration. There is, however, a distance to go before a safe and orderly migration regime can be said to exist in Southeast Asia. Gaps in policy between countries, concerns over national sovereignty, low capacity for migration management in particular countries, inadequately harmonised data collection mechanisms and the consequent slow uptake of regional frameworks, such as those proposed by the ASEAN[14] all represent major hurdles that the region is yet to overcome. Additionally, the high level of non-ratification

9 World Bank Group (n.d.) Personal remittances, received (% of GDP).
10 IOM (2024) Promoting faster, cheaper and safer remittance processes for migration workers and their families: a snapshot of Colombo Process member states' achievements.
11 UNODC Observatory on the Smuggling of Migrants (2024) Migrant smuggling in Southeast Asia.
12 Ibid
13 Ibid
14 Mat Basir, S. (2020) Irregular Migrations in Southeast Asia: Challenges for Protection and Migration.

of the refugee convention in the region continues to be a gap that only adds to asylum seekers' precarity and vulnerability.

Despite the economic powerhouse that Southeast Asia promises to continue to be, partly driven by this extensive labour mobility, the number forced into irregular movement continues to rise. Significant protection and safeguarding deficits for migrants in the region persist, and the rising levels of climate-induced migration will likely only compound the already complex situations, probably strengthening the position and powers of smuggling networks.

Photo credit: Peter Agoston / Shutterstock

Hungary: Viktor Orbán (Fidesz), prime minister of Hungary since 2010. His blend of Euroscepticism, populism and national conservatism, as well as his vocal opposition to migrants and asylum seekers, has made him a 'talisman' of the European far-right. On 30 June 2024, Orbán announced the founding of the Patriots for Europe (PfE or Patriots), a right- to far-right-wing sovereigntist political group that replaced the Identity and Democracy (ID) party at the EU parliament and is now the third-largest group in the EU Parliament.

Interview

Islam in Germany: an unresolved 'elephant in the room'?

While efforts are being made – both in Germany and in other parts of the West – to welcome Muslim migrants and refugees, right-wight and populist discourses are on the rise, **Dr. Asmaa Soliman** argues this is a paradoxical 'second 9/11' for Islam – an unresolved elephant in the room.

Dr. Asmaa Soliman is the head of the Young Islam Conference and the competence network Living Together in Migration Society at the Schwarzkopf Foundation Young Europe in Berlin. Asmaa studied in Maastricht and London, where she completed her PhD. This led to her book, European Muslims Transforming the Public Sphere, *where she examines young Muslims' engagement in the public. She has researched, taught and directed projects on diversity, intercultural understanding and Islam in Europe.*

In your 2018 book, *European Muslims Transforming the Public Sphere*, you suggest the political media and academic sphere in the West is predominantly shaped by the post-9/11 narrative. Do you still feel this is the case?

Well, I feel that we're in a second 9/11, especially due to the recent escalations of the conflicts in the Middle East. I can speak more about how things have changed in Germany, but I'm sure that at an international level, things have also changed. When it comes to Muslims, the perceptions of Muslims and the debates around Muslims and Islam, I feel it's a second 9/11. Now, I would say it feels even worse. You would think after all these years with different establishments of laws, rights, different forms of recognitions, etcetera, we would be way further with things. But we aren't, and that's why I feel it's even worse than the first 9/11. The findings of the CORRECTIV report are a strong example.

Do you mean the exposing of details from an internal party meeting of the AfD [Alternative for Germany]?

At the beginning of this year, there was a meeting. It was supposed to be a secret meeting, mainly with the members of the AfD, that's the 'alternative party of Germany' and essentially the right-wing party. But there were not just members of the AfD: people from other groups met in Brandenburg to discuss how they could get rid of people with migration backgrounds. They have actually also used the term 'remigration'. So, they were planning to find a place in the world where everyone who has a migration background in Germany should be returned to. Apparently, they also said during

the meeting they intended to make sure that until that happens, they will make the lives of those with a migration background difficult. CORRECTIV were the journalists who brought it to light.[1]

In terms of the number of Muslims in Europe, is the largest contingent from the first, second or third generation of Muslims?

In terms of numbers, I would say the highest are now with the second generation and then the third.

Why do so many people conflate anti-Muslim sentiment or Islamophobia with racism? Isn't that a conceptual error?

Yes, it is a conceptual error because racism is a more extreme and problematic form of hatred.Racism is based on perceptions about human beings being divided based on different characteristics and it justifies specific behaviour based on that. With Islamophobia, it's about fear. I think fear is still something natural, human, something that people can have and that we also need to work with. But racism is a very problematic attitude that we have to very clearly criticise. However, fear of something is more understandable but should also be tackled. We can look at it and see how to reduce it.

> **"Fear is something natural, human, something that people can have and that we also need to work with. But racism is a very problematic attitude that we have to very clearly criticise."**

What do you feel about the arguments for or against migrant or refugee assimilation as opposed to a more multicultural, pluralistic approach to integration?

Assimilation means or expects people to let go of their origin and to completely adapt to the new culture, the new context, without having parts of their origin or identity in it. So it's against everything that has to do with multicultural identity, with hybrid identity. I think it is very problematic because origin culture, heritage and history are all very, very important parts of human beings, of individuals, and to ask them to let go of them is to ask them to let go of something that is so essential to them and to kind of hide a part of their identity that is as true as the new culture they are living in. I think it's also very arrogant in a way because it just assumes that the new culture is the one to have, and the other cultures need to be hidden or forbidden, and that's just against the nature of human beings. For multiculturalism to work well alongside the politics of recognition we also need a common basis of values that needs to be spread as a culture, so everyone has a binding set of values.

> **"I think [assimilation] is also very arrogant in a way because it just assumes that the new culture is the one to have, and the other cultures need to be hidden or forbidden, and that's just against the nature of human beings."**

Aren't societies in Europe, and specifically Germany, making every effort to be inclusive, diverse and non-discriminatory with their laws and structures? So what are the lived experiences of young Muslims in Europe today that seem to suggest otherwise?

I would say we live in a paradox. On the one hand, we are advanced, developed and progressive. But on the other hand, we are very backwards. So that's the lived experience of Muslims in Germany, and I think maybe also in other countries. For example, on the one hand, we are celebrating the milestone appointment of Commissioner Reem Alabali-Radovan[2], herself a migrant, and on the other hand, we have a rise of right-wing extremism and right-wing attacks. Muslims, especially, experience more attacks now than in earlier years. And then we also have, as I said, the second 9/11, and debates where important questions are raised. Is Islam part of Germany? Is it part of Europe? So the German Muslim identity or European Muslim identity is questioned again and again. That is the paradox that we are living in and it is not as progressive as we think, even at the federal and legislative levels.

Can you give an example of this at the federal and legislative level?

Yes. On the federal level, we see that there are more politicians with migration backgrounds, so there is increasingly diverse representation. Racism is very high on the agenda. But a couple of years ago there was a strong call for a law that promotes democracy called *Demokratiefördergesetz*. It was specifically meant to support civic actors in the field of democracy including migrant civil actors and their work. This law has been issued, or the draft of the law has been brought a long time ago, but it's again and again being stopped by several parties and it's still not passed. And it's not only the right-wing parties stopping it. So essentially,

1 CORRECTIV 15th Jan 2024. Secret plan against Germany.
2 Alabali-Radovan also currently serves as Minister of State at the Chancellery and Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration in Chancellor Olaf Scholz's cabinet since 2021. She is the first person of Iraqi descent in the Bundestag.

we have a lot of drafts; we have the commissioner; we also have a lot of working groups that are specifically working on these issues, including a working group focusing on anti-Muslim racism. They published their report a couple of months ago but it was removed because of some political issues. We are not at the point where we can say we made it and we have everything we need.

When the other parties are seeing the rising popularity of the AfD, do you think they are also nervous about appearing to voters as having an agenda that leans too much the other way in relation to Muslims and diversity generally?

For sure! I think Islam and Muslims are very unsexy and we have the coming elections, as well as the three upcoming Bundesländer [federal state]s elections in the eastern part of Germany. So, of course, there are worries because in some way the issue of Islam in Germany is still the unresolved elephant in the room. Around elections, you see it even more. There is also a lot of criminalising and problematising in relation to Muslims here.

What happens when the people choose populism in a democratic system? Do we say that democracy is faulty or that it has given the correct verdict?

Whereas I still believe and hope that the majority of Europeans also stand for a Europe that is open and radically diverse, it is also very easy and common to look with suspicion at those who don't belong or who are not as European as oneself. I think it's a very typical human behaviour that is not only in Europe, but everywhere in the world, that whenever the situation is tight and things are more expensive, etcetera, populist ideas become very, very attractive. I don't think that it's necessarily reflective of the overall wishes and attitudes of people. I think it's really more about the current situation. And I would say the current situation everywhere in Europe is crazy. I mean, when we look at the aftermath of the Ukrainian war, the Coronavirus epidemic, and the rise of the cost of living – it's everywhere.

You just mentioned "radical diversity" and have written about it. What do you mean?

Radical diversity is really about a diversity that is so radical that, from the beginning, it acknowledges that people and groups can be extremely, radically different from one's own, from what is known or from the majority. But that it's still within this radical diversity, they are acknowledged, they're accepted, they are appreciated. It is radical in terms of uniting completely different life perspectives and experiences in one system.

Knowing all we are discussing and the paradoxes in Western societies around multiculturalism, why do so many Muslim refugees come to non-Muslim countries? Wouldn't they prefer Muslim-majority countries?

Because in most Muslim-majority countries the situation is worse, in terms of economy, politics and also in terms of freedom and openness. It's not because Muslims love Europe so much, but I think that it's the better option in terms of economic growth, security and stability and also in terms of the political situation and values. But I think, in terms of culture, most of them would prefer to live in a country where they are not a minority, where they hear the call to prayer, where they can speak the language or a similar language, where the weather is good. I think there are a lot of things that would make them feel much closer in terms of what they know from their home country, because Arabic or Muslim majority countries are in a way similar. There is a similarity that can be felt in terms of the daily experience.

Another term you use is the post-migrant society. What do you understand by the idea of a post-migrant society?

We work a lot with this term, *post-migrant society*. It means several things. The most important idea is not that migration is over, because migration happens all the time, but the 'post' is in terms of what we focus on, and what we focus on is not the time when people migrate, but it's the time when people with a migration history are in the country. This is a phase where everyone is trying to negotiate – and it's happening now. In German we call it *Aushandlungsprozesse* – the negotiation processes. So that's the post-migrant negotiation processes of belonging, of participating, of having equal chances.

> **"Why don't we see more statements from politicians or people distancing themselves from what is happening in Gaza to the Palestinians when it comes to civilians being killed?"**

Should there be space in Europe for Muslims to have separate rules and laws in a post-migration society?

If they don't go against these shared values, why not? I would say we should take it on a case-by-case basis. Let's look at Sharia Law. I'm not a theological expert, but when it comes to marriage, for example, it's very important for Muslims to also have Islamic marriage in addition to the state one in Western countries. Something similar could apply to the rights of women when it comes to divorce. Sharia Law includes additional rights for women that are not covered in

European law. So that would be a nice addition to what is there already. We should look into what Sharia Law is, because it is not about slaughtering people, which is the first image some people have. We have several parts within Sharia Law that can, for example, secure specific rights for women or minorities. And if they don't go against these core or shared values, why not?

> **"Why, when we talk about Muslims, is there always this expectation to condemn something they are not related to just because someone says it's Islam?"**

Do you think there is a problem with Muslims not being very fast or vocal in condemning atrocities done in the name of Islam? For example, condemnations of Hamas' 7 October atrocities from Muslim groups, let alone Palestinians, is quite low-key and sometimes absent.

Yes, I think that's a big and complex issue. I mean, the first question would be what does a Muslim, European Muslim or European Muslim with a Palestinian background have to do with Hamas in a completely different region with an agenda that is completely far away from his or her lived experience? Equally, we could ask, why don't we see more statements from politicians or people distancing themselves from what is happening in Gaza to the Palestinians when it comes to civilians being killed? I think there is a huge imbalance. This expectation from Muslims to condemn each and every Islamist attack is in itself problematic. Because we don't expect that the other way around, right? You, for example, are not responsible for any non-Muslim act of violence, and neither are you required to condemn it. These kinds of expectations have a power relation dynamic and also a colonial aspect. Why, when we talk about Muslims, is there always this expectation to condemn something they are not related to just because someone says it's Islam? I mean, we also have the right wing in Germany who say their way is the right way for Germans, but we don't ask every German to distance themselves from any right-wing attack just because it's made in the name of a German nation, right? And by the way, we are equally disturbed by Islamist attacks, and we equally see it as something extreme. And the highest number of victims of Islamist attacks have a Muslim background.

When you look at how refugees and migrants are treated in Europe, do you see a big discrimination between certain peoples who get favoured over others?

Yes, totally. I mean, there is a very obvious difference. And it's related, again, to what I was saying, this imbalance. And this perception of always seeing the Muslim as the 'other', the not white. So yes, in Germany we saw it very clearly, for example, and also with the EU laws that within just weeks were put into place to ease things for the Ukrainians, to make processes much faster for them, which is good but which was not the case for Syrian refugees, for example, in 2015. Within Ukrainian refugees, those who had a migration background or who were black had problems crossing the border or arriving in specific countries because of their skin colour or because of their religion. So there's a clear differentiation.

> **"Within Ukrainian refugees, those who had a migration background or who were black had problems crossing the border or arriving in specific countries because of their skin colour or because of their religion. So there's a clear differentiation [between certain peoples who get favoured over others]."**

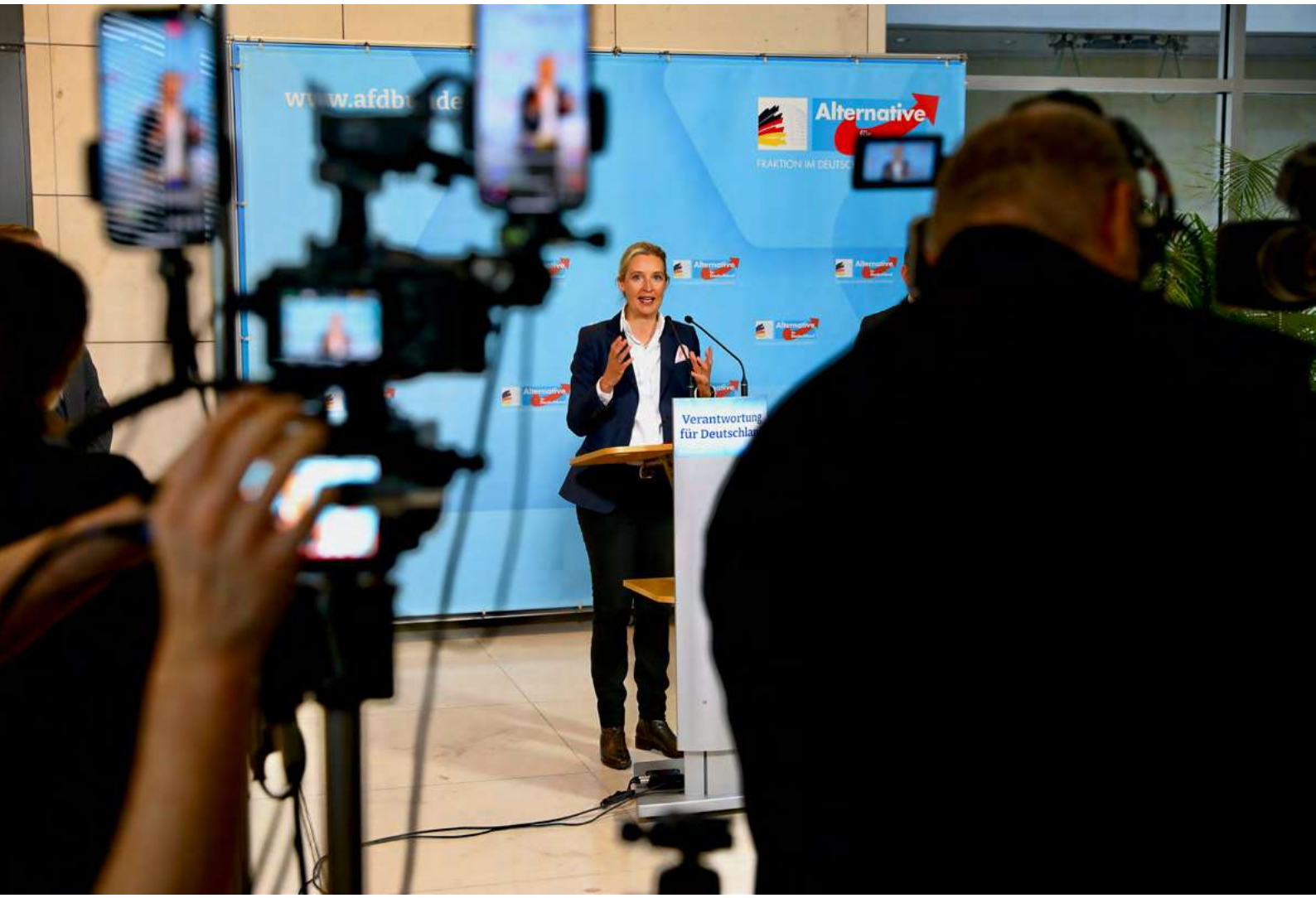
This year is a big one for elections around the world. Do you see a growing rise in populism, and if yes, what are the implications for the future of migration and refugee asylum?

The most obvious impact will be that migration politics and policies will be stricter and less open. I'm still hopeful because I think, with the rise of right-wing extremism and parties, we also have a rise of civic initiatives and people standing up against them. So I think civil society is very active at present. I don't want to be pessimistic, but if things were to go more in the direction of nationalist politics... I don't know, really. I don't want to think about that scenario, because that would mean horrible things that I don't want to put out here. Let's be hopeful and see it as a wake-up moment for the majority that is often silent or those who don't always see the necessity to do something about it.

> **"I'm hopeful because I think, with the rise of right-wing extremism and parties we also have a rise of civic initiatives and people standing up against them."**

Photo credit: Juergen Nowak / Shutterstock

Germany: Alice Weidel, chairwoman of the AfD parliamentary group, during a press conference in January 2024. In state elections in September, the anti-migrant and anti-Muslim AfD won Thuringia state and came second in Brandenburg and Saxony states, illustrating a strong movement against Germany's earlier 'welcome culture' to migrants and refugees. It remains to be seen if AfD's political opponents can halt their rise in the next federal elections in Germany, held in September 2025. [See *Keeping track in Europe*, page 87; *Normalising the extreme*, page 264 and the *Thematic snapshot*, page 179]



Section 2

Alternative perspectives prize essays

This year's Mixed Migration Review again includes five short essays by academics, writers and analysts under the age of 30 from the Global South. These were deemed to be the most original and well-drafted essays submitted in response to a competition to find alternative perspectives on migration issues. As well as having their essays published in the MMR 2024, the five winners received prize money to assist them in their studies and potential careers as migration analysts and commentators. This year, we showcase the winning essays exploring situations of migrant integration in Asia; feeling an outsider and navigating identity as a Kenyan and Indian in Europe; Mexico's changing role as a destination state and its treatment of certain groups of migrants in-country.

How do we study the social integration of temporary migrants?

Yoga Prasetyo[1]

Can a state temporarily integrate migrants into the folds of its society? If so, for what reason? The terms 'integration' and 'temporary' might sound contradictory, since integration connotes permanence. Indeed, many researchers and practitioners in the West have tended to treat integration as an evolving process toward permanent settlement and membership in society, therefore excluding those who are only meant to maintain a temporary foothold in host states. In countries that are structurally dependent upon the life and labour of temporary migrants like Singapore, however, temporariness can extend across many decades, resulting in what I would call 'officially temporary migration' but *de facto* permanent migration. It is in reconceptualising temporariness as potentially 'long-term' and factually permanent that we may begin to understand why Singapore's government started to employ increasingly integrationist discourses and measures despite providing no recourse to permanent settlement or citizenship to its temporary migrant workers.

Contradictory measures and attitudes to integration

Singapore's integrationist approaches to managing its low-paid migrant workers became especially apparent after what is now widely known as the Little India Riot of 2013, in which a fatal bus accident that killed a 33-year-old Indian migrant construction worker spurred a conflict that quickly escalated into Singapore's first civil unrest since the 1969 race riots.[2] Around 400 temporary migrant construction workers confronted police officers in the Little India area – smashing, overturning and setting police cars aflame in what activists believed to be a spontaneous expression of solidarity and pent-up frustration deriving from their collective ill-treatment under Singapore's exploitative temporary migration regime. The Singaporean government responded to the riot by introducing contradictory measures. On the one hand, it enacted strategies of spatial segregation by introducing the *Foreign Employee Dormitories Act* in 2015, which requires that all migrant construction workers be accommodated in 'self-contained' housing facilities on the outskirts of the island – equipped with mini-marts, canteens, TV rooms, and other amenities to "reduce their need to travel far [to the city] for basic services".[3] On the other hand, the government also made an explicit acknowledgement of migrant workers' essential roles in Singapore and the need to "enable them to *integrate* into our [Singaporean] community better"[4], a commitment made manifest by the introduction of the Foreign Worker Ambassadors Program in 2014.

The passing of the *Foreign Employee Dormitories Act* was momentous in a sense that it marked a new phase of disciplinary control that involved pushing all temporary migrant construction workers away from public spaces in the city centre into 'self-contained', purpose-built dormitories at the edge of the island state. Constructed away from the city, these dormitories operate as a tool of containment that sets migrant construction workers apart from the rest of the city's inhabitants – in which case geographical distances are understood to be a 'natural buffer' that lessens the psychological inconveniences of physical proximity and interactions between citizens and migrant workers.[5] As such, these dormitories not only circumscribe migrants' mobility and mark their otherness, but they also reinforce a sense of non-belonging in Singapore. At the same time, however, Singapore has paradoxically initiated attempts to foster social inclusion. In 2014, for instance, the state remarked that temporary migrant construction workers "have become an integral part of [Singapore's] community" and, thereby, there is a need to inculcate "Singapore's laws, culture, and acceptable social behavior[s] to enable them to *integrate* into [Singapore's] community better".[6] The Ministry of Manpower began recruiting hundreds

1 Yoga Prasetyo is an MA candidate in migration studies at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom. His research areas and interests lie at the intersection of labour migration, Southeast Asia, postcolonialism, temporalities and irregularity.
2 Yeo, A., Dzeviatau A., Chua, C., Tan, C. The night chaos broke out: Little India riot, 10 years on. The Straits Times.
3 Singapore Ministry of Manpower (2014) Ministerial Statement on Findings of Committee of Inquiry (COI) on Little India Riot.
4 Singapore Police Force (2014) Singapore Police Force Annual (2014), n.d.
5 Yeoh, B.S. and Lam, T. (2022) Managing the Non-Integration of Transient Migrant Workers: Urban Strategies of Enclavisation and Enclosure in Singapore, Urban Studies, 59(16), pp. 3292–3311.
6 Singapore Police Force (2014) Op. Cit.

of foreign worker ambassadors (FWAs), whose number increased to 5,000 in 2020.[7]

FWAs' main role is to promote trust and facilitate exchanges and mutual understanding between migrant construction workers and the Singaporean public to "ensure a harmonious relationship within the [broader] community".[8] Considered already integrated, FWAs help new migrants understand their new roles in the country, educate them on crime prevention in their vernacular languages[9] and report unruly or suspicious behaviours in and outside dormitories to the police.[10] An informal structure of governance is created within each dormitory by appointing FWAs as informal local leaders whose profiles are clearly marked and featured on Ambassador's Walls, allowing other workers to identify where to seek help, but who, most importantly, watch over their day-to-day activities both within and outside their 'enclaved' spaces of dormitories. In this sense, the state produces hierarchies within dormitories by dispensing a certain degree of power to FWAs in emulation of what Furnivall[11] calls the *kapiten* system – a mode of colonial governance that involves establishing local leaders to discipline their own racial/ethnic populations by granting them a higher social status in recognition of their roles.

The 'securitisation' of integration

It is evident that, to a large extent, the integration of migrant construction workers is framed as a matter of public security and a process of producing docility and law-abiding behaviours that characterise the society in what Shanmugam[12] refers to as "a country of law and order" that is Singapore. It is not surprising, therefore, that the police department takes centre stage in the integration agenda, providing training sessions on what is seen to constitute Singaporean values, laws and acceptable behaviours. Through collaborative projects with FWA, such as the Project Alliance,[13] neighbourhood police divisions throughout the city-state make concerted efforts to "develop a greater sense of good will and trust [among migrant workers] toward the police and help them to understand that we [they] are here to help".[14] To tamp down migrants' pent-up resentments and mistrust following the Little India Riot in which authority was viewed as oppressive, the police use these partnerships to reconstruct migrants' perceptions of authority by creating a sense of tolerance and inclusivity.

This idea of inclusivity is constructed not only by reconfiguring perceptions of state and police authority, but also by curating annual activities that are fashioned with symbolic demonstrations of togetherness. Some examples include the 2016 event at Tuas View Dormitory, in which 300 Singaporeans and 200 migrant construction workers 'bonded' over games.[15] In 2022, the government organised two other annual events themed Joining Hands, Building Bonds and Befriend our Migrant Friends in Little India and Geylang to commemorate International Migrants Day. Attended by more than 50,000 Singaporeans and migrant construction workers, these events facilitated social mixing through games, local foods, cultural trails along Singapore's treasured heritage sites, as well as activities in which local communities were invited by the government to submit videos expressing their gratitude for migrant workers' contributions.[16] The following year, these events were attended by a far larger audience, comprising over 70,000 locals and migrant workers.[17]

These celebrations of diversity and social bonding right in the tightly surveilled spaces of Little India and Geylang gradually replace the narrative of disintegration, manifested in the 2013 Little India Riot, with one of tolerance and diversity. More importantly, they create a space that offers a taste of Singaporean life and a fleeting sense of social acceptance to migrant construction workers. However ostensible it may be, this symbolic performance of social inclusion is necessary to create an impression of a society that is welcoming, but whose acceptance of migrant workers is premised on the contributions they make and their adherence to local social norms and laws. Migrant construction workers must, therefore, perform this Singaporean-ness while they are in public to be considered 'integrated'. In other words, integration is understood not so much as a process of socio-cultural inclusion; rather, it is a process in which migrants are expected to assemble knowledge of values, laws and acceptable behaviours to enable them to perform Singaporean-ness in public domains throughout their temporary stay in the city-state, all aiming to limit social frictions and maintain public order.

7 Singapore Ministry of Manpower (2020) Written answer by Mrs Josephine Teo, minister for manpower, to PQ on addressing mental health challenges faced by foreign workers affected by isolation at dormitories.
8 Singapore Police Force (2014) Singapore Police Force Annual (2014), n.d.
9 Singapore Police Force (2023) Migrant Workers Community Outreach Programme.
10 The Straits Times (2014) Community Safety and Security Programme launched at Kranji Lodge One Dormitory.
11 Furnivall, J.S. (2010) Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
12 Shanmugam, K. (2012) The Rule of Law in Singapore, SSRN Electronic Journal [Preprint].
13 The Straits Times (2015) Change of Command Ceremony at Jurong Division.
14 Dass, D. (2023) 'They are Migrant Workers and Anti-Crime Ambassadors!' Singapore Police Force.
15 Choo, F. (2016) Locals and Foreign Workers Bond over Games. The Straits Times.
16 Singapore Ministry of Manpower (2022) International Migrants Day Celebrations 2022.
17 Singapore Ministry of Manpower (2023) Over 70,000 in Migrant Community Participated in International Migrants Day Celebrations Organised by MOM and Partners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while integration is defined in relation to the quest for full membership in Western liberal democracies, the case of Singapore shows quite the opposite. In fact, it is precisely *because* of the nonexistent pathways to permanence that integration measures are designed – that is, to reduce the potential risks of public disorder, as transpired in the Little India Riot of 2013, attributable to the country's exploitative temporary migration policies. The case of Singapore reveals an interesting and important pattern that our Western-centric integration frameworks cannot adequately capture because of their heavy focus on 'permanence'. We need to widen our analytical scope to understand how the concept of integration, which was developed in Western contexts but has now travelled across the globe, is understood, appropriated and pursued by non-Western states and non-state actors within their specific socio-political and historical contexts. To do this, we need to go beyond the rigid dichotomy of temporary-permanent to understand the long-term and uncertain nature of temporariness around which the life and labour of Singapore's migrant construction workers are organised.

Voices from the periphery: perspectives from Kenya on migration to Germany

Stacy Achiemg Ogembo[1]

Growing up in Nairobi, Kenya, I was captivated by the stories of opportunities and prosperity in Europe. Studying abroad was my doorway to a brighter future and would also guarantee me a job upon completion of my academic career. Therefore, I worked hard to ensure I finished my bachelor's degree with good grades. Eventually, I graduated in international relations and diplomacy from the Technical University of Kenya with a first-class honours, and immediately began to look for opportunities for a German master's degree. Germany appealed to me because of its tuition-free policy and reputable universities, so when I received my admission letter to join the University of Cologne to study political science, I was overjoyed.

My first weeks in Germany were a flurry of new experiences. I had to adapt to the cold of winter, struggle to learn the German language, navigate the transport and health systems, and interact with new people – in a nutshell, I had to immerse myself in a totally new culture. However, as the novelty faded, I was confronted with the many hurdles that migrants from the Global South often face.

Personal experiences

Despite my bachelor's degree and professional experience, finding a working student position was difficult because I was not fluent in the language and my graduation certificate was termed 'foreign' – hence unrecognised by the German academic authorities. I would later come to realise that this problem was widespread and systemic among migrants. Consequently, many migrants of African descent were doing low-skilled jobs for which they were overqualified.

Finding affordable accommodation was difficult because landlords are sceptical about renting their properties to foreigners. My trips to doctors were also complicated by the language barrier, which also caused issues such as apparent wrong diagnoses of some conditions and the belief that I was resistant to certain pains I was complaining about. The random police stops were a nuisance to deal with, too. The social interactions I had also revealed the stereotypes and prejudices that many held about African migrants – stupid, scammers, criminals and so on. I cannot forget the many times I sat alone when using the public transport system and would always wonder if the seat next to me had a problem. I recall an incident on the train when an elderly German woman confronted me, questioning my presence in her country and accusing migrants of taking jobs away. Eventually, she concluded her monologue with the rhetoric "Ausländer müssen raus!"[2] Such encounters, though infrequent (discrimination in Germany is mostly covert), were deeply unsettling and reinforced the feeling of being unwelcome. Furthermore, like most migrants, I did not report the incident which, in turn, reinforces the invisibility of racism.

Such recurring experiences have the potential to lead to mental health challenges and trauma, erosion of trust in institutions, increased social tensions between the host community and the migrants and loss of professional talents that could benefit the host country in diverse ways.

African community events, WhatsApp groups, church gatherings and NGOs operating in Germany soon became my sanctuary. Here we shared our experiences and knowledge on how to navigate the German systems and supported each other through the highs and lows. However, this also meant that our integration into the broader German society remained limited. We existed in parallel worlds, connected yet separate from the local community.

1 Stacy Ogembo is a political science master's student at the University of Cologne, Germany, with a keen interest in topics related to migration, gender equality, sustainable development and trade. She holds a bachelor's degree in international relations and diplomacy from the Technical University of Kenya.

2 "Foreigners must get out!"

Migration attitudes in Germany: a mixed reception

Trends in Germany's attitudes towards migrants paint a mixed picture of a conflicted society revealing both optimism and scepticism. During the European 2015 refugee crisis, Germany championed the welcoming of refugees through its open-door policy. Seven years later, it did the same when Ukrainian refugees started fleeing their country following Russia's invasion. These political moves put Germany in the international arena as a sanctuary for many and a strong supporter of refugee protection in the European Union.

Nevertheless, German public opinion on migrants is divided. While a part of the population appreciates migrants' contribution to solving German economic and demographic problems, another is much more sceptical. Migrants are associated with a rise in crime and terror, job competition with locals, increased burdens on social systems and fears about cultural erosion.

Migration policies: progressive but strained

Whilst far-right political parties have capitalised on these hardening attitudes to gain political offices and champion anti-immigration policies, the truth is that Germany is gradually liberalising its migration policies due to the need for skilled workers. Indeed, migration is increasingly viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat, with the overriding aim of attracting skilled workers into the labour market. Recently, the government even passed the *Skilled Immigration Act*[3] to facilitate immigration, particularly for skilled workers from outside the EU. Additionally, it has introduced the *Chancenkarte*[4] to ease foreigners' access to the labour market. Most importantly, Germany has revised its citizenship laws and introduced dual citizenship to make it easier for skilled immigrants to become German citizens. Notably, skilled migrants are becoming more welcomed into society than refugees.

Nevertheless, implementation of these progressive policies has been slow due to the bureaucratic nature of German systems. The burden of social integration into society still falls on migrants, who continue to face discrimination and marginalisation in employment, education and housing despite pertinent laws. Furthermore, the adoption of the new restrictive *Pact on Migration and Asylum*[5] reflects a rise in the anti-immigration tide, portraying a very sceptical EU ready to decelerate the high numbers of immigrants.

Migration politics: a polarising issue

The salience of immigration is not only notable in German but also in EU politics due to a recent large influx of refugees and migrants. Though Germany's Green Party is migration-friendly, the far-right political party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has weaponised German voters' fears around immigration, including the beliefs that immigrants have eroded the national identity of an 'ethnic German', overburdened the welfare system and increased crime rates.

The party calls for 'remigration' policies and currently holds 82 seats in the German parliament, thanks to its increasingly sizeable voter base, and has been successful in EU elections, too. The anti-immigration rhetoric championed by AfD has also led to the mainstream parties pursuing a harder stance against immigration policies.

Voters who share these beliefs now speak more openly, resulting in an increase in xenophobic and antisemitic attacks as well as hate speech. Meanwhile, there is negligible representation of migrant minorities in legislative bodies, especially from African communities. In general, the political environment has become very hostile, thereby reducing social integration efforts by migrants. The political narrative has, therefore, shifted, weakening Germany's global image of a safe migration haven.

What is changing for Kenyans?

Kenyans are starting to look at Germany as a land of opportunity instead of the usual destinations such as the US, Canada and the UK, especially because of the *Comprehensive Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreement* between Germany and Kenya.[6] The Agreement aims to solve Kenyan youth unemployment problem, but may lead to an extensive brain drain, making it look like a classical neo-colonial move.

However, many potential Kenyan emigrants are becoming wary of Germany because of emerging reports on the evolving attitudes around migrants, as well as a rise in populism, integration challenges due to language barriers, arduous visa and family reunion processes, culture shock, safety concerns and the potential for discrimination based on the country's historical past. The dream to 'make it in Germany' remains strong among Kenyans, but more people now are having to weigh the pros and cons carefully.

3 Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (undated) Skilled immigrants: an asset to our country.
4 Brown, L. (2024) Germany's new visa programme makes it easier for skilled workers to immigrate. BBC.
5 European Commission (2024) Pact on Migration and Asylum.
6 Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (2024) Kenya-Germany Complete Labour Mobility Negotiations.

Comparative reflections

Reflecting on my experiences in Germany, I couldn't help but compare them with the treatment of European migrants in Kenya. In Nairobi, Europeans often enjoy a privileged status, with easier access to well-paying jobs and social services. They are generally welcomed and respected, their foreignness seen as an asset rather than a liability. In contrast, Kenyan (and African, in general) migrants in Germany and Europe face numerous barriers to integration and acceptance. In fact, the recent 2023 EU report *Being Black in the EU – Experiences of people of African descent*[7] puts Germany in second position in terms of countries with the highest levels of discrimination on any grounds in Europe.

Conclusion: a call for balanced perspectives

As Germany continues to position itself as a major destination for skilled migrant workers, it is crucial for the country to acknowledge both the opportunities and challenges that come with migration, advocating for policies that balance humanitarian values with pragmatic solutions, reduce bureaucratic hurdles and be ready to make social sacrifices to attract foreign labour.

I believe that there is also a need for better information and resources among prospective migrants in sending countries on some of the basic requirements at specific destinations. It is further necessary to conduct public awareness campaigns among receiving populations on some positive contributions of migrants. Efforts should also be made towards enhancing countries' commitments to frameworks like the Global Compact on Migration.

In parallel, Afro-descendants in Germany should unite and champion their rights through interconnected and supportive community networks while striving for political representation. Lastly, bilateral migration partnerships should promote circular migration between countries involved to promote knowledge and skill transfer.

7 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2023) Being Black in the EU – Experiences of people of African descent.

The 'right' immigrant: navigating identity and belongingness in Geneva

Mallika Goel[1]

"Today, too many foreigners are arriving, and not the right ones." As Switzerland gears up for a referendum to curb immigration, these words by Marcel Dettling, the leader of the hard-right party currently in power, prompted me to reflect on my own journey as a former international student and young professional in Geneva. Was I considered one of the 'right ones'?

The allure of working for an international organisation brought me to the self-avowedly international city of Geneva in the midst of a pandemic, to pursue a master's degree at an institute which prides itself on being a gateway to the United Nations. Admittedly, my lofty motivations to create a positive social impact were sprinkled with a fair amount of self-interest. I wanted access to top-quality education and better economic opportunities for myself. Having witnessed first-hand the notoriously gruelling work culture in India, I believed that, should I move to Europe, I could have a healthier work-life balance. As I had never lived outside of my home country before, I was anxious about whether I would be accepted in a foreign environment. I felt slightly reassured by the fact that almost half of Geneva's inhabitants are foreign, and thought this cosmopolitanism would translate to a culture of embracing diversity.

Upon my arrival, I saw that the ground realities were not exactly what I had envisioned. More immigrants did not necessarily mean more societal acceptance. At university, I felt at home amongst students from all over the world who, like myself, were trying to find their place in society. However, I soon realised that outside this bubble of well-educated and well-travelled young people, there was a pervasive sentiment that Switzerland is pristine, and the arrival of any foreign element might endanger this precarious perfection. I remember an incident that took place on my first morning in Geneva. Having woken up to rashes all over my body, I complained to my landlady, a retired American who had moved to Switzerland over 30 years earlier, of bedbugs. She responded, with total conviction, that Switzerland does not have any bedbugs, and that I had probably brought them myself. Cognisant of the difficulty of finding affordable housing as a foreign student, I ignored her while hastening my search for alternative accommodation.

More often, such hostility was not directed at me personally. Once, a middle-aged English colleague jokingly lamented having to wait with immigrants and refugees, whom she referred to as "the real dregs of society", during an appointment for her residency permit. I smiled awkwardly as she spoke, realising that, in her mind, she and I were different from other immigrants. My education, interests, choice of clothing and manner of speaking made me more acceptable to my Western counterparts than many other immigrants. Looking back, while a part of me was offended by her statement, another part felt an unsettling sense of validation, as though I had been granted entry into an exclusive club.

In my opinion, the desire to be accepted in a foreign land and integrate into the host community is very natural. However, the need to fit into an environment which is increasingly averse to immigrants incentivises people to distinguish themselves from the broader mass of foreigners by propagating anti-immigrant sentiments. This is especially true for people who have settled in the country for decades and have seemingly forgotten that they, too, were once fresh off the boat.

The inherent inequalities within the system perpetuate in-group competition among immigrants. After I graduated, as I was from outside the European Union, I had three months to find a job or else be deported. The refusal of private companies to sponsor work authorisations for foreigners severely limited options for people like me. We had to compete for very few open positions at international organisations like the UN.

I was completely unprepared for the vast discrepancy between international organisations' theoretical commitment to diversity and the actual practices that they follow. Despite their substantial funding, most international organisations do not pay their interns a living wage, effectively limiting opportunities to those who can afford to live in one of the world's most expensive cities without a sufficient income and with no promise of future

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employment. I was fortunate to be able to undertake a six-month internship at a prestigious organisation, thanks to financial support from my parents. However, many of my friends had to return to their home countries, either because they could not find an internship or because they could not afford it.

Resentment against the system is often channelled against vulnerable communities. Within the context of the Indian diaspora, it is not uncommon to hear people complain about the influx of refugees. A major reason is the perceived unfairness of the situation. While Indians have had to work very hard to establish a place for themselves abroad, undergoing stringent residency procedures, refugees are often seen as benefitting from more lenient entry requirements and immediate access to social support systems. While this resentment may stem from competition for resources and recognition, it also reflects a deeper struggle for acceptance and belonging in a society that continues to place immigrants in hierarchical categories of worth.

Closely intertwined with this phenomenon is the 'model minority' stereotype, which suggests that certain immigrant groups, like Indians, achieve success through exceptionally hard work and dedication. My own family often reminded me to capitalise on the positive reputation that Indians have abroad, encouraging me to always go above and beyond in my efforts, as that is the only way to stand out from others. This mindset was so ingrained in me that, when my manager called me after work hours, I felt an obligation to respond immediately, believing that maintaining this image of diligence was crucial for my acceptance and success in a foreign land.

After the internship, I secured a job within the same organisation. However, a few months later, budget cuts left me without a job, legally requiring me to wrap up the past several years of my life and move back to India within two weeks. Just as I was beginning to get comfortable with the life that I had built for myself in Geneva, it was snatched away from me due to circumstances that were beyond my control. Not only was it a logistical nightmare, but it was an intensely emotional upheaval, which felt like a personal failure.

My experience in Geneva was not unique, but rather a microcosm of the broader immigrant experience across the globe. The pressures to conform, excel and differentiate oneself from other immigrants often come at the cost of one's mental wellbeing and sense of identity. The challenges I faced, from navigating cultural misunderstandings to confronting systemic barriers in the job market, taught me resilience, adaptability and the importance of perseverance in the face of adversity. More importantly, they deepened my empathy towards others facing similar struggles, regardless of their background.

To conclude, I don't know whether I fit Mr Dettling's notion of the 'right' foreigner, nor do I care. My own experience defies such simplistic categorisations. Such reductive labels strip individuals of their complexity, reducing them to arbitrary traits deemed acceptable by prevailing norms. In truth, every immigrant brings a unique story and valuable contributions to their host country. The conversation needs to be more empathetic and, instead of framing migration as a problem to be solved, should focus on promoting inclusive policies and nurturing a culture that recognises and celebrates the inherent worth and potential of each person. This, I firmly believe, paves the way for a more compassionate and equitable society for all.

A recipe... for disaster? Mexico's transformation from transit to destination nation

Regina Resendiz Vargas[1]

For Mexican families, migration was a recurring topic at the dinner table. Our conversations focused on the hardships faced by migrants who moved to the US in pursuit of a better life. To us, it seemed unjust that all human beings were valued equally in theory, yet migrants were often treated so differently in practice.

The world has changed significantly since then, with migration in Mexico increasing at a rapid pace. Last year, the number of irregular migrants arriving in Mexico surged by 77 percent, reaching 782,176 people.[2] Additionally, the composition of migration flows has evolved. Irregular migration from Africa and Asia has doubled, diversifying the sources of immigration.[3]

Mexican perspectives on migration have changed, too, and with them, our dinner conversations. Shifting migration patterns, inequality, racial discrimination, fear and politics have emerged as new ingredients shaping our nation's evolving identity. Once known primarily as a country of origin and transit, Mexico has begun to transition towards becoming a destination nation.[4]

Have perspectives on migration changed? What will result from the combination of these new elements? In this essay, I aim to explore these questions by reflecting on my life in Monterrey, Mexico's second-largest metro area, in the hope that ideas will arise on how to steer the situation towards a positive outcome.

Shifting migration patterns

In Mexico, two trends are shifting migration patterns. First, immigration is increasing, surpassing our government's capacities. This upsurge is fuelled by the convergence of economic and political factors across the American continent. Moreover, the Mexican government's lack of effective responses stems from the persistent neglect of migration on the national political agenda. It appears that our government only acknowledges migrants when they can be used as pawns in geopolitical games with the US, or in response to catastrophic events.

On 28 March 2023, the country woke to horrific news: a fire at a migrant centre claimed the lives of 40 individuals locked in an Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) building.[5] The investigation revealed a shocking reality: the government seemed to be unsure of who was responsible for overseeing the activities of the INM. Despite the constitution placing its management under the Secretariat of the Interior, the secretary stated an internal agreement had shifted responsibility to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[6] The blame was passed from one entity to another, leaving justice for those trapped in the flames of our government's incompetence unresolved.

The second trend is the increasing danger associated with migration. On 4 June, a new White House fact sheet was published with new measures that bar migrants who cross the southern border from receiving asylum. Words like 'Republicans' and 'Democrats', and expressions like 'partisan politics' and 'intensification of immigration law enforcement' weighed heavily on me. It's distressing to think that the effects of the deep political division in the US extend far beyond its borders, profoundly impacting vulnerable individuals caught in the crossfire. Policies, such as the one announced, do not deter people from leaving their home countries; instead, they force migrants to take more dangerous routes[7] or stay at insecure borders, leading to more fatalities. At times, it seems as though these deaths are the intended outcome of such strategies.

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2 Nochebuena M. (2024) Migración alcanza cifra récord en 2023 en México: bajan devoluciones, crece control y violencia., Animal Político.
3 INM (2024) National Migration Information. INM.
4 Selee A. (2024) Mexico as a Destination Country for Migrants, COLMEX.
5 Phillips T. (2023) At least 40 dead in Mexico migrant centre fire as rights groups blame overcrowding, The Guardian.
6 INM (2023) Incendio en el INM de Ciudad Juárez, INM.
7 Pérez, S. (2019). Mexico's crackdown forces migrants to more dangerous routes, PBS News.

Racial discrimination and inequality

On my way to university, I pass by Tower Obispado, one of Latin America's tallest and most expensive towers. Its mirror windows reflect Independencia, one of the state's oldest and most stigmatised districts, born from displaced immigrants from San Luis Potosí.[8] Located just four kilometres away from the tower, Independencia stands as a testament to the deeply ingrained inequality in our society.

This inequality is not unique to nationals, as it is often magnified when experienced by a migrant, affecting every aspect of their lives – from the routes they take to the way they are received. While American, European and Canadian 'expats' are welcomed with open arms,[9] our southern brothers and sisters are often met with hostility. On the way to the US, or when settling in one of Mexico's cities, they are persecuted by the police and criminal organisations.[10] It is common for my colleagues from Central and South America to talk about the dangers, the questioning and the thousands of pesos[11] that the corruption of our institutions has taken from them. Racial discrimination is also present, as a friend from Colombia explains, "They don't even need to see my passport; it seems that my skin colour is the perfect reason to question my migratory status."

The deeply rooted racial discrimination and inequality, together with our new role as a destination nation, have prompted Mexicans to change their views on migration. However, the change seems to be for the worse. This is particularly evident in the case of Haitian immigrants, who, fleeing political unrest in their country, are met with the same racial discrimination that we decry in other countries.[12] A local radio host, discussing the influx of Haitian immigrants, echoes sentiments we once denounced when directed at Mexicans: "If locals can't even live a good life, why should migrants?" His derogatory terms lingered in my mind as I changed the station.

Fear and politics

For years, I had been grateful that Mexico, while not free from institutional discrimination against migrants, seemed to avoid the level of politicisation of immigration seen in Europe and the US.[13] However, in this year's mayoral election, my world changed as I encountered a stark display of anti-immigrant rhetoric.

Let's begin with some background. Mexico, and especially Monterrey, is experiencing drought and electricity service failures due to soaring temperatures.[14] These environmental challenges have sparked frustration among inhabitants.

The inaction of our local governments has exacerbated a troubling reality in our city: there is a growing number of families residing in public parks, parking lots and streets, near Monterrey's scarce migrant shelters. While this situation might evoke empathy in some, for others, including a mayoral candidate, it fuelled fear.

For politicians, in particular, it is simpler, and perhaps politically more lucrative, to direct their anger at migrants.

And so, the mayoral candidate inundated his social media with the most violent, attention-grabbing reactions that he could get from the individuals experiencing homelessness. One video in particular, shows a man (whose status as a migrant is uncertain, but assumed by the candidate due to his skin colour) having to relieve himself on a sidewalk due to the unavailability of public restrooms in our city.[15] Instead of offering assistance, the candidate's team filmed the incident, provoking the individual until he screamed, allowing the candidate to remark, "Imagine if a woman was passing by." I viewed all the videos from his campaign and read each comment, all brimming with hatred and fear.

From that point forward, I followed the candidate's actions. During the debate, he articulated sentiments echoing those heard globally against migrants, tailored to resonate with our citizens, such as: "People without education are not welcome in our city",[16] "To anyone who chooses to live in parks begging for money, we'll load them onto a truck and send them home",[17] and even adopting the well-known slogan "Regios[18] first."[19]

8 Villasana, M. (2019) La colonia Independencia, una de las más antiguas de NL., Milenio.
9 Culver, D. (2022) Mexico City becomes WFH Haven for US expats, CNN.
10 HRW (2022) Mexico: Asylum Seekers Face Abuses at Southern Border, HRW.
11 Mexican currency
12 Morrissey, K. (2022). For Haitian migrants, waiting in Tijuana brings fear, discrimination, even death, The San Diego Union Tribune.
13 AP (2024). Though migration affects both US and Mexico, Mexican politicians rarely mention it, AP.
14 TecScience Extreme Heat Provokes Cities Break Temperature Records in Mexico, TecScience.
15 @Patoezambrano (2024). El centro de Monterrey esta fuera de control con migrantes e indigentes, Instagram.
16 Zambrano, P. (2024) Primero Los Regios. Facebook.
17 Ibid.
18 *Regios* is a colloquial term used to refer to people from Monterrey, the capital city of the northeastern state of Nuevo León in Mexico. The term comes from the word *regiomontano*, which means someone from Monterrey.
19 Zambrano, P. (2024) Op. Cit.

All this has led to the spread of fear, a change that was once unlikely in cities like Monterrey, where many families share migrant stories. The candidate's third-place finish, with 72,444 votes,[20] marked more than just a result; it was a testament to the deep-seated fear and divisive politics taking hold in my city.

Conclusion

From the dinner table conversations of my youth to the stark realities migrants face today, I am more convinced than ever of the importance of our leaders recognising the humanity of migrants and addressing the root causes of migration.

Moreover, the shifting migration patterns in Mexico demand urgent attention from authorities, not only in our country but also in the US and around the world. This is a global phenomenon that can't be solved by one-sided policies. The injustices faced by migrants underscore the need for multiple actors to support comprehensive and compassionate policies that respect the dignity and rights of all individuals.

We must actively promote dialogue among stakeholders, involving migrants, NGOs and youth groups to cultivate effective and sustainable solutions. It's essential that dinner conversations, essays and policies transcend mere words, recognising that implementing effective strategies requires integrating their perspectives at the decision-making table.

In today's interconnected world, the principle of 'think global, act local' takes on heightened significance. When fear and discrimination arise from within our own communities, it becomes evident that solutions cannot depend solely on top-down approaches. We must actively combat hate speech and advocate for regulations governing how our politicians and media leaders discuss migration.

From classrooms to international organisations, leaders should take decisive action. It is imperative that we work together to create a more inclusive society where migration is not a source of division but a symbol of our shared humanity. The recipe for migration is a complex one, with many ingredients and flavours. It is up to us all, citizens and leaders, to choose a recipe that serves justice, empathy and respect for all.

20 IEEPC (2024) PREP Monterrey. IEEPC.

Invisible chains: the harsh reality of Haitian migrants trapped by policy and prejudice

Sebastián Rodríguez[1]

In a small, busy taquería in Monterrey, Haitian migrants are seen dressed in green and red uniforms, diligently preparing food and washing dishes as part of a news report. The bright orange walls and simple setup of the place serve as a backdrop for the daily grind of these migrants, who have relocated to Mexico in the hope of finding employment, mostly in informal sectors. Despite their aspirations for a better life, they are often relegated to menial, low-wage jobs.

An interviewer captures this scene and remarks, "It is a great suffering that thousands of [Haitian] migrants who have arrived here have gone through, but some have had much better luck today".[2] On the surface, this statement appears neutral and even empathetic, seemingly applauding the hardworking nature of Haitian migrants. However, this stark contradiction is one of many examples revealing a pattern of exploitation masquerading as integration, a system of inequality that pretends to be multicultural and inclusive.

The reality for Haitian migrants in Mexico is far from the 'better luck' suggested in the news report. Instead, they face entrenched racial discrimination and systemic economic disparities that trap them in a cycle of poverty and marginalisation. This essay will explore these underlying issues, examining how Mexican society's structures and attitudes have exacerbated conditions of entrapment for many migrants.

The Haitian exodus

The number of Haitian migrants in Mexico has reached unprecedented levels. Between January and December 2023, Mexico received 140,982 asylum requests from nationals of 20 countries, with Haiti having the highest number of applications at 44,239, according to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance. Experts attribute this influx to the economic, social, political and climatic conditions affecting the country. Chronic institutional weakness, continuous political crises, increasing violence and crime, high unemployment and vulnerability to natural disasters have made life increasingly untenable.

Facing dire conditions in their homeland, many decide to migrate without a clear understanding of the challenges of the journey or how to ensure their safety. This sets in motion a series of migratory flows that span vast distances and even decades of displacement. Many migrants begin their journey not just from Haiti, but from countries like Brazil and Chile – where they initially sought refuge – only to face renewed pressures to migrate. The route often takes them through the Darién Gap, a treacherous stretch of jungle between Panama and Colombia, fraught with danger – particularly for women and girls, who are exposed to heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence.

Upon reaching Mexico, Haitian migrants encounter racial discrimination from migration and law enforcement officials, arbitrary detentions and brutal conditions in detention centres, where they are often deprived of basic sanitation and medical care. And yet, despite risking everything and making multiple attempts to reach their ultimate destination, many Haitian migrants find themselves trapped in Mexico. How can it be that after enduring such extreme risks and traversing multiple countries, these migrants find themselves in a state of limbo, devoid of the necessary support and resources to move forward?

To explain this, Dr Olga Odgers-Ortiz has introduced a compelling concept known as 'the era of migratory entrapment',[3] which argues that many migrants find themselves involuntarily confined within host countries due to a complex interplay of international migration policies and geopolitical shifts. Entrapment in this context occurs primarily because of US policies, which include tightening border controls and frequent changes to asylum laws and procedures, coupled with the Mexican government's increasing efforts to halt the northward movement of migrants.

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2 Migrantes haitianos se quedan a trabajar en México | Noticias Telemundo
3 Odgers-Ortiz, O. (2024) La era del atrapamiento migratorio: la migración africana hacia la frontera norte de México. Cuadernos Inter.c.a.mbio sobreCentroamérica y el Caribe. 21(1).

In this perverse logic, US migration policies provide the groundwork for a racial order that is enforced even beyond its borders, outsourced for enforcement by Mexican authorities long before refugees and migrants even approach their destination.

But while Dr Odgers-Ortiz offers a compelling framework for understanding the plight of Haitian migrants, it's essential to consider the local realities on the ground. Entrapment may indeed be triggered by geopolitical shifts and policies, but it is continually reinforced by racial hierarchies.

An inescapable reality

Haitians are among the most precarious migrants in Mexico. Most arrive with little more than the clothes on their backs, desperate for basic necessities such as food, clothing and medical attention. While the Mexican government pats itself on the back for providing work permits, this remains an insufficient policy that leaves many without meaningful access to protection or employment. Language barriers further exacerbate their conditions, with many not speaking Spanish. Haitian women, in particular, tend to speak less Spanish than men due to their limited work experiences in transit countries, often because they were forced to stay at home to care for children or family, making them dependent on male partners.

As a result, Haitian migrants' high vulnerability forces them into jobs primarily within the informal sector, such as street vending or construction labour, where they work 10-14 hours a day and under deplorable conditions for jobs that few others are willing to do. Because of the dangerous journeys they undertake, many begin their new lives in Mexico already at a disadvantage, burdened by financial debt to both formal and informal actors. Viewed as transient by the local authorities, they are also often deprived of labour protections, making exploitation and abuse a routine part of their daily lives. Additionally, the devaluation of their educational credentials and professional qualifications further relegates them to the most marginalised positions within the labour market. Each of these conditions has not merely worked to hinder their journey but has served practically to dominate and constrain the lives of these migrants, reinforcing their entrapment within a system that denies them basic human dignity.

In addition to their economic exploitation, Haitian migrants also endure pervasive racism that deepens their marginalisation. This discrimination manifests itself not only through physical policing and control by Mexican authorities, but also through institutional practices and the everyday rhetoric of Mexican society. What we see is an insidious ordering of Haitian migrants that operates through both force and persuasion, coercion and consent. They are pursued, handcuffed and subjected to beatings by authorities, all supported by an underlying discourse that justifies and sustains this oppression.

Mexican society likes to tell its version of the story, where Haitian migrants are seen as tireless and resilient workers, and are therefore 'welcomed' and 'integrated' because they eagerly take on menial jobs. In southern Mexico, in particular, Haitians are more likely to be hired for agricultural work, driven by the misconception that they can endure more physical labour. Newspapers tout headlines such as "In Mexico's border city, Haitian people hailed as success story"[4] and "Tijuana's Haitian immigrants seen as a model for other newcomers."[5] They often highlight stories of *maquila* (low-cost factories) employers approaching shelters to solicit Haitian workers, praising their productivity and willingness to work. Families are depicted as incorporating Haitians into their barbershops, beauty salons, internet cafés and restaurants, motivated by a spirit of help. All this sensationalises an 'unlikely' harmony between Mexican and Haitian people, even going so far as to talk about the emergence of a 'Mexican dream' for those entrapped.

The power of these narratives has a particular salience. They exceptionalise Haitian migrants by attributing to them characteristics such as an inherent willingness to endure harsh working conditions. On the one hand, this process serves to separate them from society as 'others'. They become abstractions, distinct and apart. The daily narratives, like those previously mentioned in newspapers and community stories, weaponise this distinction into a hard-and-fast separation and an organising principle.

On the other hand, and more critically, these narratives define Haitian migrants within specific categories, casting them as an exploitable and excludable out-group. This systematic process of racial formation serves as a means of control because to define is to dominate. By assigning them specific duties and privileges, such as those seen in *maquila* factories or agricultural work, Mexican society manages their lives within a hierarchy that presents itself as neutral and benign. It's a subtle, yet very powerful, mechanism because it upholds a racialised hierarchy while obscuring the ongoing racism, effectively ensuring Haitian migrants remain trapped within a system designed to exploit and marginalise them.

4 Watson, J. (2023) In Mexico's border city, Haitians hailed as success story. Northwest Arkansas Democrat Gazette.
5 Solis, G. (2018) Tijuana's Haitian immigrants seen as a model for other newcomers. Los Angeles Times.

Photo credit: Penofoto / Shutterstock

Germany: At the start of the year, Sahra Wagenknecht formed her own alliance party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), which enjoyed rapid success as a new left-of-centre populist party with strong intentions to control irregular and regular migration and implement deportations of rejected asylum seekers. Some say she is so far left she is far right. Her manifesto illustrates that anti-migration positions are not the monopoly of the political right and are increasingly becoming mainstreamed globally.

Photo credit: Charles Henry Mercer / Shutterstock

South Africa: The issue of migration has played a major part in the South African elections. Anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobia were central to many political parties' campaigns – each promising to be harsher than the next – and had universal appeal among the electorate. The results of the May elections saw South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) majority significantly reduced for the first time since the end of apartheid.

Section 3

Policy and politics in a year of elections

In an extraordinary year of elections around the world, this section of the Mixed Migration Review offers essays, *Thematic snapshots* and interviews to highlight key policy and political issues relating to mixed migration. The section starts with a chart aiming to give an indicative presentation of how salient migration was in this year's elections and how the election results could impact mixed migration. It also includes data and analysis using 4Mi surveys presented as evidence-based counterfactuals, challenging some assumptions and myths relating to mixed migration. The essays explore the politicisation and instrumentalisation of migration in politics; the salience of both migration in politics and populism as a seemingly winning political phenomenon; how attitudes and perceptions about migration are formed and how they are measured in polls and surveys. An additional essay looks at some alternative approaches to democracy, particularly urban democracy, in the context of migration management and integration. The essays are separated by interviews with migration experts and commentators, as well as *Thematic snapshots* offering an in-depth focus on particular themes central to contemporary mixed migration dynamics.

Election outcome chart: 23 selected elections in 2024 where immigration has significant salience in society and politics

There have been many more elections this year than those listed in this chart[1] and MMC has applied editorial judgement as to which should be featured here. The main criteria used are the salience of migration in the country, the election discourse and campaigning and the likely impact of the results of the election on mixed migration that either represents a new direction or reinforcement of existing noteworthy practices. In some countries not featured, migration may have significant salience but there were other, more immediate, issues such as the economy, geo-political alignment (NATO, the EU, the Ukraine war), security or other issues dominating the elections (e.g., in Senegal, Cyprus, Jordan, Comoros, Canada, Romania, etc.)

Country	Salience of migration as political issue	Election outcomes and relevance to mixed migration
Algeria	Moderate	Presidential elections on 7 September saw incumbent President Abdelmadjid Tebboune win a second term. Algeria is a major country for migration, serving as a transit point, a destination and a country of origin. It has tightened its migration policy in recent years, stepping up operations to repatriate and turn back sub-Saharan migrants. Over the past years, Algeria expelled and 'dumped' in the Niger desert tens of thousands of sub-Saharan migrants and asylum seekers. With Tebboune's re-election, it is likely that these policies will continue.
Austria	High	Migration issues are dominating the electoral cycle in Austria as a top concern. The legislative election on 29 September saw the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) placed first, winning 28.8 percent of the vote and achieving the best result in its history. The FPÖ campaigned on "Fortress Austria" and heavily emphasised remigration, particularly to Islamic countries. The FPÖ also called for "zero asylum" in Austria, increased deportations of criminal foreigners to their home countries and a new law to ban political/extremist Islam in Austria.
Belarus	Moderate	President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in office since 1994, reportedly oversaw the January parliamentary election with iron control: there were no opposition candidates – all contenders came from four registered political parties (each of which is pro-government) or pro-government independents. Pro-Russia Belarus has used migrants to punish the EU, settle scores and weaponise migration along the Polish/Belarus border. Perhaps not salient in Belarusian society, migration will continue to have potential saliency in international politics and Lukashenko's approach is heavily influencing Polish and EU migration policies (e.g., the instrumentalisation clauses in the new *EU Migration and Asylum Pact* and Poland's decision to suspend asylum).
Belgium	High	Pre-election, Flemish opinion polls indicated that migration was the pivotal issue for people in Belgium. Some suggested all parties were involved in a 'bidding war of anti-migration positions'. Many analysts predicted a major far-right swing in favour of the extreme Vlaams Belang party, but the country saw only a slight rightward shift in the 9 June federal election results. Nevertheless, the conservative nationalist New Flemish Alliance (with strict immigration policies and the intention to remove all irregular migrants) retained its spot as the largest political party.

1 Calculations of the expected number of national elections through the year vary but one source identifies 88 general or parliamentary elections (not to mention additional local or regional elections) were scheduled for 2022, involving countries that account for half of the world's population. (Cf: Wikipedia (no date) List of elections in 2024).

Country	Salience of migration as political issue	Election outcomes and relevance to mixed migration
Bulgaria	High	Ex-Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's centre-right GERB party won the snap election on 27 October, but without the majority needed to form a government. Six consecutive elections so far in just three years have failed to yield a stable government. In the meantime, support for the ultra-nationalist and pro-Russian Vazrazhdane (Revival) party has increased, with the party coming third in the latest election and, potentially, playing a more powerful role in future. Stopping migration and removing migrants has not only been an issue of the far-right, however, with GERB also promising "zero illegal migration and secure borders for every Bulgarian citizen."
Croatia	High	Right-wing, nationalist anti-migrant perspectives are widely supported in Croatia. On 17 April, Croatia's ruling conservative centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) won the parliamentary election, but with fewer seats than needed. Moving yet further rightward, it formed a coalition government with the Homeland Movement – a nationalist and right-wing populist party. Both parties can be expected to be tough on migrant workers, irregular migrants and asylum seekers – often from Afghanistan, Iran and Syria, mostly in transit through Croatia.
El Salvador	Low	General elections in El Salvador, on 4 February and 3 March, were indirectly relevant to migration. The incumbent Nayib Bukele was re-elected as president in a landslide of popularity, partly derived from his iron-fist approach to crime. It remains to be seen if Bukele's popular mega-prisons and crime reduction projects will reduce forced displacement and ease migratory and asylum pressures on the US, Mexico and other transit states.
European Union	High	On 9 June, the European Union parliamentary elections saw far-right parties make gains at the expense of centrists – but their wins were not sufficient to dominate the parliament. Shortly after the results, two new far-right and distinctly anti-migration parties were formed (Europe of Sovereign Nations and Patriots for Europe). Having a higher presence of anti-migration parties in the EU is likely to result in a more restrictive impact on mixed migration. Immigration issues featured at the top or near the top of virtually all parties campaigning for the EU parliament, reflecting the salience of immigration in European society and politics.
France	High	Immigration and identity ideas of nationality were top agenda issues in France this year. President Emmanuel Macron's defeat by the far-right, anti-migrant National Rally (RN) in the June EU elections led him to call a snap general election in late June and early July. Although the RN were ahead in the first round, the rapidly-formed, left-wing New Popular Front alliance, together with Macron's centrist coalition, prevented a far-right victory. Eventually, the RN came in third, but still disrupted French politics by controlling an unprecedented number of seats in the legislative assembly.
Germany	High	In the June EU parliamentary elections, the far-right, anti-migrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) surged in both votes and seats, finishing second of all parties. The issues of immigration and Islam were a top priority in some areas of Germany, but not everywhere. Germany must hold its next federal elections before 26 October 2025, but it held three important regional state elections in September of this year (Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg). The AfD's success was unprecedented, with an outright win in Thuringia and a close second position in Saxony and Brandenburg – giving the party significant political power in all three regions.
India	Moderate to High	Migration is a 'hot-button' issue both for the federal government as well as for select subnational entities. In elections in India between April and June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a third term, but lost an outright majority and was forced to form a coalition government for the first time. In particular, the *Citizenship Amendment Act* – which is perceived as anti-Muslim and having highly discriminatory outcomes for refugees and migrants – has been at the centre of the election. The BJP are, for many analysts, illustrative of nationalist populism and majoritarianism with authoritarian leanings.

Country	Salience of migration as political issue	Election outcomes and relevance to mixed migration
Indonesia	Moderate	Led by the former army general and the President of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto, the Great Indonesia Movement Party (known as the Gerindra Party) won national elections in February 2024. Gerindra is a nationalist, right-wing, populist party in a country where anti-migrant and anti-refugee (particularly, anti-Rohingya) feelings appear to run high. The relatively few and desperate Rohingya refugees that arrive in Indonesia (and that have not been pushed back at sea by the Navy) have recently been subjected to ill-treatment, abuse, physical violence and online hate – an environment Subianto and Gerinda are unlikely to change for the better in terms of protection and respect of rights.
Mauritania	Moderate	Incumbent president Mohamed Ould Ghazouani was re-elected for his second and final term on 29 June. Migration has been propelled to a major political issue, due to EU deals with the government to halt irregular migration – the biggest of which was worth €210 million for 2024 alone, and the one allowing Frontex to operate in Mauritania causing a public and political backlash. Ghazouani's re-election suggests current migration-related policies will continue.
Mexico	Moderate	On 2 June, Claudia Sheinbaum of the left-leaning Morena party won with more than 58 percent of the presidential vote, making history as Mexico's first female president. The migration agenda is very prominent in the bilateral relationship between Mexico and the US. Mexico has recently become a major country of destination for significant numbers of asylum seekers and migrants and is under continual pressure from the US to enforce border control to reduce numbers accessing the US through Mexico's northern border. As such, the issue of migration is both politicised and securitised in the country.
Panama	High	Immigration issues have had rising importance in Panama, with over 520,000 migrants and asylum seekers passing into the country through the Darién Gap in 2023 alone. In a surprise win on 5 May, former security minister José Raúl Mulino of the right-wing Realizing Goals party won the presidency, replacing outgoing President Laurentino Cortizo of the centre-left Democratic Revolutionary Party. Mulino immediately vowed to take a tough securitised stance against migrant arrivals in Panama, promising to "close" the Darién Gap and signing a cooperation deal with the US to stop and deport migrants away from Panama.
Portugal	Moderate to High	Normally a migrant-friendly country, the far-right, anti-migrant populist Chega party surged (to then fall in June at the EU elections), fuelled by young Portuguese voters, winning 50 seats – up from 12 in March elections. However, the centre-right alliance led by the Social Democratic Party won the majority of seats by a slim margin (80 of 230 seats). Although migration was an important talking point in the election campaigns, so too were housing, public services, wages and more.
Slovakia	High	The Slovak presidential election was held in March and April. Peter Pellegrini of the Hlas party was victorious but the election was widely regarded as a win for Slovakia's prime minister Robert Fico, who saw his ally elected as President. With a reported 1,000 percent increase in the number of migrants from Syria crossing into Slovakia in 2023, migration issues were increasingly dominating media and political campaigns. Fico, a close ally of Hungary's anti-migrant and anti-Muslim prime minister Viktor Orbán, has promised to bring order to the country by preventing irregular migration.
South Africa	High	In May, South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) majority was significantly reduced for the first time in 30 years. The issue of migration played a major part in the elections, with anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobia central to many political parties' campaigns. More than 30 parties ran, each vowing to be harsher than the next on migration – a promise that had universal appeal with the electorate.

Country	Salience of migration as political issue	Election outcomes and relevance to mixed migration
Tunisia	High	Tunisia has become a major country of transit for migrants and asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa and other countries on their way to Europe, as well as a major country of origin. Meanwhile, Tunisia has well-financed but controversial agreements with the EU to assist in the management of migrants, many ending up in dire conditions. Presidential elections on 6 October 2024 saw the incumbent Kais Saied win with 91 percent of the vote, with a voter turnout of just under 29 percent. In the country, the issue of migrants has become sensationalised and violent, and was further exacerbated by incensory anti-migrant pronouncements from the president in 2023 and 2024, meaning that his win is likely to result in more of the same going forward.
Türkiye	High	Syrians have been a major polarising issue in Turkish politics for some years. The 3.7 million Syrian refugees living in Türkiye represented a 'political flashpoint' and one of the main issues at the forefront of the election campaign in the country in 2023. This year's local elections (31 March) took place in 81 provinces, as well as for various thousands of mayoral and local councillor positions. The issue of Syrian refugees became both securitised and politicised further in July, after anti-Syrian riots. Reportedly, leading candidates competed to offer the most aggressive proposal to deport the refugees back to Syria.
UK	High	Despite immigration being one of the top three issues during the electoral campaign, the desire to remove the Conservatives appears to have been paramount in people's voting behaviour. The UK voted in a centre-left government led by Keir Starmer in a landslide election victory in early July. The Labour Party promised a wide range of changes, including reducing overall immigration, burying the 'Rwanda plan' and trying a policing approach to stopping the 'small boats' crossing the Channel.
United States	High	Mixed migration concerns have been as high as they could be for voters in the US this year. Polls repeatedly placed topics such as border control, undocumented migration and immigration in general as top issues for a highly divided electorate. Their salience in US politics is long-standing and ongoing. For mixed migration, the implications of Donald Trump's re-election on 5 November are uncertain, but if they follow his campaign claims (including forbidding 'sanctuary cities', sealing the US-Mexico border and conducting mass deportations) and continue the trends of his first term, they promise to be divisive and dramatic, negatively affecting millions of people both inside and outside US territory.
Venezuela	Moderate to High	The elections in Venezuela were significant to migration because the country is the source of one of the largest international displacement crises in the world, with 7.7 million Venezuelans displaced globally – of which 6.5 currently reside in South America. Many of the displaced aspiring to return were disappointed by the re-election of Nicolás Maduro in a disputed election on 28 July. Inside Venezuela, all political candidates, including Maduro, leveraged promises of repatriation (return migration), tapping into the sentiment of bringing back their self-exiled compatriots and uniting families, which resonated strongly with voters.

2024: global elections and the politicisation of migration

The importance of 2024 as a year of elections

Chris Horwood[1]

In a unique and coincidental alignment, 2024 has become a huge year for elections across the world – from small island states to major countries of emerging economies, advanced economies and the economic bloc of the European Union.

Calculations of the expected number of national elections through the year vary but one comprehensive source identifies 88 general or parliamentary elections scheduled for the year, involving countries with half of the world's population – not to mention additional local or regional elections.[2]

The results of the elections are varied. In some countries, they indicate that the status quo was maintained in terms of the balance of ideological or political power. These were generally, but not always, led by those with ongoing anti-democratic projects. In others, the election results indicate a subtle swing. Finally, in other countries, we are witnessing bigger shifts. Evidently, the results of this major global show of democracy will prove consequential for years to come, and come at a time when analysts warn of democratic backsliding often linked to the continuing rise of populism.[3]

In recent years, democratic backsliding has reportedly become a defining trend, with analysts offering a range of explanations for it – from the role of Russia and China and disruptive technologies to the rise of populism, the spread of political polarisation, democracies' failure to deliver and leader-driven anti-democratic projects. More generally, this phenomenon may also be due to a response to navigating poly-crisis in a contemporary 'new world disorder'.[4] Whilst the causes are diverse and, to a certain extent, debatable, the result is an irrefutable rise of grievance-fuelled illiberalism, opportunistic authoritarianism (including by interest groups like the military) and majoritarianism that inherently erode democratic ideals and institutions.[5] These trends include a tendency to condemn economic globalisation and multilateralism, and often promote national interests.

The Global North (arguably, with the exception of some European countries and the US) has generally used robust democratic institutions to hold off significant democratic erosion, but the same ideas that cause backsliding have made considerable advances in recent years, and are arguably becoming stronger. This also explains why the elections of 2024 have been, and are, so important – often confirming some commentators' fears of growing global authoritarianism.[6] Closely associated and illustrative of these trends, the rise of populism is one of the most important political, social and economic phenomena in recent years, both in advanced and emerging economies.[7] Populism in advanced economies, even those with otherwise 'progressive' social ideologies, has been growing in force over the last 15 years, and embedded with it the ever-present populist concern of restricting immigration (or more) as part of a wider nationalist and majoritarianist project.[8] Perceptions and policies around immigration have attained a critical level of importance in political, social and economic discussions in this context, and therefore have also featured highly in this year's elections.[9]

1 Chris Horwood is a migration specialist and co-founder of Ravenstone Consult.
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3 Benasaglio Berlucchi, A., & Kellam, M. (2023). Who's to blame for democratic backsliding: populists, presidents or dominant executives? Democratization, 30(5), 815–835.
4 Ipsos (2023) A New World Disorder: navigating a polycrisis. Ipsos Global Trends 2023.
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6 Freedom House (2022) The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule.
7 CEPR (2022) Populism (RPNS).
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9 This issue of the impact of populism and what causes it is discussed in more detail in various essays in this MMR as well as more specifically in the EU context in the essay titled: *The instrumentalisation of migration in the populist era* on page 168 .

The global salience of mixed migration in 2024

Before looking at the relevance of mixed migration in elections in 2024, the scale and scope of contemporary mobility and displacement should be briefly laid out as context to make sense of its rising salience.

Although the most recent decades have been denoted 'the age of migration', the proportion of those migrating has only risen gradually. However, in a population-expanding world, the results are that the absolute number of international migrants is rising fast.[10] According to IOM's most recent estimates, a total of 281 million people were living in a country other than their country of birth in 2020 (3.6 percent of the world's population), which represents 128 million more than in 1990 and over three times the estimated number in 1970. Of this total, 169 million were migrant workers globally in 2019.[11]

This is the 12th consecutive year in which the number of refugees and displaced people has grown. Considering the geopolitical state of the world, this number looks set to keep rising in the short to medium term. The impact of climate change could cause this figure to increase, possibly exponentially, into the long term, although most climate mobility is currently internal to nations. In June 2024, UNHCR stated that – between early 2023 and May 2024 – a record-breaking 120 million people (1.55 percent of the global population) were living in a forcibly displaced status globally, with 69 percent of these being internally displaced. Almost 32 million are refugees under UNHCR's mandate, and close to seven million are asylum seekers, another record high.[12]

Myanmar, Afghanistan, Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Haiti, Syria, Sudan, Gaza/Palestine and Armenia are major refugee-producing countries. Here, people are mostly forcibly displaced by conflict and violence. Elsewhere, such as in Venezuela, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, various sub-Saharan countries and those in the Maghreb and North Africa, climate change, economic and political turmoil and/or gang violence force millions to move.

In 2023, 3.6 million people made new claims for asylum, with 1.2m making them in the USA alone – mostly after clandestinely crossing the Mexican/US border, but overwhelming the asylum system and fuelling anti-migrant rhetoric with high political significance (see below).

Low- and middle-income countries host around 75 percent of the world's refugees and other people in need of international protection. As will be detailed below, in some of these countries their presence has a political impact, such as in Türkiye, Tunisia or South Africa. However, the far smaller percentage of refugees hosted in the Global North in addition to other asylum seekers and migrants who often cross borders irregularly (and often with smugglers) towards the Global North have a huge impact on perceptions, policies, parties and, therefore, elections. For example, in the UK, while net *regular* migration was 685,000 people in 2023 – causing some political controversy – it was the 30,000 who arrived irregularly by 'small boats' from France that had incendiary power in terms of being sensationalised by the media. In turn, this can be weaponised or, at least, promoted to the top of the agenda by political parties, arguably belying its actual socioeconomic impact.[13] By contrast, the number of irregular crossings into the US from Mexico by a wide range of nationalities is comparatively high and a perennial headache for politicians on both sides of the political divide. In 2023, there were over two million border apprehensions of irregular crossings, with 250,000 alone occurring in December.[14] It is not unreasonable for states to want to manage their borders and document immigration, but it is often imperative to be *seen* to do so politically.

More generally, there are changing trends and impulses – or compulsions – for millions of people to move from or flee their places of origin. Beyond conflict, violence, insecurity and natural disasters, there is high global economic and livelihood precarity and inequality, combined with greater internet, social media and smartphone connectivity to fuel aspirations and expectations. While more people are seeking to move, the effects of many years of liberal and humanitarian pro-immigration or pro-refugee policies have meant many countries now have a significant and visible proportion of foreign residents who, if not well integrated, can be problematised.

10 de Haas, H., Castles Dphil, S. & Miller, M. J. (2020) The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World. Guilford Publications.
11 IOM (2024) World Migration Report.
12 UNHCR (2024) Global Trends Report.
13 The Migratory Observatory (2024) People crossing the English Channel in small boats.
14 Gramlish, J (2024) Migrant encounters at the U.S.-Mexico border hit a record high at the end of 2023. Pew Research

The relevance of mixed migration in elections

The pivotal role of migration in election campaigns is listed in ICMPD's *Ten migration issues to look out for in 2024*:

> *"In view of widespread dissatisfaction among electorates with high levels of irregular arrivals and asylum applications, ruling governments and parliamentary majorities will try to prove that they are capable of delivering on policies that address irregular migration and asylum in a sustainable way and bring down the numbers of arrivals in their country."*[15]

Polls by Pew, Ipsos, Gallup and others confirm a strong trend of concern around *irregular* immigration in contrast to surveys that show how people's attitudes to migrants and refugees are gradually moving in a more positive direction.[16] Although there is no contradiction in these attitudes, and those who want to see their borders controlled and managed better are not necessarily opposed to migrants living and working in their countries, it has suited some parties to conflate the two issues. Indeed, the rise of parties in Europe that define themselves in patriotic or nativist terms are typically anti-immigration, opposed to more refugees (especially as they perceive the asylum process as being 'gamed') and even specifically anti-Muslim, has been striking.[17]

Such is the importance of immigration to some societies that mainstream centrist parties and even some left-of-centre parties have adopted harsher policies and manifestos to prevent the far-right parties from luring voters to their side. Some analysis argues that such shifts are self-defeating, as they unintentionally benefit far-right parties and not the political mainstream whilst, in the process, legitimising anti-immigration positions – the normalisation of the extreme.[18] As one analyst has recently written, "the longstanding effort to keep extremist forces out of government in Europe is officially over".[19]

Far-right parties dictate the migration agenda in Europe and, to a different degree, other parties follow them with watered-down versions, hoping to keep their voters. Problematising and politicising immigration, scapegoating migrants and refugees during times of crisis, sharing alarmist predictions, fear-generating prognosis and analysis, though, are not just tools of parties in Europe. Increasingly, they are seen as legitimate election campaign positions around the world and are strongly present in this year's elections. The degree to which these issues have salience and are relevant differs between countries with high heterogeneity, but globally the politicisation of migration has, arguably, never been higher.[20] The 2024 election outcome chart that accompanies this essay (page 148) and the following selected examples (presented randomly) offer an indication of the extent of the relevance of mixed migration issues in this year's elections.

South Africa

South Africa reportedly hosts more migrants and asylum seekers (most irregularly arrived) than any other country in sub-Saharan Africa. In May, in the nation's most competitive elections since the end of apartheid, South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) majority was significantly reduced for the first time since gaining power after the end of apartheid three decades ago. The issue of migration has played a major part in this year's South African elections, which saw more than 30 parties run. Anti-immigration rhetoric and xenophobia were central to many political parties' campaigns and had universal appeal to the electorate, with each party promising to be harsher than the next.[21]

European Union

In June, the European Union parliamentary elections saw far-right parties make gains at the expense of centrists – but their victories were not enough to win a command of the parliament. The centre still holds, and the change was only a subtle swing to the right. Two groups with far-right parties – the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) – won over 140 of the parliament's 720 seats.[22] Far-right campaigns were not the only ones to have mixed migration issues feature at the top or near the top of their agenda. Shortly after the results, the ID was disbanded as two new far-right and distinctly anti-migrant parties were formed (Europe of Sovereign Nations and Patriots for Europe, with the former promising to be more radical than the latter). However, the current EU raft of migrant-restricting policies and the new *Pact on Migration and Asylum* was navigated by centrist parties, too. This higher presence of avowed anti-migrant parties in the EU will likely result in a further restrictive impact on mixed migration.

15 ICMPD (2024) 'Ten migration issues to look out for in 2024'. International Centre for Migration Policy Development
16 A more detailed exploration of migration-related surveys, polls and perceptions can be found in the essay, *Migration perceptions, opinion polls and voting outcomes: teasing out what people really want* on page 244.
17 Coi, G. (2024) Mapped: Europe's rapidly rising right. Politico.
18 May, A. & Czymara, C. (undated, online) Mainstream parties adopting far-right rhetoric simply increases votes for far-right parties. The Loop; Krause, W., Cohen, C., Abou-Chadi, T. (2022) Copying the far right doesn't help mainstream parties. But it can boost the far right. The Guardian; Morland, A. (2023) Normalising the extreme 2023. Mixed Migration Centre.
19 Coi, G. (2024) Op. Cit.
20 Hutter, S., & Kriesi, H. (2021). Politicising immigration in times of crisis. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 48(2), 341–365.
21 Hill, J. (2024) South Africa election 2024: 'You see skeletons' - the deadly migrant crossing. BBC; Dionne, K. Y. & Wellman, B. (2024) How immigration issues are steering South Africa's 2024 elections. Good Authority.
22 Westfall, S. (2024) How big elections are changing the world in 2024. The Washington Post.

Venezuela

The 28 July elections in Venezuela were important to mixed migration for at least two reasons. On the one hand, the country is the source of vast numbers of those who are currently displaced in the Americas. On the other hand, Venezuela also represents the aspiration of those millions of Venezuelans who would like to return home if and when conditions are judged to improve. The hopes of opposition leader Edmundo González Urrutia to become the new president were crushed as Nicolás Maduro won a disputed election, promising to continue the controversial 25 years of *Chavismo*. The last decade, in particular, was catastrophic,[23] with the exodus of millions of Venezuelans in what is one of the largest international displacement crises in the world. This resulted in 7.7 million Venezuelans displaced globally, of which 6.5 million currently reside in South America. The exodus itself caused major sociopolitical disruption and affected political outcomes in hosting countries as immigration and the presence of Venezuelans have been problematised, sometimes to the advantage of anti-migrant populist parties.[24] Inside Venezuela, all political candidates, including Maduro, have leveraged promises of repatriation (return migration), tapping into the sentiment of bringing back their self-exiled compatriots and uniting families, which resonates strongly with voters.[25] However, soon after the election, the autocratic winner made moves to shut down dissent, while opposition groups called on the world to reject the results and took to the streets demanding fresh elections – arguably, not an environment conducive to mass return migration.[26]

France

In the June EU elections, President Macron's alliance suffered a huge defeat by the far-right anti-migrant National Rally (RN) led by Marine LePen, leading him to call a sudden election in early July. Although the RN were comfortably ahead in the snap election's first round, the rapidly-formed left-wing New Popular Front alliance and President Macron's centrist coalition thwarted a far-right victory. Eventually, RN came in third, but it still controlled a large number of seats in the legislative assembly, significantly disrupting French politics. The country anticipates political deadlock and a hung parliament, as no party won a clear majority.[27] These events are also interesting insofar as one election where migration issues were prominent (the EU election) led to another, unexpected, election in the same year where immigration and identity ideas of nationality were also at the top of the agenda.

Iran

A little-known reformist surgeon, Masoud Pezeshkian, defeated his ultraconservative rival Saeed Jalili in Iranian elections in June, following the sudden death of President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash. His surprise win represents a major shift.[28] Describing his victory as the start of a "new chapter" for Iran, Pezeshkian campaigned for more social freedom and engagement with the West.[29] However, this last aspiration is likely stymied by the July killing (by Israel, it is assumed) of the political head of Hamas, in Tehran.[30] Indeed, conflict with Israel, and therefore the West, runs a high risk of escalating rapidly. Migration is only relevant to the Iranian election insofar as many Iranians have been continually fleeing from the country's oppressive regime in recent years and seeking asylum in the Global North (mainly the US, EU and the UK). If the new president is somehow successful and this heralds a new direction for Iran, fewer Iranians may leave the country and some may return. Alternatively, closer relations with the West may prompt yet more people to leave unhindered. The presence of an estimated 780,000 Afghans in Iran, most of whom arrived irregularly and who often face harsh detention and summary expulsions, also featured in election campaigning. These are not the only migrants some politicians are promising to 'completely' expel. Some sources claim as many as eight million migrants live in Iran irregularly.[31]

Belgium

Flemish opinion polls indicated that migration was a pivotal issue for people in Belgium. Some suggested all parties were involved in an anti-migration 'bidding war'.[32] As a result, the far-right was leading in the polls prior to the elections in June. Many analysts also predicted a major far-right swing, but the country saw only a slight rightward shift. Consequently, contrary to polls and predictions, the more extreme Vlaams Belang party did not win as much as was expected – one of the various election results in 2024 where a far-right anti-migration party did less well than expected.[33] The conservative nationalist New Flemish Alliance (with strict immigration policies which include the intention to remove all irregular migrants) retained its spot as the largest political party.

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25 Hardy, E. (2024) The Role of Migration in a Year of Crucial Elections. Carnegie.
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27 Al Jazeera (2024) French left says 'ready to govern' as country faces hung parliament
28 Lawless, J & Kirka, A. (2024) Elections in Europe and Iran show authoritarian march may have slowed, not halted. AP News
29 Gambrell, J & Vahdat, A. (2024) Masoud Pezeshkian, a heart surgeon who rose to power in parliament, now Iran's president-elect. AP News
30 Sewell, A. (2024) Hamas' top political leader is killed in Iran in strike that risks triggering all-out regional war. AP News
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32 VUB (2024) Is migration also the defining issue for you in the 2024 elections? Vrije Universiteit Brussel
33 Haeck, P., Camille Gijs, C and Victor Jack, V. (2024) Belgium drifts to the right — but not far right. Politico

Tunisia

Tunisia has become a major country of transit for people on the move from Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions, as migrants and asylum seekers try to avoid the long-standing horrors of Libya on their way to Europe. Meanwhile, the country has well-financed but controversial agreements with the EU to assist in the management (prevention) of migrants leaving Tunisian shores under its 'neighbourhood' partnership.[34] As a result, conditions for stranded migrants in Tunisia further deteriorated throughout 2023, and the issue of migrants has become sensationalised.[35] In early 2023, President Saied polarised Tunisian society and sparked a wave of violence against Black migrants by alleging they threatened to transform 'Arab-Muslim' Tunisia into an 'African' country, and problematising and scapegoating migrants for his political ends.[36] Tunisia holds elections in October of this year.

United Kingdom

Bucking some dominant trends in Europe, the UK voted in a centre-left new government after Keir Starmer's landslide election victory in early July. Ending 14 years of Conservative Party rule, the Labour Party promised a wide range of changes including reducing overall immigration, burying the external processing 'Rwanda plan' and trying a policing approach to stopping the 'small boats' crossing the English Channel – something the Conservatives had manifestly failed to do. Despite immigration being one of the top three issues during the electoral campaign, according to polls, it was the desire to remove the Conservatives that appeared to have been paramount in people's voting behaviour. Those who were especially concerned about migration voted for the anti-migration Reform Party, which gained over 14 percent of the popular vote, becoming the third party by vote share but winning just five seats in parliament. Shortly after the Labour win and following a triple stabbing incident on 29 July, serious anti-migrant and anti-asylum rioting took place in multiple urban centres across England, Ireland and Wales. Hundreds were arrested, many of whom were subsequently handed significant custodial sentences.[37] The riots where people chanted against 'small boats' gave an early test to Prime Minister Starmer, at a time which saw record numbers of crossings – more than 1,000 new arrivals – over a four-day period in early August.[38]

Mexico

The coincidence of this year's electoral cycle in Mexico and the United States highlights the relevance of the migration agenda, which is very prominent in the bilateral relationship between the two countries.[39] Mexico has recently become a major destination country for significant numbers of asylum seekers and migrants and is under continual pressure from the US to enforce more stringent border control measures to reduce numbers accessing the US through Mexico's northern border. As such, the issue of migration is both politicised and securitised in Mexico. Claudia Sheinbaum, of the left-leaning Morena party, won with more than 58 percent of the presidential vote, making history as Mexico's first female president. Different candidates addressed migration-related challenges in their campaigns, but there was little anti-migrant rhetoric and little difference between candidates' positions on the subject. All highlighted the importance of addressing the multi-layered challenges of migration in their region through cooperation and multinational partnerships, with their approaches differing only marginally. Even if migration did not feature heavily in the elections, the position of the new president on migration and asylum is likely to be very significant from a political standpoint, both domestically and internationally.

Croatia

Right-wing and nationalist perspectives are widely supported in Croatia. In April, Croatia's ruling conservative centre-right Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) won the parliamentary election, but with fewer seats than needed.[40] Taking a further rightward tack, the party formed a coalition government with Homeland Movement – a nationalist and right-wing populist political party, which became the 'kingmaker' after winning only 14 seats to HDZ's 61.[41] Both parties are strongly nationalist and can be expected to be tough on migrant workers and irregular migrants and asylum seekers – often from Afghanistan, Iran and Syria, mostly in transit through Croatia. Aid organisations document violations against refugees and migrants, including illegal summary returns, physical violence, humiliation and theft by law-enforcement officials.[42]

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38 UK Home Office (2024) (online) Small boat arrivals – last 7 days
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40 Tesija, V. (2024) Croatia's HDZ Secures Third Govt Term in Alliance With Far-Right. BalkanInsight.
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42 Amnesty International (2023) Croatia 2023

Portugal

The far-right, anti-migrant populist Chega party surged, fuelled by young Portuguese voters and winning 50 seats – up from 12.[43] Their win represents a big shift in the political dynamics in Portugal, normally a reliably liberal and migrant-friendly country. In the March elections, the centre-right alliance led by the Social Democratic Party won the majority of seats by a slim margin (80 of 230 seats). Although migration was an important talking point in the election campaigns, so too were housing, public services, wages and more. Chega saw its support drop from 18.1 percent to 9.8 percent between the national elections in March and the EU elections in June.[44]

Panama

In a surprise win this May, former security minister José Raúl Mulino of the right-wing Realizing Goals party won the presidency, replacing outgoing President Laurentino Cortizo of the centre-left Democratic Revolutionary Party. Although Panama was already planning to take a stricter position against transit migrants, Mulino immediately vowed to take a tough securitised stance against migrant arrivals in Panama, promising to "close" the Darién Gap.[45] The migrant issue has had rising importance in this small country – its population is approximately 4.5 million – with over 520,000 migrants and asylum seekers passing into Panama through the Darién Gap in 2023 alone.[46] Additionally, Mulino lost no time signing a cooperation deal with the US, which is keen to deport transit migrants who eventually move north to the US southern border.[47] In a statement reminiscent of some Mediterranean leaders, Mulino accused international aid workers of facilitating illegal migration.

Türkiye

Syrians have been a major polarising issue in Turkish politics for some years.[48] The 3.7 million Syrian refugees living in Türkiye represented a 'political flashpoint' and one of the main issues at the forefront of the election campaign in the country in 2023, along with inflation and the centralisation of power in the hands of the government. Reportedly, leading candidates competed to offer the most aggressive proposal to deport the refugees back to Syria.[49] Despite the predictions of most surveys, President Erdoğan and his People's Alliance party were narrowly re-elected. Not unlike South Africa, it appears all parties promise to deal strictly with Syrian refugees. This year's local elections took place in 81 provinces, as well as for various thousands of mayoral and local councillor positions. The issue of Syrian refugees became both securitised and politicised further in July after anti-Syrian riots.[50]

Germany

Although Germany must hold its next federal elections before 26 October 2025, it held three important regional state elections – Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg – in September of this year. In the June EU parliamentary elections, the far-right, avowedly anti-migrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) surged in both votes and seats, finishing second of all parties. The party also recorded success in this year's regional elections. With migration at the top of their agenda, their success clearly illustrates the level of traction their views have with some of the electorate.[51] These results were a 'huge blow' for the government, and commentators are speculating on the future role the AfD and the migration agenda could play in German politics – not to mention the influence AfD European MPs will have in the EU parliament as part of the newly formed anti-migrant Europe of Sovereign Nations.[52]

India

Migration is a 'hot-button' issue both for the federal government as well as for select subnational entities.[53] In elections in India between April and June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a third term, but lost an outright majority and was forced to form a coalition government for the first time. For many analysts, the BJP is illustrative of nationalist populism and majoritarianism and epitomises democratic backsliding. In particular, the *Citizenship Amendment Act* – which is perceived as anti-Muslim and having highly discriminatory outcomes for refugees and migrants – has been at the centre of the election.[54] Some are hoping the authoritarian and highly nationalist drift driven by BJP's majority may be coming to an end with the recent election outcomes.[55]

El Salvador

Elections in El Salvador in February and March were indirectly relevant to migration. The incumbent and self-described "world's coolest dictator" Nayib Bukele was re-elected as president in a huge landslide of popularity,

43 Carbonaro, G. (2023) 'They say they're not racist': How far-right extremism seeped into Portugal's mainstream politics. Euronews.
44 McMurtry, A. (2024) Portugal's far-right party deflates in European elections. AA.
45 Zamorano, J. (2024) Panama's New President José Raúl Mulino Vows To Stop Migration Through Darien Gap. HuffPost.
46 Hardy (2024) Op. Cit.
47 Montoya-Galvez, C. (2024) U.S. agrees to help Panama deport migrants crossing Darién Gap. CBS News.
48 Uras, U. (2022) Rising anti-refugee sentiment leads to debate in Turkey. Aljazeera.
49 Hickson, A. & Wilder, C. (2023) Protecting Syrian Refugees in Turkey from Forced Repatriation. New Lines Institute.
50 Al Jazeera (2024) Protests and arrests as anti-Syrian riots rock Turkey
51 Kaiser, J. (2024) Germany's scandal-ridden AfD rides steady wave of support into elections. The Parliament.
52 Starcevic, S. & Wax, E. (2024) New far-right group led by Germany's AfD founded in European Parliament. Politico.
53 Hardy, E. (2024) The Role of Migration in a Year of Crucial Elections. Carnegie.
54 Saaliq, S. (2024) India's new citizenship law excludes Muslims. Here's what to know. AP News.
55 Maiorano, D. (2024) India's 2024 Elections: Has Democratic Backsliding Come to a Halt? Istituto Affari Internazionali.

partly derived from his iron-fist approach to crime. [56] El Salvador was a typical crime gang-infested Central American country, which millions of citizens were fleeing, primarily migrating north to claim asylum in the US. It remains to be seen if Bukele's hugely popular mega-prisons and crime reduction projects – which are being copied, in part, by Honduras and Ecuador – will reduce forced displacement and ease migratory and asylum pressures on the US, Mexico and other transit states.[57]

United States

Mixed migration concerns are as high as they could be for voters in the US this year. Various polls have repeatedly placed polemical issues of border control, undocumented migrants and immigration at the top of the agenda for a highly divided electorate.[58] Their salience in US politics is ongoing and will only increase as election campaigning gears up. For mixed migration, the outcomes of this election could be very dramatic due to the contrasting approaches of the Democrats and Republicans. In particular, the Republicans led by Donald Trump have a clear anti-migrant agenda, including forbidding 'sanctuary cities', sealing the US-Mexico border and conducting mass deportations.[59]

The results, therefore, could affect millions of people already inside US territory, including those on humanitarian parole, awaiting deportation or asylum hearings, on temporary permits of residence, in detention centres, waiting for family reunification as well as children of undocumented migrants who were born in the US. Millions outside the US could be affected, too: for example, those who are would-be migrants, those preparing for secondary movement or those in transit and hopeful of entering the country using Safe Mobility Offices or online appointment booking systems (CBP One app). These are people from a wide array of countries from Asia and Africa, but especially from Mexico, the Northern Triangle countries, Ecuador, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela. At a regional level, the election outcomes will have direct repercussions on bilateral trade and migration agreements and military cooperation in Central and South America.[60]

Conclusion

The above 17 country briefs illustrate not only the salience of mixed migration issues in this year's elections, but highlight some of the implications of the outcomes of those elections on the lives of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. These cases also show that the political salience and preoccupation with immigration is by no means monopolised by the Global North.

Interestingly, immigration issues are of little importance in authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China, where strict rules and border controls are implemented without regard to international normative laws or conventions. The Gulf States – where the vast majority of the population is made up by labour migrants – also manage immigration with strict rules that bar integration, assimilation or pathways to citizenship.

Across the 88 national elections that were scheduled for 2024, however, mixed migration was not always the most prominent issue.

For example, it could be expected that migration would be high on Mexico's political agenda, whereas in fact, it was not a contentious issue, perhaps because all candidates and parties have similar views on the subject. Other examples include countries such as Brazil, Canada, Chile, Jordan, Finland, Hungary, Iceland and Pakistan, where issues of migration and refugees are either high on the political agenda or where the results of the elections would have a direct impact on them.

The rise of migration's salience generally and, specifically, in politics is symptomatic of larger issues of global trends – polycrisis factors including the growing impact of climate change, the globalisation of crime, the cost of living and the accompanying rise of populist politics. In many countries, the elections of 2024 and their outcomes have a distinct anti-migrant and anti-refugee edge, with right-leaning and populist parties scoring better than ever or even taking, or continuing to hold, leadership. For the moment, it appears that – at the political level, at least – 2024 is a 'colder' year compared to earlier 'warmer' gestures of welcome, such as when countries opened their borders to almost eight million Venezuelans, 5.5 million Syrians and 6.5 million Ukrainians. Ironically, in many countries, the current anti-migrant surge is partly a result of the perceived burden of 'too many' refugees.

56 Westfall (2024) Op. Cit.
57 See also *Thematic snapshot* on El Salvador, page 227.
58 Pew Research Center (2024) Immigration attitudes and the 2024 election; NORC (2024) 2024: The Public's Priorities and Expectations. The Associated Press NORC; Brenan, M. (2024) Immigration Named Top U.S. Problem for Third Straight Month. Gallup
59 Boundless (2024) What the New Republican Party Platform Says About Immigration.
60 Congressional Research Service (2023) Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy.

However, rhetoric is not the same as policy and implementation. Although it appears that there is a strong impetus to reduce asylum space and migration in many places following this year's elections, restrictive policies have often proven hard to implement for two reasons. Firstly, international and domestic law and accompanying institutions often mitigate and contain radical or extreme policy. Secondly, the world's economy and countries with shrinking and ageing populations are in increasing need of migrant labour – at some point, economic necessity looks certain to ameliorate exclusionary aspirations.

What do anti-migrant policies in winning political parties actually achieve during their government tenure? In the UK, under the nominally migration-restrictive and pro-Brexit Conservatives for 14 years, legal migration rose to unprecedented levels, way beyond their election promises. Equally, the Conservatives found themselves unable to stop the 'small boats', whose numbers also increased significantly during their tenure. In the US, irregular migration has continued to be a major policy dilemma before, during and after the avowedly anti-migrant and anti-Muslim President Trump. Parties and policies do not operate in vacuums but often in contexts with regulations, laws and international agreements maintained by established institutions and with a clear separation of powers. Perhaps, the inability to implement anti-migrant policies is less interesting to some politicians compared to their use of anti-migrant rhetoric to gain votes and power.

Nevertheless, the seriousness of the anti-migrant and anti-refugee trends seen in the elections that have already taken place in 2024 is sobering. The implications for millions of mostly vulnerable individual people and families caught in the migration/refugee nexus cannot be underestimated, as many countries' new governments start to implement their harsher and more restrictive policies. Meanwhile, for millions, the many global drivers of displacement and mobility have never been so compelling.

Interview

Immigration and the pace of change

The societal changes generated by immigration can be a divisive topic, sparking both fear and enthusiasm. However, according to **Andrew Selee**, we should also consider the pace at which these changes occur – and their perceived effects on people's lives.

Dr. Andrew Selee is the President of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), a position he took in 2017. The MPI is a global, nonpartisan institution working to improve immigration and integration policies. Dr. Selee is also the author, editor and co-editor of several books and publications, with a focus on the relations between Mexico and the United States. His latest book, published in 2018, is Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together.

Why does the issue of immigration divide people so much?

First of all, anything that involves change among people can be divisive. It can also be unifying, but both of those elements are present. I think there are three things that spark people in different directions and explain why people respond differently. One is change – cultural and social change that happens in people's lives. Some people love immigration because it speaks to their natural desire for inclusion and change. For some people it seems absolutely fabulous because it creates cultural and social change and yet for others it's really threatening. Most people grow up in communities that change only gradually. And when the pace of change increases, some people love it, but others feel like their way of life is threatened.

Secondly, I think we live in uncertain economic times. That's probably always been true in the last 400 or 500 years, of course, but I do think technology has increased the pace of labour market change and many people feel more vulnerable as a result. And there is a question in some people's minds about what makes them vulnerable, whether it's immigration, trade or technology. And it's a lot easier to be angry at people than at forces you can't see. And, of course, for other people, it's the exact opposite: it's an opportunity. For people who feel more secure, immigration actually is often seen as a benefit. But others see it as one of the many threats they face, whether or not that's logical, whether or not studies tell us that it is a threat to people's livelihood, people perceive it that way.

The third element is chaos. This is something we have to be aware of: when we don't have immigration policies that align supply and demand in some sort of rational way, people are going to find their way around border controls and the result will be a perception of chaos. All the studies tell us that the perception of chaos

at borders is probably what most alienates people about immigration right now. The perception of chaos, I think, is what actually tips it from being a worry of an intensely concerned minority to something that generates a much broader sense of wariness.

There seems to be a contradiction between the economic necessity for immigration and people's tolerance of immigrants. Almost as if people preferred to miss out on the economic advantage immigration can offer, if that meant reducing the number of immigrants.

This is where the limitations of research and fact-based work come in. You can make the case that we need mobility for many countries to stay competitive. And it's not only developed countries. I mean, there are increasingly a lot of upper middle-income countries and even some middle-income countries that have significant labor market needs. For them to stay economically competitive, they need immigrants. Yes, you could do something with technology and automate some functions, but there will have to be immigrants too.

Countries and people in different countries have preferences on the pace of change. This is a huge issue in South Korea or Japan, for example, which are facing major demographic pressures. How far do you go to bring in workers from other countries and how long do you let them let them integrate and stay permanently if that means changing your culture? The same thing is going on in Germany or the United States. Even in Canada or Australia, which really have already crossed the threshold and become countries that have really strong and quite plural immigrant communities.

Probably around a quarter of all Canadians were born abroad – the number is huge, and it's about 30% in the case of Australia, but it's still a question of how fast a pace of change societies are willing to deal with. Even some people who are immigrants themselves or children of immigrants look at this and say, 'We can't take it anymore.' But I think it's a legitimate question.

We need to acknowledge that people within countries are going to have debates about how fast that pace of change is and what that means. There are some people in that debate who are undoubtedly racists, while others are enthusiastic about change. But in the middle, there are a lot of people who probably understand the need for change, but aren't necessarily comfortable with what that means in their daily life.

So, for you it's more about the pace of change and less an issue of xenophobia or even racism?

Racism is now such an overused term. I do think we need to be aware that not everyone who is concerned about immigration is necessarily a full-on racist, and that there are many people who are wrestling with a change in their way of life. Whether it's Japan, Germany, the United States, Thailand, Colombia or many other places around the world, immigration brings change. We can argue that, most of the time, it's pretty good change, but that doesn't mean that it's easy for people to go through the process.

I do think there is some element of struggling to deal with differences in many countries, where people are pushing back on folks who aren't like them. But it's not homogeneous within countries. People in a capital city that has always had people arriving may be much more open to immigration than those in a rural community where there's been more cultural continuity over time.

> **"I think we're seeing a convergence of people's discomfort with change, with the pace of change, with the perception that people are not coming through orderly ways."**

Cities tend to be more porous anyway. They've always gone through change, often through internal migration, but always through change. I think we're seeing a convergence of people's discomfort with change, with the pace of change, with the perception that people are not coming through orderly ways.

What about the relationship between humanitarian protection and irregular movement?

In Europe, the United States and much of the world, asylum and refugee pathways are seen as disorderly by many. People who make negative decisions and who are not accepted for refugee status are not returned and so asylum systems become de facto entryways for people who may not qualify for humanitarian protection. But that's one of those things I think we have to wrestle with – there are clearly millions and millions of people in this world who do need humanitarian protection even if they don't always line up with the people who are using the traditional asylum pathways.

And right now, in many countries, asylum has stopped protecting people who need it because they don't get decisions for years. At the same time, that lack of decision-making ability incentivises people who might otherwise not pursue asylum claims to present themselves as asylum seekers.

Is the line between migrant and asylum seeker being blurred by events?

I think there are legitimate questions we have to ask. I think it is worth asking: when do people have to flee? Is it because the state is pursuing them or is unwilling or unable to protect them? Could people have stayed somewhere else in their country? Was

there another country on their journey where they should have applied first if what they were seeking was humanitarian protection? Those are legitimate questions: if someone came through 10 countries, were they not safe in any of them?

So, you might start wondering whether we stretched this asylum door open too far, so far that it becomes meaningless and therefore it becomes impossible to protect people who have priority needs, who really could not have been safe in their country. Certainly, there are places where it's not safe to be gay or lesbian or transgender. There are places where defying the local gang not only creates a problem in your own neighbourhood, but it also puts your name out there and you have to get out.

I don't think we should exclude things like gang violence, sexual orientation or domestic violence, but I do think we have to be a little more clinical about who needs international protection. The reality is that if we make asylum the answer to everything, it will ultimately lose public support. And it will stop protecting. I tend to talk more about legal pathways these days including those which include access to humanitarian protection.

> **"We always have to figure out how we live up to our international obligations to deal with people who cannot stay in their countries, who are forced out and who become the responsibility of the international community."**

When you wrote *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together*, you discussed the idea of a Mexican border as a seam rather than a frontier because of the interconnectedness of the US and Mexico on a number of fronts. Were you suggesting there could be an open border?

No, I think the modern world we live in is state-centric, or at least it's been like this for the last 400 years. And states are useful. They provide public goods and give us an identity which allows us to have a sense of solidarity that we can build common efforts around. We need to bind our communities in ways that allow us to be economically successful, to make the right investments, to bring people along and to make sure people have equality of opportunities. We don't always do it perfectly, but states are useful and I don't think we're going back. So having boundaries matters. And so how do we connect people in an interconnected world? How do we create the pathways that allow people to move back and forth in very agile ways, in ways that benefit people on both sides of the border? We're in a world that's changing demographically quite quickly. In the United States, we're seeing right now seven to 10 million jobs open every month.

You know, the same thing is happening in much of Europe. I mean, look at Italy or South Korea. We're going to have to figure out mobility for labour markets that are going to demand immigrant work. And, of course, we also have to figure out what we do with displacement. Because the other reality is we always have to figure out how we live up to our international obligations to deal with people who cannot stay in their countries, who are forced out and who become the responsibility of the international community. And that then creates obligations on states. But the bigger question may actually not be that in the future, but rather around the demographic changes that attract people to move across borders because there are real opportunities waiting for them. And if we don't figure out the legal pathways for this, people will find other ways of coming.

Over two million undocumented migrants were apprehended entering the US last year. If you were running the US, would you want to 'build a wall'?

I think the wall became a metaphor and a Rorschach test for how people feel about immigration. It is both oversold and under-considered. I mean, on one side Trump sold it as the cure-all when in fact it isn't. There are places for which you don't need a wall. There are places where you can build a wall, but even then people have access to asylum and other legal procedures by the time they get to the wall, so the wall won't stop them from getting in.

> **"Some of the walls became a metaphor for how people feel about globalisation, about immigrants, about trade, about other vulnerabilities to attack from the rest of the world. And it's become such a symbol we can't seem to have a rational conversation about it."**

There are already lots of walls on the US border. I mean, there were a lot of walls even before Trump got there. But Democrats and people who don't like Trump went in the other direction and said we don't need a wall at all. The wall became a symbol. And some of this is about wanting to wall off the world and wall off things that we do not control as a country – we were once the preeminent power globally and we've lost that. And a wall on the border with Mexico is a tangible symbol. I think some of the walls became a metaphor for how people feel about globalisation, about immigrants, about trade, about other vulnerabilities to attack from the rest of the world. And it's become such a symbol we can't seem to have a rational conversation about it.

But in reality, it would be good to have fencing, walls and technology in many parts of the border. The rational conversation would be, what sort of barriers do we need and where? What should our laws look like? What does the humanitarian protection system look like? How do we resource this?

Everything on immigration comes back to symbols, at least in most developed countries and increasingly also in some emerging economies. Sometimes we don't get to the rational conversation because we react immediately to the symbol that's been put out there.

To what extent do you think the US's 'humanitarian parole', the CBP One app, the Safe Mobility Offices and now Biden's new asylum regulations are truly about offering safe access at scale? Do you think they might be, in fact, designed to reduce the pressures at the US borders while discouraging mobility?

I think this is the moment to innovate how we find the people with protection needs closer to where they are, which is a big part of the safe mobility initiative. Or how we create an orderly system at borders so that people can, even if they have to wait a bit, get an appointment to be screened at a port of entry. And there has been a huge expansion of legal pathways to the United States with the CHNV program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans. That is technically not a protection pathway; rather it is humanitarian parole for people that gives them a two-year work permit. It's directed at people from four countries where there are protection needs, but it is not based explicitly on individual protection needs.

It's not a pathway that asks if someone merits international protection. It just says, if you're from those four countries, here's a way you can go legally to the United States. The CHNV program is for 360,000 people a year, which is a significant expansion in admission to the United States from the Western Hemisphere. The US admits two to two and a half million people in work and education pathways every year, including a million in green cards, so you if add 360,000 more legal entries, that's suddenly quite a significant expansion.

I think that's creative. I think we're headed into a world where we need to think about how we do humanitarian protection differently, much more intentionally, much more focused on where people are starting their journey rather than just when they show up at borders. And I think we've learned that enforcement has diminishing returns, particularly if you don't give people a legal alternative.

In the US, what are the perceptions of regular as opposed to irregular migration?

Around February and March this year [2024], there were four polls that came out within the span of about a month and a half on immigration. These were done by the Wall Street Journal, AP NORC, Pew, and Gallup, and they all came to the same conclusion: Americans are generally favorable towards immigration. Yes, support has gone down slightly, but it's still higher than it was 20 years ago. However, people are very concerned about the border and irregular crossings. And I think the underlying recognition among average Americans is that immigration matters for the United States, that it's part of what makes the country successful, but that they really want to know that there's an orderly process for people coming in.

> **"The underlying recognition among average Americans is that immigration matters for the United States, that it's part of what makes the country successful, but that they really want to know that there's an orderly process for people coming in."**

And without a well-thought-out immigration system, you're always going to have problems. The last time we did a major immigration reform was in 1990. We set levels for most kinds of visas back in 1990! That's 34 years ago in a different economy and in a different demographic moment. We haven't updated it. We have a need for immigration, but we don't have the legal pathways, and, therefore, we have people coming illegally or irregularly. But that then creates pushbacks because it's chaotic.

The question, then, is: how do you deal with the chaos, make sure people don't cross illegally, but at the same time create opportunities for people to come legally because the economy needs it? That's the challenge, because what gets political attention right now is people crossing the border unauthorised. But in reality, under the Biden administration, most migrants who manage to make it to the US border are probably getting in. Yes, the deportation numbers look high, but the reality is there keeps being this push politically to close the border, in part because the border is still fairly easy to cross.

I do think there's a really legitimate conversation. Yes, we deport a lot of people but, frankly, it's not an orderly process and most people do make it in, despite the number of people who get returned. There does need to be an investment in creating a rational, functioning asylum system and a rational immigration control

system. But in the end, none of that's going to work unless we also figure out the legal immigration part.

We know one of the main migration drivers for people from the Northern Triangle is crime. We see an iron-fist government response to crime in El Salvador and now Ecuador and also Honduras. The results are a considerable reduction in gang crime in El Salvador. Is this a sustainable solution and one that will reduce movement?

It's hard to tell. I mean, the number of people coming from El Salvador has gone down, but they went down before the iron fist policy. In poorly institutionalised systems, it's tempting to go to the iron fist because nothing else seems to work. Trying to do rule-of-law-based policing is really hard in imperfect systems. But my sense is that iron-fist solutions have diminishing returns over time as well.

They work really well for a while but at great human costs to people who get unfairly accused and put behind bars. Although they do bring numbers down quickly, I don't think we have the evidence to know if it works over time. Authoritarian societies can do many things better in the short term because they make command decisions. But they also create networks of corruption and complicity that can over time undermine not only the rule of law, but also the functioning of government.

Which could, in itself, create conditions that eventually become even bigger drivers for mobility.

Exactly right. My suspicion is things that look really good in the short term may look really bad in the long term. If you look at societies that have relied on long-term authoritarian methods to control people, what you've seen is those societies decay over time, and either they transition to democracy or they live in a really unstable equilibrium over time.

This year is a big one for elections around the world. Do you see a growing rise in populism? And if so, what are the implications for the future of migration and asylum?

Populism is being fuelled by many things, and the perception of chaos at borders is one of them. The perception of rapid change in cultures and societies is another in some places. And I think we're going to see more pushback against immigration exactly at a time when we need more legal immigration.

We live in strange times. I think there was a moment in history where you did really have conflicting interests and you had labour movements and business organisations and farmers, and people were organised to try and defend particular interests. And governments could expand in different ways and change the calculus of who benefited.

I think we've reached the end of that, where people expect very little change in their lives coming from governments. We live in a moment where people's expectations of real changes coming from government are pretty low. And what they're looking for are leaders who speak to their symbolic needs, who make them feel recognised, who acknowledge their fears, their concerns, and their anger. And that happens on all sides, I think, because sometimes there are multiple sides in every country. But I think that, for many people, elections are not about policy. They're about how we feel about the candidates and whether they meet our needs for some sort of symbolic acknowledgement of our concerns.

"We live in a moment when people's expectations of real changes coming from government are pretty low. And what they're looking for are leaders who speak to their symbolic needs, who make them feel recognised, who acknowledge their fears, their concerns, and their anger."

What about the prospect of Donald Trump being re-elected?

For the US, this is a really defining election on immigration policy – even more than the last one where Trump was elected. If Trump were to win, this would be an administration that is sceptical not only of unauthorised immigration but also of legal immigration. It would be a huge change for a country that has always been welcoming of immigrants, at least on paper, even if the population has always been somewhat conflicted about what that means in practice.

So, if Trump were to come into power, this would be a watershed moment in the United States, and we're really in uncharted territory. Or perhaps we're back where we were a century ago, the last time we tried to close the country off to most immigration. We'll see.

Thematic snapshot

The extraordinary case of fake-news-driven 'populist' street violence: anti-migrants summer riots and protests in the UK

This summer's protests and violence in the UK were an extraordinary case of a multi-locational, anti-migrant fire, where fake news and toxic social media were both the spark and the incendiary fuel. Arguably, though, they were also the result of a complex interplay of factors, including economic and social grievances, political discontent and social tensions. While not the sole cause, the impact of digital platforms in spreading and amplifying divisive content as well as mobilising protesters was a critical element in the dynamics of the riots.

Between 30 July and 7 August 2024, an estimated 29 anti-immigration demonstrations and riots took place across 27 towns and cities in the UK.[1] Many, but not all, of these were violent, with participants attacking mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers and clashing with the police. By the end of August, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) confirmed that 1,280 people had been arrested for their involvement, with 796 people charged,[2] and that the police had identified hundreds more suspects in connection with the disorders who may be arrested in the future.

Despite a pre-existing judicial crisis in terms of lengthy court delays in the UK, the government deliberately fast-tracked court cases with unprecedented speed as a deterrent to further street violence. By 8 August, over 200 people had already been sentenced and by 2 September the government said 570 people had been brought before the courts, many receiving considerable custodial sentences.[3] The UK had not seen disorder of this nature or magnitude since riots in 2011, in which at least 4,000 people were arrested (within one month of the event) and 1,984 prosecuted (within two months).[4]

A tragic event became the catalyst for these public eruptions of protest. Axel Muganwa Rudakubana, born in Cardiff, Wales, and of Rwandan parentage was charged with a stabbing attack which killed three young girls and wounded others in Southport, Merseyside, on 29 July.[5] However, the spark that lit the fire of protest was the misinformation spread online claiming that the 17-year-old male suspect was called Ali Al-Shakati and was an asylum seeker who had recently come to the UK on the infamous 'small boats'. "Save our kids. Stop the boats" was a chant frequently used by some of the protesters in some locations.

The misnaming of the stabbing suspect and other misinformation rapidly lit up social media like wildfire, as public and behind-the-scenes influencers, as well as so-called news sources, shared fake news with millions of viewers, some with calls to action.[6] Known far-right activists promoted and attended the riots, including, reportedly, Patriotic Alternative and members of the English Defence League (EDL). The Merseyside police publicly identified the EDL as a key factor, although the organisation ceased to exist in any formal sense after its founder, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon – who uses the alias Tommy Robinson – focused on spreading his message on social media platforms.[7]

The speed and extent of the spread of misinformation at the end of July and early August offer an alarming example of mobilised and radicalised events occurring without direct leadership or formal organisation. Analysts concur that it is not possible to pinpoint who started the calls for protests, but there was a clear pattern of multiple influencers and conspiracy theorists who together amplified false claims about the identity of the attacker through various echo chambers of social media.[8] Some analysis indicates that the misnaming of the attacker started with an influencer called Artemisfornow and a separate source called Channel 3 Now.[9] These claims,

1 Downs, W. (2024) Policing response to the 2024 summer riots. House of Commons Library.
2 NPCC (2024) Arrests and charges related to violent disorder continue.
3 BBC (2024) Who are the rioters and what jail sentences have they received?; House of Commons (2024) Home Secretary statement on disorder. UK Government.
4 Berman, G. (2014) The August 2011 riots: a statistical summary. House of Commons Library.
5 Culley, J. & Khalil, H. (2024) Southport stabbings - what we know about attack. BBC.
6 Spring, M. (2024) Did social media fan the flames of riot in Southport? BBC.
7 Ibid.
8 Quinn, B. (2024) Misinformation about Southport attack suspect spreads on social media. The Guardian.
9 Channel 4 News (2024) Southport attack: how disinformation spread to start a riot; Burnell, P. (2024) No charge over spreading of Southport misinformation. BBC.

alongside additional provocative content, also reached people without any connection to far-right individuals and groups.

The NGO Hope Not Hate described the protests and riots as having "no single organiser. Many have the support of the organised far right but appear locally led [...] Most of the planned events are more broadly focused, expressive of a wider hostility to multiculturalism, anti-Muslim and anti-migrant prejudice, as well as a visceral streak of populist, anti-government sentiment."[10] A key issue identified by Hope Not Hate was that "most of these protests are being planned organically, often by local people who are plugged into decentralised far-right networks online". The "shared slogans, language and iconography owes to the fact that their organisers are often active in overlapping online spaces".[11]

These statements reflect how some are describing the nature of the contemporary far-right in the UK, where relatively large numbers of people are engaging in activity online but there's no membership or structure.[12] Similarly, they also reflect that the protests occurred in a context of three groups of underlying concerns, including:

1. Socio-economic issues, such as rising inflation, cost of living crises, rising inequality, unemployment and dissatisfaction with government policies.

2. Political discontent and widespread frustration with political leadership and policies, including those related to immigration, public services and economic management.

3. Long-standing social tensions, particularly in communities experiencing rapid demographic changes or economic hardship.[13] The UK has experienced increasing polarisation on issues such as Brexit, national identity and immigration. These divisions have been exacerbated by a perceived lack of integration and resources to support communities – especially low-income ones – with high numbers of migrants.

The timing of the protests was interesting insofar as they occurred just after the end of 14 years of Conservative government rule – the party that repeatedly claimed to be reducing migration and be tough on irregular migration, but proved to be unable to materialise either 'promise'. On the contrary, the numbers of irregular and regular migrants have risen significantly in recent years, despite the Brexit promise to 'take back control' of the UK's borders.[14] So these protests also highlighted the government's failure to address issues of immigration and, specifically, the 'small boats' phenomenon. Statistics from the first months of the new Labour administration illustrate that the new government, too, is struggling to control the situation.[15] In August, for example, the number of people crossing the English Channel in small boats sometimes reached record levels of over 800 per day.[16]

Reassuringly, this summer's protests and disorder were met with robust police response, rapid judicial processing of those arrested and mass-organised counter-demonstrations, especially from anti-racist groups. The government's reaction echoed by many analysts and commentators is that the street violence was the result of thuggery and criminality with virtually no reference to any of the direct concerns (child safety, immigration, asylum policies etc.) or any underlying causes. The new UK prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, repeatedly referred to the protesters as "thugs", condemned their actions as "far-right thuggery" and promised they would all face the full force of the law.[17] This reaction, along with the speedy prison sentences, appears to have worked as a deterrent as no further protests have taken place.

The short-lived nature of the eruption of the UK summer protests may be an indication of the somewhat ephemeral and passing nature of fast-paced sensationalised social media. It may question how deep and real the underlying causes are, and whether people feel sufficiently motivated to demonstrate in any sustained manner. In France, the Yellow Vest populist, grassroots movement for economic justice (*Mouvement des gilets jaunes*) offers a contrasting example. Opposing what it saw as the wealthy urban elite and the establishment (but, noticeably, not anti-immigration), the movement involved an estimated three million people and held hundreds of demonstrations between 2018 and 2022. These protests sometimes developed into major riots, described as the most violent since those of May 1968 and continued despite strong police action.[18]

Nevertheless, there are those calling for a public inquiry who consider writing off the UK riots merely as racist,

10 Hope Not Hate (2024) A weekend of unrest: dozens of protests planned in the wake of Southport.
11 Ibid.
12 Casciani, D. (2024) Violent Southport protests reveal organising tactics of the far-right. BBC.
13 Easton, M. (2024) Protests reveal deep-rooted anger, but UK is not at boiling point. BBC.
14 García, C. A. & Duncan, P. (2024) Immigration: how 14 years of Tory rule have changed Britain – in charts. The Guardian.
15 Mitchell, A & Devlin, K. (2024) Starmer shows 'great interest' in Italy's plans to send migrants to Albania, says Meloni. The Independent.
16 Border Force (2024) Small boat arrivals – last 7 days (Updated 18 September 2024). UK Government.
17 BBC (2024) Starmer condemns 'far-right thuggery' as unrest continues.
18 Wikipedia (2024) Yellow vests protests.

Islamophobic, anti-migrant scapegoating by right-wing "thugs" as unwise, because "rioting is generally an indicator that all is not well in the body politic. We ignore this at our peril".[19] Others agree that the causes of the protests were not only about migrants or asylum seekers but about economic inequality in the UK, which is well known and requires urgent remedial action and no public inquiry.[20] Either way, the main responsibility for the remarkable flare of populist-style disorder in so many cities across the UK this summer appears to rest with the irresponsible misuse of social media more than anything else.

19 Newburn, T. (2024) Racism? Poverty, drink and social media? We still don't know why Britons rioted a month ago – and we need answers. The Guardian.
20 Ford, R & Butcher, J. (2024) Economic inequality leads to anger – and riots. The Guardian.

The instrumentalisation of migration in the populist era

Ayhan Kaya[1]

Anti-migration, populist political parties are a rising force around the world. In 2024, elections and election campaigning illustrated their ability to attract – and maintain – voter support as independent polls repeatedly showed mixed migration as one of the hottest issues. Is it inevitable, though, that populist parties are anti-migration? Are they posturing opportunistically to capitalise on people's genuine concerns, and do they therefore represent a response to a groundswell of public feeling against migration? Or, instead, do they help create anti-migrant narratives which also maintain a sense of crisis around migration – a crisis which is never really solved, but works to attract more voters to the right-wing populist cause? This essay will focus on right-wing anti-migration populism, how it instrumentalises migration within a broader analysis of populism, how it can be explained, how it operates, why it is currently so popular and what its likely direction going forward is.

Three explanations of populism

A typical modern explanation of populism links it to socio-economic factors, suggesting that populist sentiments arise from the destabilising effects of neoliberal globalisation, leading to precarity and marginalisation among the working and lower-middle classes.[2] These groups reject mainstream politics, generate narratives of ethnic competition and national division, and appeal to a polarising narrative that divides the nation into "aversive insiders" and "invading outsiders".[3]

Another explanation views right-wing populism as a reaction against cosmopolitan elites, emphasising a return to 'traditional values' and an anti-establishment stance. Accordingly, a growing number of people in the EU believe that elites have pushed forward liberal rights such as gender equality, gay rights, mobility, inter-faith dialogue, ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, environmental protection and so on, against the will of ordinary people.[4] Here, populism instrumentalises the politics of nostalgia to win the hearts and minds of those constituents who are subject to a rapid societal, structural, spatial, demographic and cultural transformation in the age of globalisation.[5] Populist slogans in the US – such as Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" or the Tea Party's "Take America Back" – and in the UK – with UKIP's "We Want Our Country Back" and the Brexit campaign promising to "Take Back Control" – strongly resonated among significant numbers of the electorate.[6]

A third approach focuses on the strategic methods populist leaders use to connect with constituents, leveraging ethnicity, culture, religion and myths to mobilise those alienated by globalisation and inequality.[7] Populist leaders often engage in performative acts to highlight both their ordinariness and extraordinary qualities, such as displaying virility. Examples include Silvio Berlusconi's notorious and much-publicised escapades with women, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's nickname *Uzun Adam* (tall man) and Vladimir Putin's tabloid photos showcasing his naked torso while hunting.[8] These figures also 'battle' perceived enemies on behalf of the people, with a recurring theme of paranoia and martyrdom.[9] Another good example is Trump's immediate words just after being shot at in 2024: "Fight, fight, fight!" while raising a fist as security personnel carried him away.[10] Many of his supporters have attributed the failure of the assassination attempt to an act of God, using the phrase: "Because he was touched by God."[11]

Occasionally, in fact, these acts of extraordinariness have religious connotations. Hugo Chávez presented himself as the reincarnation of Simon Bolivar, Silvio Berlusconi once declared himself the Jesus Christ of politics, and Marine

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2 Fennema, M. (2004) Populist Parties of the Right. Amsterdam School for Social Science Research.
3 Brown, W (2018) Neoliberalism's Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century "Democracies" Critical Times.
4 De Vries, C. E. & Hoffmann, I. (2019) The Hopeful, the Fearful and the Furious. Polarization and the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections. Eupinions.
5 Gest, J. Et al. (2017) Roots of the Radical Right: Nostalgic Deprivation in the United States and Britain. Comparative Political Studies.
6 Kaya, A. (2020) *Populism and Heritage in Europe: Lost in Diversity and Unity*. Routledge.
7 Laclau, E. (2005) *On Populist Reason*. Verso.
8 Kaya, A. (2020) Op. Cit.
9 Moffitt, B. (2016) *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation*. Stanford University Press.
10 Smith, D. (2024) 'Fight! Fight! Fight!': Trump emerges as an American messiah with swagger. The Guardian.
11 Holmes, K., Treene, A. & Contorno, S. (2024) An unusually reflective Trump suggests divine intervention in aftermath of rally shooting. CNN.

Le Pen's associations with Joan of Arc's sacrifice and martyrdom reportedly increased her party's followers' admiration for her 'saint-like' female courage.[12]

A rising phenomenon

Populism is a complex concept with varying definitions among scholars. It has been described as a 'thin-centred ideology' (meaning it addresses only part of the wider political agenda), a political style,[13] a political strategy, a discourse to connect with 'the people' or a political logic that mobilises marginalised groups.[14] It has also been suggested that populism is not confined to any region or ideology but is an aspect of various political cultures.[15]

Populist leaders typically maintain popular support by dramatising and scandalising existing or fabricated problems, crises, breakdowns or threats.[16] Populist politicians often exploit and reframe events and situations for their benefit to keep the public on high alert. This tactic makes it easier for them to engage with their supporters through these radically simplified issues and political debates. In Latin America, for instance, some populist politicians invoke imperialist conspiracies; in Africa, they leverage neo-colonialism; in the Netherlands Geert Wilders frequently exploits the perceived increasing Islamisation of the country as a threat to the nation's social, economic and political well-being. In particular, the issue of mixed migration and its framing as a 'crisis' is politically very convenient, offering common ground to unite most right-wing populist parties. Arguably, the populist cause has an unholy alliance and dependency on this 'crisis' never being adequately managed or solved, as it provides a certain level of guaranteed support.

Populist parties have become common in many Western countries in recent years. A selection of these right-wing populist parties – always also promoting anti-migrant or migrant-restrictive positions – include the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, (also the Forum for Democracy (FVD) and JA21), the Danish People's Party in Denmark, the Swedish Democrats in Sweden, the Front National (now National Rally) and Bloc Identitaire in France, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, the Finns Party in Finland, Brothers of Italy, Lega, CasaPound and the Five Star Movement in Italy, Vox in Spain, Chega! in Portugal, the Freedom Party in Austria, Alternative for Germany in Germany, Victor Orban's Fidesz and Jobbik Party in Hungary, the English Defence League, the British National Party, the UK Independence Party and the Reform Party in the UK, the Golden Dawn (previously) and Greek Solution in Greece, Law and Justice Party in Poland, Pierre Poilievre's Conservative Party in Canada, and the Justice and Development Party in Türkiye.[17] Some have had periods of success followed by demise and oblivion, but most are active and, in many cases, have gained strength in recent years. In 2024, in particular, many populist right-wing, anti-migration parties did well in elections.[18] These parties, however, represent just a limited selection of the extent of populism, both in terms of its geographic and political spread.

Contemporary right-wing populism

Populism is not new, but at the very heart of the rise of contemporary right-wing populism lies a significant disconnection between centrist and moderate politicians and their electorates. Over the last decade, right-wing populist parties have gained increasing public support, particularly in the wake of two global crises: the financial crisis (2007-2008) and the so-called (European) refugee crisis (2015-2016). The financial crisis, coupled with neoliberal governance, has led to a degree of socio-economic deprivation for some Europeans. Meanwhile, the refugee crisis has been leveraged by opportunistic political groups to evoke nostalgic feelings about identity, nation, culture, tradition and collective memory. This populist moment has not only bolstered many former far-right-wing parties, but has also given rise to new ones.

In the EU, despite national variations, populist parties are characterised by their opposition to immigration, a concern for the protection of national culture and European civilisation, and adamant criticisms of globalisation, multiculturalism, the EU, representative democracy and mainstream political parties. They exploit a discourse of essentialised cultural differences, often conflated with religious and national differences.

Right-wing populist parties and movements frequently exploit the issue of migration and asylum, depicting it as a threat to the welfare as well as to the social, cultural and even ethnic characteristics of a nation. Populist leaders often attribute major societal problems – such as unemployment, housing shortages, violence, crime,

12 DeHanas D. N. (2023) The spirit of populism: sacred, charismatic, redemptive, and apocalyptic dimensions. Democratization.
13 Taguieff, P. A. (1995) Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem. Telos; Moffitt, B. (2016) Op. Cit.
14 Mudde, C. (2016) *On Extremism and Democracy in Europe*. Routledge; Barr, R. (2009) Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics. Party Politics; Wodak, R. (2015) *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. Sage; Laclau, E. (2005) Op. Cit.; Mouffe, C. (2018) *For a Left Populism*. Verso.
15 Worsley, P. (1969). The concept of populism. In G. Ionescu & E. Gellner (Eds.), Populism its meaning and national characteristics (pp. 212–250). London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson
16 Wodak, R. (2015) Op. Cit.
17 Kaya, A. (2020) Op. Cit.
18 See Election outcome chart, page 148.

insecurity, drug trafficking and human trafficking – to lenient migration policies. This narrative is bolstered by racist, xenophobic and demeaning rhetoric, with terms like 'influx,' 'invasion,' 'flood' and 'intrusion' commonly used. Public figures such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Heinz-Christian Strache in Austria have spoken of the "foreign infiltration" of immigrants, particularly Muslims, in their countries. Similarly, the AfD (Alternative for Germany) leader, Alexander Gauland, depicts immigrants as threats to the *Heimat* (homeland), a concept cherished by sedentary 'ordinary people'. In practice, the AfD's primary focus is not so much on combatting the 'new cosmopolitan class' but addressing the issue of 'irregular mass migration', a concern it shares with many populist parties throughout Europe today.[19]

In Europe, some populist political party leaders, such as Éric Zemmour, Marine Le Pen, Thierry Baudet, Alexander Gauland and Viktor Orbán promoted the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy,[20] framing the immigration of Muslims as a calculated strategy of Islamification. Additionally, they openly criticise Islam by aligning themselves with liberal and civilisational stances on issues like the emancipation of women and LGBTQI+, using them to further their anti-Islam rhetoric. For many right-wing populists, Islam, introduced by immigrants and refugees, is the primary adversary. They will, therefore, strategically adopt liberal principles such as free speech and gender equality if it aids in their efforts against Islam and Muslim immigrants and refugees in Northern and Western Europe.[21]

Populism unbound

Populism manifests differently across the world, with leaders and parties holding diverse ideologies including communism, socialism, Islamism, nationalism, fascism or environmentalism, yet all employing populist rhetoric and strategies. Left-wing populism, for example, focuses on class as a unifying force, while right-wing populism emphasises culture and heritage, often coded as race. Left-wing populism supports intellectualism and a vanguard party, whereas right-wing populism is anti-elitist, anti-intellectual and anti-establishment, celebrating religion, myths and nationalistic ideologies.[22] Populism can also be eclectic: Germany's Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance – Reason and Justice (BSW), for instance, is a left-wing nationalist, populist, Eurosceptic and socially conservative German political party with clear nationalist positions for controlling immigration more robustly. Formed in early 2024, it already enjoys high support and popularity in parts of Germany – particularly among anti-establishment and right-leaning voters – and threatens to compete with the country's other rising populist party, the right-wing AfD.[23]

Outside Europe, some analysts are alarmed at what they see as the crisis of democratic political legitimacy and emerging nationalist populism in Africa.[24] As examples, they cite the recent former Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari, Pastor Evan Mawarire's This Flag movement in Zimbabwe and Senegal's populist opposition leader Ousmane Sonko, whom the new president has recently promoted to prime minister. In South Africa, two populist parties have dented the ANC electoral majority (arguably, a populist party itself): Jacob Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) and Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) – who both did well in the 2024 elections.[25] The level of anti-migrant xenophobia (more correctly, *afrophobia*) displayed across all parties in South Africa this year has been of concern to rights organisations.[26] Some cite popular nationalist movements manifesting themselves in successful or attempted coups across the Sahel (West Africa's 'coup belt') pointing to an increasingly populist civil society.[27]

Populism has also been a significant force in Latin America, but often manifesting on the political left with promises of extensive socialist changes – as seen in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez, in Bolivia under Evo Morales, in Mexico under Andrés Manuel López Obrador and, previously, in Brazil under Lula da Silva. Far-right former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is regarded as also having had populist tendencies. Javier Milei, who was elected president of Argentina in late 2023, has been described as a right-wing, ultraconservative populist. Nayib Bukele in El Salvador is the much-supported populist enjoying at least 85 percent of the national vote.

Elsewhere, Narendra Modi, prime minister of India since 2014, is the longest-serving prime minister outside the (establishment) Indian National Congress Party with top populist appeal. He has membership in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer organisation.

19 Joppke, C. (2021) Nationalism in the neoliberal order: Old wine in new bottles? Nations and nationalism.
20 Camus, R. (2011) *Le Grand Remplacement (The Great Replacement)*. Reinharc; Camus, R. (2018) *You Will not Replace Us!* Plieux: Chez L'auteur.
21 Brubaker, R. (2017) Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective. Ethnic and Racial Studies; Kaya, A. (2020) Op. Cit.; Joppke, C. (2021) Op. Cit.
22 Mouffe, C. (2018) *For a Left Populism*. Verso.
23 Connolly, K. (2024) Anti-immigration leftists have potential to upend German political scene. The Guardian.
24 Sithole, N., Nguijol, G. C. & Micozzi, M. (2024) Crisis of Democratic Political Legitimacy and Emerging Populism in Africa. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS).
25 Morieson, N. (2024) The Rise of Populist Parties in South Africa and End of the ANC's Parliamentary Majority. European Centre for Populism Studies (ECPS).
26 Human Rights Watch (2024) South Africa: Toxic Rhetoric Endangers Migrants.
27 OECD (2022) Populist civil society, the Wagner Group, and post-coup politics in Mali.; Lawal, S. (2024) West Africa's 'coup belt': Did Mali's 2020 army takeover change the region? Al Jazeera.

Arguably, voters in the Philippines have chosen populist leaders for decades, voting repeatedly for candidates like Ferdinand Marcos Sr, Rodrigo Duterte and now (since 2022) Bongbong Marcos, despite – or because of – their promise of 'strongman rule'. There are many more examples of populist leaders globally, not least the US former president Donald Trump, whose past and present political campaigning is a jumbled collection of archetypal right-wing populist themes.[28] Populist experts even describe China as a populist authoritarian regime.[29]

Populism: rising from the ashes of the failure of multiculturalism?

In Europe, a significant portion of the public increasingly views diversity as a threat to social, cultural, religious and economic security. This sentiment has led to growing resentment against multiculturalism, which was initially seen as promoting conciliation, tolerance and universalism to create an 'intercultural community'.[30] Over time, however, multiculturalism has been perceived as institutionalising differences, and its supposed failure has been criticised not only by extreme, right-wing populist parties but also by centrist ones. In 2010 and 2011, leaders like German chancellor Angela Merkel, UK prime minister David Cameron and French president Nicolas Sarkozy all criticised multiculturalism.[31]

Contemporary populism has popularised nativism, which favours indigenous inhabitants over immigrants and refugees. Nativism is arguably a thin-centred ideology that protects the interests of locals against those of newcomers. The term 'nativism' has gained traction among Brexiteers, Trumpists, Le Penists and other right-wing populists who want to distance themselves from accusations of racism and xenophobia. Nativist European populism pits 'ordinary' people against cosmopolitan elites and immigrants. It instrumentalises anxieties and fear, accusing the political system of betraying ethnocultural and territorial identities.[32]

Migration: populism's convenient scapegoat

In this age of migration, and as the salience of this issue is so evident in political discourse and the media, a few key questions arise. Is the public seduced by vote-seeking political rhetoric supported by the media in a context where they would normally not prioritise the subject?[33] What is the line of causality in the relationship between populism and the anti-migration agenda? Does a rise in the number of refugees or immigrants in destination countries inevitably trigger right-wing populist reactions?[34] The answers to these questions are far from clear-cut. After all, migration and periods of high international mobility have existed for centuries, and the current brand of migrant-focused populism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Furthermore, countries like Ireland, Canada and even so-called 'overwhelmed' Malta or Cyprus have not seen the rise of right-wing populism witnessed in many other refugee- and migrant-receiving countries.

It is likely, therefore, that populism emerges in situations that have particular preconditions that enable or nurture populist political options. The visibly high proportion of foreigners in any society at the same time as economic and societal problems turns migrants into scapegoats for a raft of other failings. However, once immigration is put high on the media agenda and framed in a way that advances populists' interests, it becomes difficult to promote a different framing. Immigration becomes the scapegoat for many of the preexisting or independently occurring conditions. Part of populism's mass appeal, especially among the economically disadvantaged or those harbouring a sense of being marginalised, is its promotion of simplistic and scapegoating narratives to explain complex socioeconomic conditions and deficits.[35] Not only are migrants used as scapegoats, but it may be entirely in the interests of populist parties – when in government or close to power – to actively obstruct reforms or instigate new policies which exacerbate a sense of crisis around immigration and asylum. In this context and with these dynamics, it is hardly surprising, therefore, that the salience of migration in Europe after the 2015-2016 mass movements of migrants and refugees into the bloc also coincided with the rise in anti-migrant populist parties.

28 See Wikipedia's List of Populists.
29 Pretorius, C., & Valev, R. (2024) Populist Authoritarianism in China – National and Global Perspectives. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS).
30 Kaya, A. (2012) *Islam, Migration and Integration: The Age of Securitization*. MacMillan Palgrave.
31 Kaya, A. (2012) Ibid.
32 Filc, D. (2015) Latin American inclusive and European exclusionary populism: colonialism as an explanation. Journal of Political Ideologies.
33 See essay, *Migration perceptions, opinion polls and voting outcomes: teasing out what people really want*, page 244.
34 Edo, A. & Giesing, Y. (2020) Has Immigration Contributed to the Rise of Rightwing Extremist Parties in Europe? EconPol.
35 Halikiopoulou, D. (2023) Fighting for equality rather than copying far-right populist positions on immigration. The Progressive Post; Schmidtke, O. (2020) Populism and the Politics of Migration. Europe Canada Network (EUCA).

In a similar vein, countries that had previously been welcoming of those looking for a better life after fleeing disaster and/or persecution have cooled their welcome and, to different degrees, have recently introduced more restrictive policies against migrants and refugees, often catalysed by political groups. This has been the case, for example, in Lebanon with its Syrian population, Chile, Colombia and Ecuador with Venezuelans, and South Africa with Zimbabweans, Somalis and those from Mozambique. Even the current reactions in Sweden and Denmark, the protests and incidents in Germany, France and Italy, and the August 2024 protests in the UK illustrate a higher level of public discontent.

A clear example from elections around the world this year, and particularly in Europe, is that highlighting immigration and problematising it as a central issue of political choice pays off. Even when the economic realities suggest increased migration is a significant opportunity, if not a necessity, the scapegoating argument requiring reduced migration normally wins.[36] The results of the EU parliamentary election in June epitomised what was occurring in many individual nation-states. European Union parliamentary elections saw far-right parties make gains at the expense of centrists, but their victories were not enough to win a command of the parliament.[37] However, in some countries, populists' electoral gains successfully overshadowed the centrists and either placed them in leadership roles or close to them as kingmakers in coalitions or powerful players difficult to ignore going forward.[38]

The widespread instrumentalisation of migration

The rise of the anti-migrant populist phenomenon that continues to this day, arguably with greater support than earlier, represents a highly effective instrumentalisation of immigration issues in politics by those who stand to benefit from it – which is then echoed and copied by other political players fearful of missing out. This instrumentalisation of mixed migration concerns in politics is gathering pace around the world, not only because of the political engineering that drives it but also because of the high numbers of people moving internationally and their increased presence and visibility in the media.

Even if the global proportion of international migration has remained relatively stable (around or below 3 percent of the global population) in recent decades, the absolute number has risen significantly and, when added to past migration, the level of multiculturalism in many countries has become more visible. This was even more the case during a period of perceived polycrisis with rapid cultural and social changes afoot, the impact of a global pandemic, economic precarity and inequality, as well as the uncertainties of both AI technology and climate change. Additionally, the relatively limited number of those moving irregularly (except at the US-Mexico border, where numbers are exceptionally high) repeatedly attract headline news creating a sense of crisis and absence of control which plays directly into the populist political playbook.[39]

Populist right-wing parties and political parties of other persuasions are not alone in instrumentalising migration for their own interests. In their own way, migration-focused international agencies including UNHCR and IOM as well as various NGOs benefit from keeping mobility in the news and the rising level of needs of migrants and refugees high on the international agenda – and, thereby, as a funding priority.[40] Other advocates, seeking more urgent action to mitigate climate change also raise the threat and impending crisis of mass climate migration to focus the minds of policymakers.[41] Inadvertently, their contributions to the migration crisis narrative not only assist right-wing populist parties but also allow any governing authority to make harsher policies against migrants and refugees more palatable – when not necessary.

Arguably, the media has been part of the radicalisation of the 'growing aversion to immigration worldwide'.[42] All media, including the so-called liberal press, has played a critical role in the instrumentalisation of migration as 'news' and 'crisis', and increasingly continues to do so, particularly through social media platforms where fierce battle lines are drawn. On these channels, especially, sensational stories that grab attention, trigger readers' emotions and maintain a febrile discourse around migration act as powerful news-selling clickbait.[43]

36 The extent of these wins is indicated in a selected summary of election outcomes in the Election outcome chart, page 148.
37 The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) won over 140 of the parliament's 720 seats.
38 See Election outcome chart, page 148.
39 Hinterleitner, M., Kammermeier, V. & Moffitt, B. (2023) How the populist radical right exploits crisis: comparing the role of proximity in the COVID-19 and refugee crises in Germany. West European Politics.
40 UNHCR (2023) Forced displacement continues to grow as conflicts escalate; Townsend, M. (2024) Conflicts drive number of forcibly displaced people to record high. The Guardian.
41 Huckstep, S. & Dempster, H. (2023) The 'Climate Migration' Narrative Is Inaccurate, Harmful, and Pervasive. We Need an Alternative. Centre for Global Development.
42 Agovino, M., Carillo, M. R. & Spagnolo, N. (2021) Effect of Media News on Radicalization of Attitudes to Immigration. Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy.
43 Agovino, M., Carillo, M. R. & Spagnolo, N. (2021) Ibid.

Elsewhere, commercial companies and security interests have instrumentalised immigration, and especially the relatively small levels of irregular migration, as security threats. Analysts have documented the emergence of border security (personnel, infrastructure and equipment) as a fast-rising, lucrative sector catalysed by well-positioned professional lobbyists from the defence sector.[44] In recent years, many countries have significantly beefed up their border security systems, massively increasing their budget allocations and militarising their external borders as if protecting them from an armed invasion. States engaged in increased spending on wall building and/or border security are wide-ranging, including countries such as the US, Australia, the UK, Finland, Saudi Arabia, Hungary, Greece, Türkiye and the European Union itself, where Frontex is experiencing a major expansion.[45]

A final example of the instrumentalisation of immigration is in cases of so-called migration diplomacy and inter-state disputes. Far from being a monopoly of populist politics, the weaponising of migrant movement can be used by any government for international diplomacy: exacting payment from one state or bloc to another state (Türkiye from the EU), score-settling (Belarus against Poland/the EU), irritating an enemy (Nicaragua against the US), twisting arms (Libya against Italy), punishing (Morocco against Spain) and offering conditional aid (the US with Central American states and the EU with North Africa and others).[46]

Future direction

In 2023 and 2024, the dynamics illustrated in this essay have continued to influence elections worldwide, with populist parties gaining traction as they address grievances related to mixed migration and socio-economic inequalities.

Arguably, right-wing populism has risen due to long-standing structural inequalities and the failure of mainstream political parties to address these issues during the neoliberal era. Populist parties have increasingly attacked multiculturalism, diversity, migration and Islam, contributing to polarising governance discourses. In Europe, liberal democracies are being challenged by illiberal populist parties that capitalise on the resulting alienation.

Research and polls from 2024 indicate that European youth are increasingly voting for far-right populists, such as in countries like France, Germany and in the EU parliamentary elections as a whole.[47] Even if there is also strong evidence of polarisation among young voters, a new generation of voters appears to be drawn towards more extreme parties as they deem traditional ones unable to solve problems. As mentioned, the popularity of populist parties outside Europe is on the rise too and the importance of youth support remains high. Unless the values of this portion of the electorate change, or they become disillusioned and disappointed in populist politics, they might continue to represent a sustaining force that keeps populist – and, within the context of this analysis, anti-migrant – positions dominant. At a minimum, nativist anti-migrant populist parties of all political sides are creating a normalisation around exclusion, restriction, deterrence, detention and deportation that is a far cry from earlier international expressions of solidarity, inclusion, more open borders, burden sharing and mobile labour.

Populist parties emphasise direct democracy and exploit emotions like fear, anger and frustration, which stem from perceived democratic deficits and disillusionment with representative democracy and can be harnessed by populist messaging. Clearly, as a direction of travel, the global populist trends are troubling as they offer a counterfactual to both representative democracy as well as some of the values and normative expectations of international relations.

44 National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR) (n.d.) Border Militarization and Corporate Outsourcing; Stop Wapenhandel (2023) Border profiteers: arms industry and migration.

45 Jones, C., Kilpatrick, J. & Maccanico, Y. (2021) At what cost? Funding the EU's security, defence, and border policies, 2021–2027. Statewatch.

46 Tsourapas, G. (2022) Migration diplomacy gets messy and tough. Mixed Migration Centre.

47 Montero Lopez, P. (2024) Why is the far right gaining popularity among young people? Euronews; Pfeifer, H. (2024) AfD: How Germany's far right won over young voters. DW; Cokelaere, H. (2024) It's not just boomers, young people are voting far right too. Politico.

Interview

Populist agendas in the age of discontent

With several major elections taking place in 2024, policies around the severe restriction of immigration are once again making headlines and sparking debates. Populist parties, argues **Sheri E. Berman**, are leveraging this to drive voters' attention towards the inaction of mainstream politics, which often generates frustration and discontent.

Sheri E. Berman is a Yale and Harvard-educated scholar and researcher, currently Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University. She is also the author of several books and articles on topics such as fascism, populism, democracies and dictatorships.

You've written that populism is a symptom rather than a cause. Can you explain?

It's fairly clear when we look at the historical evidence: we tend to see support for anti-establishment and even extreme movements and parties when people are dissatisfied. And people are dissatisfied because they feel like existing parties and governments are simply not responding to their needs and concerns. So support for anti-establishment and extreme movements and parties rises almost by definition when people believe that the establishment parties and existing governments are not doing their job.

When we see rising support for populist parties of the right or the left in Western Europe, for example, we should recognise this as reflecting the fact that people are dissatisfied and believe that mainstream options are not working for them. And we should take those concerns seriously, even if we don't believe that the parties that they're voting for, let's say, right-wing populist parties, have good solutions for them.

Speaking of this, populism is typically regarded as having a right leaning or even a far-right leaning in its political agenda, but you've argued that's too simplistic. Could you elaborate?

Right-wing populism is the form of populism that is dominant in the West. It's not the form of populism that dominates in Latin America, for instance. There was recently a very important election in Mexico and the winning candidate came from the outgoing president's party; the previous president was considered to be a left-wing populist.

As far as the term populism is concerned, one needs to be careful using it to ensure that it doesn't obscure as much as it clarifies. One reason is that many parties that are called right-wing populist, particularly in Western Europe, no longer have right-wing economic platforms. We should think of political competition today in the West as occurring on two axes, one economic, and one non-economic.

> **When we see rising support for populist parties of the right or the left in Western Europe, [...] we should recognise this as reflecting the fact that people are dissatisfied and believe that mainstream options are not working for them.**

On the economic axis, we have debates about more state versus less state, more social protection versus less social protection, more market versus less market, and so on. On the non-economic, we see debates on topics most folks who read about or study immigration are probably most interested in, like more immigration versus less immigration, more social and cultural diversity versus less social and cultural diversity, and so on.

So generally right-wing populist parties are coded as right-wing because they are on the right on those latter, non-economic (or social and cultural) issues, but in Western Europe, they are not any longer, for the most part, on the right on economic issues.

Why have populist parties made these moves?

They've done this for strategic reasons. That's where the voters are, particularly low-income and low-educated voters, and this is where these parties now gain a disproportionate share of their votes. In order to attract these voters, they had to move to the centre or even centre-left on economic issues and moderate on social and cultural issues.

Many of these parties started out with roots in radical right-wing movements, sometimes even neo-fascist movements. And they espoused an ethnonationalist perspective on citizenship: a view of citizenship that's based on ancestry or even blood. Most of these parties abandoned this view of citizenship/immigration over the past decade or two because it was too openly racist or xenophobic for most voters. Now their objections to immigration tend to centre on things like the purported unwillingness of immigrants to assimilate, to accept national values and to play by the rules of the game, as well as on the strain migrants and refugees place on government resources.

These are significantly different types of objections to immigration. An ethnonationalist objection to immigration is an objection that is racist and xenophobic,whereas an objection that's based on economic concerns or on a purported unwillingness to assimilate is not. This gets back to the question of how to label these parties: once they no longer espouse conservative economic policies and move away from open racism and xenophobia, it may be confusing to still label them "right-wing" populists, on the basis of these policy stances in any case.

Have you seen immigration in Europe treated differently by different sides of the political spectrum over time?

Absolutely. There was a dramatic liberalisation of views towards immigration, diversity, etc. during the early 21st century. During the postwar decades, Christian Democratic and conservative parties, of course, generally took conservative takes on these issues and many left-wing parties were wary of immigration as well, primarily for economic reasons. But over the past 20 years, educated elites in general and both centre-right and centre-left, but particularly the latter, grew much more liberal on these issues. Partially for this reason, immigration increased dramatically in Western Europe over the past decades. Whereas voters who were wary of rapid demographic and cultural change would have seen their views reflected in the platforms of mainstream parties during the postwar decades, this became much less true during the early 21st century.

> **The liberalisation of mainstream party platforms combined with extremely high levels of immigration created resentment and frustration on the part of many voters. One consequence of this is what we are seeing now with right-wing populists who are calling for severe restrictions on immigration.**

The liberalisation of mainstream party platforms combined with extremely high levels of immigration created resentment and frustration on the part of many voters. One consequence of this is what we are seeing now with right-wing populists who are calling for severe restrictions on immigration. So it's hard to understand the appeal of right-wing populists without looking back and understanding shifts in mainstream parties, and the dramatic demographic shifts of the past decades in Western Europe.

And what about the issue of migration becoming salient elsewhere and in elections involving populist-style parties in countries such as India, Argentina, Brazil or Mexico?

Yes, that's right. We talk most about the West because there are very large migration flows to the West and, for obvious reasons, we pay a lot of attention to them. But backlashes against migration happen in other countries as well. There was a recent election in South Africa, for example, and immigration was a big concern there. We've seen this also, of course, in parts of the Middle East, where there are obviously major refugee flows due to conflicts in the region. Places like Türkiye and

Lebanon have had to absorb a lot of these refugees. Times of economic strain tend to be particularly difficult for migrants because it is harder to convince people to be open and generous when they are worried about their own futures and access to government resources.

> **"Times of economic strain tend to be particularly difficult for migrants because it is harder to convince people to be open and generous when they are worried about their own futures and access to government resources."**

How viable is the idea of open borders in democratic societies? And if not, is some degree of authoritarianism or iron fist needed to enforce border controls? Is there an inherent contradiction here?

I would say that there are two competing imperatives here. On the one hand, people, especially those in advanced industrial societies, for legal and for moral reasons, have an obligation to human beings fleeing desperate situations. On the other hand, I do think open borders are incompatible with stable democratic societies. It's just not possible to let everyone who wants to come, for instance, to Western Europe or the United States to just come. You can see the trouble these conflicting imperatives have created in the United States, with Trump, or in Western Europe, where governments are thinking about "offshoring" migrants and refugees in order to keep them from crossing their borders.

> **"The world needs a more comprehensive rethinking of how to deal with migration and refugee flows that is consistent with our obligations to the truly desperate but recognises that not everyone can be absorbed by Western Europe and the United States."**

These are not only bad solutions, they're inefficient ones. The world needs a more comprehensive rethinking of how to deal with migration and refugee flows that is consistent with our obligations to the truly desperate but recognises that not everyone can be absorbed by Western Europe and the United States. How that solution is going to come about, I don't know, but we are at a point where societies are tipping into unpleasant and inefficient policies in order to deal with these challenges.

Why is the US southern border so politicised in the US?

It's because that border is very porous, and it's not only true refugees who are reaching it, but people from across South America and even other parts of the world who are simply hoping for a better life. In addition, highly educated, cosmopolitan elites who are not living on these borders do not have to deal directly with the consequences of these flows – until recently their jobs have not been threatened, their neighbourhoods and government services have not been overwhelmed, and so on.

But, for example, when southern Republican governors recently began sending migrants crossing the southern border to northern cities like New York, the tone began to change. New York is an incredibly liberal and diverse city with a long history of immigration. But once the Texans and others started shipping immigrants to New York the backlash was pretty immediate. Suddenly we had to take care of an unexpected and large number of migrants, without the resources or planning for it. Eric Adams, who's our mayor, said 'We can't do this'. People who had school gyms and parks taken over by migrant shelters and other government programs cancelled said, 'Look, we feel sorry for these people, but we cannot deal with this'. So these are real challenges.

Another pressing issue that intersects with migration is climate change. What kind of impact will climate change and environmental pressures have on the salience of populism, in your view?

Climate change is an incredibly important issue, but what's happened in, for instance, Europe is that there's been a backlash to various climate-change policies led by right-wing parties. More generally, we have seen protests by farmers, commuters, rural citizens and others against climate policies that these citizens believe would place an unbearable financial burden on them. Populist parties have taken advantage of voters' resentments here. They understand that, when economic times are tough, voters don't want to pay for a problem that, while real, is not as pressing as the need to pay one's bills.

It's even worse in the US where one of our major parties denies that climate change is even happening! Many Republicans think electric cars are some kind of liberal plot to kill the American car industry. So we have a debate here in the US that's quite different from the one happening in Western Europe, but if you look at what's going on there's a trend: when people who feel like their pocketbooks are being strained are asked to pay extra for policies that down the road will hopefully help us deal with climate change, it's a very tough sell.

There are many elections coming up in the next few months. How important do you think the role of media and social media is in deciding elections and issues within elections?

Social media changes not only who's giving the messages, but the type of messages that are being given. A generation or so ago, most people got their news from major news networks, that were relatively consistent in both the information that they were giving to listeners and in the relatively neutral way in which they presented it. That's no longer the case. There's now an incredible proliferation of news sources and a proliferation of new ways to communicate, and those news sources have become increasingly partisan and those styles of communication increasingly uncivil if not vulgar and obnoxious. This really is a big challenge for democracy.

Do you think it's harder to gauge public perceptions of these issues in the current context? Do people say one thing but vote another?

What is true is that the most extreme people are generally the loudest and the most politically active. That is to say, if you feel strongly or passionately about something, you're much more likely not merely to vote, but to participate in politics in a variety of ways. When we look at the political arena, political discourse, etc. what we often see or hear is not an accurate reflection of the preferences or concerns of average voters. I think this may be even more true today than a generation ago because social media has enabled those extremists to be even louder and more prominent in public debates.

I'm not on X [formerly Twitter] precisely because the prevalence of really extreme and nasty voices just drowns out everything else. And we know from innumerable studies that many of the opinions voiced on this platform are not at all reflective of the majority of citizens.

> **"Citizens feel like high levels of immigration reflect a government that is not in control of its own borders and is effectively rewarding migrants who do not play by the rules of the game."**

With regard to immigration in particular, it is probably the case in both Western Europe and the US that the plurality if not majority position is a desire for lower levels of immigration and in particular for a stop to illegal immigration. Citizens feel like high levels of immigration reflect a government that is not in control of its own borders and is effectively rewarding migrants who do not play by the rules of the game.

These sorts of objections to immigration fall into what I would call the non-racist, non-xenophobic category. But there are some people who just don't like migration because they don't like people who are different from them. They have an antipathy towards the other, so to speak.

You wouldn't call that racism?

Yes, I would call that latter view racism. If you don't care how much people assimilate, how much they play by the rules of the game, whether or not they have a job, but rather you object to their presence because of their skin colour, their religion or their ethnic origin, that is pretty much the definition of racism. But to object to migration because, again, you feel that there are too many illegal immigrants or you feel like immigrants are not participating in the labour market or you feel that government resources are strained and immigration is siphoning off too many of them – that should not be conflated with racism or xenophobia, not least because such objections can at least potentially be dealt with by policy.

> **"Right-wing populists [...] work to keep immigration-related issues at the forefront of the agenda, because the more people think about these issues, the more these parties benefit."**

To what extent do you think the so-called 'political agenda' is manipulated during elections?

Parties offer voters policies and appeals, and those are the ones that voters must choose from. Parties want to keep the issues that help them at the forefront of the political agenda. So right-wing populists, for example, work to keep immigration-related issues at the forefront of the agenda because the more people think about these issues, the more these parties benefit. We constantly see politicians and parties doing this – trying to manipulate which issues get the most attention – in order to attract voters. Being able to control or manipulate the agenda is a large part of winning elections. The Biden administration, for instance, thinks the economy is doing very well, and so would like to get voters to focus on that, but they have not been very successful at this. Instead, voters seem more focused on Trump's trial, Hunter Biden's trial or the Mexican border.

This year is a really big one for elections around the world. Any comments or concerns in relation to what we've been discussing?

There was a right-wing shift in the recent EU elections, although it is unclear how much impact that will have on EU policies. Immigration is a major concern of both these

parties and EU voters, but whether they will be able to affect much change in that regard remains to be seen.

The big concerns are the US and India. Modi won the recent elections in India but by a smaller margin than many predicted or hoped. Whether that will slow down his attacks on India's Muslim minority or India's democracy remains to be seen. In the United States, we have an election in November that Donald Trump may very well win. And if he does, it will be very problematic, and not just for American democracy.

For better or worse, the United States remains an incredibly important and influential country, and Donald Trump's election would likely empower radicals and ethnonationalists in other parts of the world and probably inject a level of instability into the global security and economic systems that's likely to negatively impact democracy around the world.

The populist right strengthened by terror acts: Germany pushed towards major changes

On 23 August during a festival in Solingen, Germany, a mass stabbing attack which killed three people and injured another eight had direct political, policy and possibly electoral repercussions.[1] However, unlike in the UK – where a July stabbing outrage was falsely attributed to a Muslim asylum seeker, which in turn triggered multiple protests and riots – the perpetrator of the Solingen attack was a Syrian asylum seeker. Initially, the man had been scheduled for deportation to Bulgaria, based on the *Dublin Regulation*. Nonetheless, he went off the radar and the state failed to carry out his deportation within the necessary timeframe. After that window of time had elapsed, Germany became responsible for the claim, and the man was granted subsidiary protection. The Islamic State reportedly claimed responsibility for the Solingen attack, stating that the perpetrator was one of its 'soldiers'.[2]

'Terror' attacks involving refugees or asylum seekers – although a rare occurrence – often receive a disproportionate level of media attention, which both generates and reflects social and political agitation around immigration and asylum. The Solingen attack "shook" Germany "to its core" but, by contrast, Germans remain less moved by reports of the doubling of attacks on refugees and asylum seekers in Germany and by Germans, between 2022 and 2023.[3] More specifically, German police reported an alarming number of registered attacks targeting refugees last year: a total of 2,378, up from 1,248 in 2022. Apparently, at least 219 people were injured in the 2023 attacks, most of which were committed by right-wing extremists.[4]

Assessing both successful and failed terror attacks across German municipalities, researchers have recently found that successful attacks have led to significant increases in the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD) populist party's vote share in state elections, despite the fact that most attacks were committed by right-wing nationalists against migrant communities. Ironically, the findings indicate that the media put emphasis on migration issues rather than on the right-wing activists to blame for the attacks.[5] Their conclusions are that acts of terror can shift a country's political landscape and have directly helped the far-right in recent years.[6]

Recent immigration and asylum statistics in Germany are striking and the subsequent sociopolitical reactions, especially in the wider context of migration anxiety in the EU and beyond, are perhaps not surprising. In 2022, Germany took in more than 1.2 million refugees (mainly Ukrainians)[7] while, in 2015, it welcomed more than one million refugees (many of whom were Syrians). Year after year, Germany has taken the largest amount of responsibility with respect to Europe-bound asylum seekers, who initially arrive in other EU countries but are increasingly setting their sights on Germany as their country of choice. Germany accepts and hosts more refugees than any other European country, and almost a third of all EU asylum applications in 2023 (334,000) were made in or to Germany.[8]

The latest terror attack took place in late August – only days before state elections in Thuringia and Saxony (1 September) and weeks before those in Brandenburg (22 September), at a time when immigration and asylum policy is at the top of the national political discourse and the eastern federal states' political agenda. Despite Germany's high labour demand – which migrants and refugees are well-placed to meet and have already been meeting – there is evident public concern in Germany about integration, security and the inability to enforce return decisions against failed asylum seekers.[9] This was illustrated in September 2024, when Kenya's President Ruto announced a labour migration deal with Germany that he claimed could allow up to 250,000 Kenyans to obtain visas to work in Germany. Germany immediately denied the numbers involved would be so high, embarrassing President Ruto and illustrating

1 Nöstlinger, N. (2024) Migration smashes into German elections after deadly knife attack. Politico; Quinn, B. (2024) Misinformation about Southport attack suspect spreads on social media. The Guardian [See *Thematic snapshot*, page 165].
2 Hayden, J.(2024) Islamic State claims responsibility for deadly knife attack in Germany. Politico.
3 Cole, D. (2024) Germany to harden weapons laws and asylum rules after Solingen stabbing. The Guardian.
4 AA News (2024) Attacks on refugees doubled in Germany last year: Report.
5 Sabet, N., Liebald, M., & Friebel, G. (2023) Terrorism and voting: The rise of right-wing populism in Germany. CEPR (Vox EU).
6 Ibid.
7 AA News (2024) op cit.
8 AA News (2024) op cit.; EUAA (2024) EU received over 1.1 million asylum applications in 2023.
9 Beirens, H., Fratzke, S., & Le Coz, C. (2024) Germany, and Maybe the European Union, Are at a Migration Crossroads. MPI.

the government's reluctance to be publicly seen as increasing migration.[10]

The attack in Solingen and the subsequent claims from the Islamic State were, therefore, a 'gift' to anti-migrant proponents in German politics. However, they also spurred every party to display their anti-migration credentials in an effort to outdo one another in what could be described as a bidding battle for the votes of the German public in state elections this year and in federal ones in 2025.

In direct response to the Solingen attack, the ruling coalition run by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz rushed through tougher migration regulations. Interior minister Nancy Faeser told reporters in Berlin, "I think we can present a proper package that responds appropriately to this terrible terrorist attack."[11] Among other measures, the government committed to classifying knife crimes as a reason for deportation, including to Syria and Afghanistan; scrapping benefits for asylum seekers the state deems should seek protection in the EU country they first entered under the *Dublin Regulation*; and removing protected status from refugees who leave Germany to visit their home countries without a compelling reason. From the middle of September, the German government also reinstated, for an initial six months, border controls with its nine neighbours. Under the new measures, mobile border police units have been deployed to carry out spot checks on travellers and vehicles at Germany's EU borders. Critics question whether the move will harden into something more permanent, possibly creating a chain reaction of replication by other EU member states also straining under electoral immigration anxieties.[12]

Although these unilateral border measures are an assertive move by the government, some analysts calculate that they may result in meagre reductions in migration numbers.[13] Meanwhile, proposals by the opposition Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and AfD parties go much further and could put both the Schengen agreement and the long-supported Common European Asylum System (CEAS) at risk, should they do well in 2025's elections.

In the wake of the August attack, the far-right AfD boosted its already fast-rising ascendence by emphasising the 'dangers' of refugees, Islam, excessive welcoming of refugees and migrants, and weakness around return and barring irregular migration. The AfD's success was unprecedented, with an outright win in Thuringia and a close second position in Saxony and Brandenburg – giving the party significant political power in all three regions. The AfD was predicted to do even better, and its increased popularity has been causing political shock waves through mainstream parties, whose primary response has been to rush to implement stricter immigration policies or, in the case of opposition parties like the CDU, call for more stringent measures. According to some analysts, "German officials are scrambling to show they have not lost control over migration and are addressing the public's concerns regarding the rising number of arrivals."[14]

Popularity for populist far-right solutions to perceived migration problems is driving all parties to embrace concepts and measures that, until recently, were dismissed as conflicting with European values. The fact that the CDU itself was Chancellor Merkel's party, which once welcomed so many refugees in 2015, is an indication of how much policies, public opinion and political support have changed in Germany but also throughout the EU. Electoral outcomes in Germany in 2024 could further reinforce and normalise this trend, which could result in yet more extreme positions in 2025. Any further terrorist attacks by refugees or asylum seekers and, indeed, those against refugees and migrants in-country will only accelerate this trend.

10 Abuso, V. (2024) Kenya: Berlin contradicts Ruto on labour pact. The Africa Report.
11 Nöstlinger, N., & Wilke, P. (2024) Germany announces tougher migration measures ahead of state elections. Politico.
12 Henley, J. (2024) 'The end of Schengen': Germany's new border controls put EU unity at risk. The Guardian.
13 Beirens, H., Fratzke, S., & Le Coz, C. (2024) op cit.
14 Beirens, H., Fratzke, S., & Le Coz, C. (2024) op cit.

Depolarising the migration debate: innovating democracy and city-level decision-making

Sophie van Haasen[1]

Introduction

The year 2024 is a global election year: over three billion people turn to the polls and migration is a critical political topic in many national election campaigns.[2] As anti-democratic and far-right parties[3] are on the rise across the globe, so is the anti-immigrant narrative that they promote.[4] Crucially, this discourse on – and politicisation of – migrants has real-life impacts on policymaking and on the lives of people on the move, including more dangerous migratory routes and lack of service provision during transit and upon arrival, and can lead to xenophobic riots and violent attacks on property or persons.

This essay will turn to cities in search of inspiration and hope. It will look at how city administrations may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of migration and it will go to the heart of local democracy and decision-making. It will not draw generalisations but will rather provide examples to inspire more action by and with local governments in the face of a downward national policy trend.

Migration is – and will continue to be – urban

In 2018, 55 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas – a figure which is expected to increase to 68 percent by 2050[5]. Migrants, both internal and international, also increasingly choose cities in their search for safety, housing, education and work, and, in many cases, drive the increase in urbanisation. The impacts of climate change will also increase urbanisation trends[6]. This combination leaves cities facing multiple pressures, as migration puts high demand on services and infrastructure. At the same time, this context also generates initiative and pragmatic leadership. While national governments manage borders and visa regimes, local authorities are responsible for meeting the most important direct needs of migrants and refugees alongside those of host communities.[7] This often leads to policies serving all, regardless of migratory status, and, in some cases, leads to cities bypassing national guidelines and regulations and taking on a strong advocacy role pointing to local implications of national (in)action.

The national-local political divide

This political divide is well-documented and can be found across a range of policy topics. The reasons are ample: urban areas are often centres of innovation, research and culture, and often tend to be more diverse than rural communities, which in general leads to more liberal voting behaviours among its residents. Urban priorities may also stand in contrast with national politics, with a stronger need and urgency for mayors to tackle the climate crisis and eradicate social inequalities.[8]

In the context of migration, this may have several explanations:

1. Cities often count on a long history of migration, considering it part of their social fabric and identity. This urban diversity creates a context in which there is more direct contact among people with different backgrounds, enhancing mutual respect and, in general, leading to more positive opinions

1 Sophie van Haasen is the coordinator of the Mayors Mechanism with an interest in the intersections of migration, democracy and cities. She wrote this essay in a private capacity as an independent consultant.
2 Hardy, E. (2024) The Role of Migration in a Year of Crucial Elections. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
3 Beauchamp, Z. (2024) Why the far right is surging all over the world. Vox.
4 United Nations (2023) With Hate Speech and Xenophobia Rising Worldwide, Third Committee Calls for End to Systemic Racism, Racial Discrimination.
5 UN DESA (2018), News.
6 World Bank (2021), Groundswell Report Part 2: Acting on Internal Migration.
7 GFMD Mayors Mechanism (2024) Localising Global Migration Goals to Accelerate the 2030 Agenda: Partnering with Local Governments Towards the Summit of the Future?
8 Tharoor, I. (2018) The growing urban-rural divide in global politics. The Washington Post; Muro, M. & Whiton, J. (2018) America has two economies – and they're diverging fast. Brookings; Rodden, J.A. (2019) Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide. Basic Books.

on migration.[9] This stands in contrast with a rural electorate that is feeling increasingly isolated.[10]

2. City residents and administrators also see first-hand that failing to tackle discrimination will hamper the wellbeing of the entire city population, which sets in motion community action and solidarity.[11]

3. City administrations also experience inconsistencies and administrative hurdles resulting from national regulations that they need to implement and sometimes pragmatically find ways around them.

Local governments, therefore, often take a more progressive stance on migration and, in certain cases, even adopt an openly adversarial position against their national counterparts.[12] This is the case, for example, in sanctuary cities and safe harbour cities. While there is no universally adopted definition of a 'sanctuary city', this concept captures city contexts in which local law and police enforcement do not report the immigration status of the people they meet.[13] They also adopt specific policies to include undocumented migrants in city life and often deliberately go against national immigration enforcement.[14] Examples of sanctuary cities are San Francisco, Houston, Barcelona, Milan, Glasgow, Toronto and Vancouver.

In Europe, safe harbour cities push their national governments to accept more refugees and ask for a more just European distribution, highlighting that cities have the capacity and political willingness to help accommodate newcomers.[15]

Cities are not immune to global anti-migrant rhetoric

Nonetheless, this pro-migration stance is not true for all cities. Historical, geographical and socio-economic factors play a critical role and mean that some cities have always been more right-wing, with a hard-line position on migration.[16] City politicians are also not immune to the politicisation of migration. Global challenges, such as the negative effects of climate change, but also growing inequality within countries, mostly play out in cities, leading to increasing competition between host communities and newcomers to find affordable housing and decent work.[17] Even in some traditionally welcoming cities or cities governed by leaders from the political left, these factors are leading to stricter attitudes towards migration.

New York City is a pertinent example of a long-term sanctuary city where local policies ensuring the right to housing regardless of status and protecting undocumented migrants from expulsion when reporting crimes were supported by mayors regardless of political colour.[18] When Mayor Adams came to power in 2022, however, this changed.[19] This Democratic mayor has questioned the sanctuary city status, travelled to Central America to discourage migrants from coming to New York and – in efforts to unlock more funding in 2023 – claimed that migrants will "destroy" the city. In 2023, New York City indeed experienced high numbers of arrivals – in part the result of a politically motivated move by conservative governors to bus migrants from border towns to bigger cities. Against a backdrop of failing federal immigration policy (in turn, the result of the extreme politicisation of migration in the US), an increase in the cost of living and budget cuts across city services, this indeed hampers New York City to effectively respond.[20]

Further research would be needed to identify the effects of national elections and the further politicisation of migration on local leadership and policies.

Depolarising the migration debate by reviving democracy

Let us turn again to the anti-migrant narrative that has become dominant in mainstream political discourse. This discourse stands in the way of finding real policy solutions,[21] moves society from one perceived crisis to another and brings policymakers to set up costly,

9 De Coninck, D., Rodríguez-de-Dios, I. & d'Haenens, L. (2020) The contact hypothesis during the European refugee crisis: Relating quality and quantity of (in)direct intergroup contact to attitudes towards refugees. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations.
10 Kenny, M. & Luca, D. (2021) The urban-rural polarisation of political disenchantment: an investigation of social and political attitudes in 30 European countries. Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society.
11 Barbu, S. (2023) Homelessness Among Asylum Seekers in Brussels. Social Europe.
12 Vertier, P., Viskanic, M. & Gamalerio, M. (2023) 'Dismantling the "Jungle": migrant relocation and extreme voting in France', Political Science Research and Methods.
13 Florida Coastal Law Library (n.d.). Immigration Law Sanctuary Policies.
14 The New York Times (n.d.) San Francisco Sues Trump Over 'Sanctuary Cities' Order.
15 Bathke, B. (2021) 33 European Cities Sign Safe Harbours Declaration. InfoMigrants; Other European examples are the 'Villes Acceuillantes' in France, 'Rebel Cities' in Italy and 'Network of Solidary Cities' in Belgium.
16 ReliefWeb (2018) Why Cities Hold Key to Safe, Orderly Migration.
17 United Nations (n.d.) Inequality – Bridging the Divide.
18 The Economist (2024) Is New York Rethinking Its Sanctuary City Status?
19 Mendes Raouf, Y. (2024) Cities Can Go Big on Immigration. Foreign Policy in Focus.
20 Jacobin (2023) Eric Adams Is Playing a Dangerous Game With Migrants.
21 VUB Podcast 'Migration Talks' (2023) Episode: The impact of migration narratives on EU policymaking.

short-term measures, that mostly respond to the perceived security threat of migration.[22] This leads to questioning of the current political system, in which political parties increasingly engage in statements geared to attain short-term attention, and whether it is fit for purpose to deliver solutions to complex topics, such as migration.[23]

In response, a growing group of practitioners are experimenting with new ways of decision-making that increase citizen ownership and informed dialogue, with the idea that these may lead to better policymaking overall.[24] Below are some examples:

Citizens assemblies or panels are "a body of citizens who come together to deliberate on a given issue and provide a set of recommendations to the convening body such as a government or parliament".[25] Their membership is (in part) chosen by randomised sortition, making them a representative sample of society.

Ireland, for instance, has organised assemblies on issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion and climate change, many of which resulted in concrete policy change and constitutional amendments.[26] France did similarly on issues such as end of life and climate change, and Iceland on constitutional reform.[27] Although rather the exception than the norm, sometimes assemblies are institutionalised as permanent bodies (e.g. City of Paris,[28] the Region of Brussels Capital[29] and the Region of Ostbelgien[30]).

Even though considered a tool of the political left, assemblies are constituted by people who have differing opinions and come from different political colours in society. Even so, the outcomes of recommendations tend to lean more to the progressive side of the political spectrum (e.g. Ireland on same-sex marriage and Texas on green energy).[31]

The process directly impacts participants' stance on the topics discussed: they report increased knowledge and a shift toward more common-good perspectives. They also report increased political engagement, especially by those who are neglected by standard partisan groups.[32] Assemblies usually also exert a positive influence on the perceived legitimacy of the recommendations from the perspective of the wider public.[33] Their success, however, depends heavily on their political mandate and methodological set-up.

Advisory (or representative) councils are a democratic innovative tool that aims to correct democratic deficits by institutionalising the participation of marginalised communities in decision-making. There are many examples of such councils.

The Australian Indigenous Advisory Council, for instance, is appointed by the prime minister to advise the government on Indigenous policy. The European Youth Forum represents the views and opinions of youth in all relevant EU policy areas and the UK Migrant Advisory Committee advises the UK Home Office on migration affairs.

Such councils are generally reported to lead to better decision-making overall, increased political trust of marginalised communities and enhanced dialogue and understanding between members of these communities and the broader public.[34] Their success, however, greatly depends on the will of those in power to take up recommendations, on the time and resources the council has available and on their membership and how it is (s)elected.

The following section explores whether we may find examples at the local level that try to foster a more nuanced conversation on migration precisely through political innovation. Local governments are generally better trusted than their national counterparts; there is more leeway for direct communication and, in some cases, local politics might be 'less party political'.[35] Some have even argued that the true 'soul of our democracy is local'.[36]

22 Castelli Gattinara & P., Morales, L. (2017) The politicization and securitization of migration in Western Europe: public opinion, political parties and the immigration issue, Handbook on Migration and Security, Edward Elgar Publishing.
23 Van Reybrouck, D. (2016) Against Elections: The Case for Democracy. Penguin Random House.
24 Pogrebinschi, T. (2016) Comparing Deliberative Systems: An Assessment of 12 Countries in Latin America.
25 Participedia (n.d.) Citizens' Assembly Method
26 Berbner, B. (2020) The Unlikely Friendship that Helped Legalize Same-Sex Marriage in Ireland. We are Not Divided.
27 This website has an extensive overview of deliberative panels across the globe.
28 Ville de Paris (n.d.) Tout savoir sur l'Assemblée citoyenne de Paris.
29 Democratie Brussels (n.d.) Burgerparticipatie in het Brussels Gewest.
30 Parliament of the German-speaking Community in Belgium (n.d.) What is the Citizen's Council.
31 Interview Jonathan Moskovic, former democratic innovation advisor at the French Speaking Brussels Parliament and former coordinator of G1000.
32 Dryzek J. S., Bächtiger A., Chambers S., Cohen J., Druckman J. N., Felicetti A., Fishkin J. S., Farrell, D. M., Fung A., Gutmann A., Landemore H., Mansbridge J., Marien S., Neblo M. A., Niemeyer, S., Setälä M., Slothuus R., Suiter J., Thompson D., Warren M. E. (2019) The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation, Science.
33 Pow, J. (2021) Mini-Publics and the Wider Public: The Perceived Legitimacy of Randomly Selecting Citizen Representatives. Representation.
34 Elias, A., Mansouri, F. & Sweid, R. (2021) Public Attitudes Towards Multiculturalism and Interculturalism in Australia. Journal of International Migration and Integration.
35 Bunting, H. (2023) The Core Principles of Trust Applied to Local Government. Local Government Information Unit – LgiU.
36 Protect Democracy (n.d.) How to Protect Democracy.

Case 1: VILLEURBANNE, FRANCE

Population: 156,928 (2021) **Migrants:** 19%[37] **Mayor:** Cédric Van Styvendael

Villeurbanne, a city near Lyon, traditionally served as the industrial backyard of its larger neighbour. It, therefore, has a large working-class population and a high percentage of migrant workers. Migration is part of the social fabric of the city, and many residents have a migration story within their families. The city gradually developed a welcoming environment due to its vibrant associative life, among other things.[38] In response to the 2015-2016 dismantling of the 'Calais Jungle' refugee and migrant camp, Villeurbanne became a 'welcoming city'. The dismantling also took place in a context in which national migration policy was becoming more restrictive,[39] giving less leeway for cities to assist newcomers.

This sparked a larger debate with the then-administration on how to integrate newcomers within this restrictive context, setting up a process called 'Welcoming Villeurbanne: a collective and participatory reflection' to discuss the increased 'precarity' of migrants caused by national politics.[40] This year-long process also included the set-up of a 'jury' – or citizen assembly – to discuss welcoming policies.[41] The jury was asked to discuss how to make sure everyone's rights were respected, not whether the city should be a 'welcoming city' or not: this question, it was argued, "would sterilise the debate, lead to inaction and give rise to contradictions".[42]

The jury proposed several recommendations which now form part of the current welcoming policy of Villeurbanne. Since then, the city has also installed a permanent Citizen Assembly, which offers a political space for Villeurbanne residents (regardless of migratory status) to evaluate and participate in policymaking.[43] The impact of this work on public views on migration or general voting behaviour has not been analysed yet.

Against the backdrop of the overall rise of the far-right in France,[44] progressive parties are historically in the lead in Villeurbanne, with the percentage of votes for the far-right fluctuating between 9 percent (2017), 11 percent (2022) and 21 percent (2024). However, further analysis is required to be able to speak of an increase of the far-right (e.g. in the 2020 local elections, the far-right was not even on the electoral 'list'). Villeurbanne's support for the far-right also stays far behind the national average (32% in the 2024 elections), and political dynamics and voter turn-out are different depending on the type of election[45] (e.g. local, parliamentary and presidential).

Case 2: FUENLABRADA, SPAIN

Population: 189,891 (2022) **Migrants**: 13%[46] **Mayor**: Francisco Javier Ayala Ortega

Originally a rural municipality, the city is now the fourth largest within the Madrid metropolitan area. Fuenlabrada witnessed a dramatic population increase in the 1980s, due to the large-scale movement of young workers coming from both the capital city and agrarian regions, later joined by international migrants seeking affordable housing. Fuenlabrada is a very 'young' municipality, with over 20 percent of its residents younger than 20.[47]

Migration is part and parcel of the identity of the city, which can also be observed through its active civil society, consisting of (Spanish) regional, ethnic, religious and neighbourhood associations. As of the 2000s, these started working together informally, but were formalised into a 'Mesa de la Convivencia'[48] in 2020. This *mesa* acts as a critical space to discuss living together and how to benefit from the city's cultural diversity, and has become an important partner for the city in shaping local policies.

According to the city councillor for participation, Mr Francisco Javier Bokesa Abia, not labelling policy discussions as 'migration' specific has been critical to

37 Institut national de la statistique et des études economiques - INSEE (2018) Étrangers - Immigrés en 2018 - Commune de Villeurbanne.
38 Ville de Villeurbanne (2020) Villeurbanne hospitalière: une réflexion collective et participative - Rapport de mission.
39 Millar, P. (2024) How France's Far-Right Changed the Debate on Immigration. France24.
40 Institut national de la statistique et des études economiques - INSEE (2018) Op. Cit.
41 Ville de Villeurbanne (2020) Rapport du Jury Citoyen.
42 Institut national de la statistique et des études economiques - INSEE (2018) Op. Cit.
43 Participez - Villeurbanne (n.d.) Assemblée Citoyenne de Villeurbanne.
44 Alouane, R. S. (2024) France's far-right renaissance: a new era of political upheaval in Europe. Friends of Europe.
45 Ministère de l'intérieur et des outre-mer (n.d.) Les archives des résultats des élections en France.
46 EPDATA (2022) Fuenlabrada - Población: inmigrantes, emigrantes y otros datos.
47 Red de Ciudades Interculturales (n.d.) Intercultural Projects in Fuenlabrada.
48 Mesa por la Convivencia Fuenlabrada (n.d.) Por la integración y la convivencia en nuestra ciudad.

their success. Instead, it is much more interesting to approach issues from a shared Fuenlabrada 'identity' and ensure migrants can take part in the local participatory ecosystem.[49] These structures also allow for non-migrant residents to participate and be in direct contact with people from diverse backgrounds which, in turn, helps build mutual understanding and respect. This is, of course, all longer-term work, which needs to go hand in hand with strong support for first arrivals: migrants and refugees need to feel included and welcome from the moment they arrive.

In order to better understand the electoral implications of this work, it is important to consider Spain's political context and the position of its far-right, which have been somewhat different from other European countries.[50] Even though the far-right party Vox has impacted on overall polarisation in Spanish society, this isn't (yet) reflected in a radical shift in public attitudes and opinions about migration.[51] Despite its surge in 2018, Vox hasn't had the same level of success as its colleagues abroad: in 2023, the party won just over 12 percent of the votes.[52] When looking at the percentage of Vox voters in 2017 and 2023 in Fuenlabrada, there is a slight increase in the 2023 local elections (from 7% to 11%), still leaving the majority support for the socialist party PSOE unchallenged (54% in 2017 and 55% in 2023). Most votes came directly from the nationalist party Ciudadanos. Even though the introduction of inclusive policies might significantly impact voting behaviour, a causal link cannot be established purely by looking at these voting results.

> *"The extreme right discourse is 'revolutionary' in the sense that it is immediate and fast, whereas building welcoming ecosystems is 'evolutionary' and takes a longer time to establish. The fact that this ecosystem exists is, however, a critical buffer against the surge of the extreme right. Meaning the latter hasn't impacted our city that much."*
>
> **Francisco Javier Bokesa Abia, Councillor for Participation, City of Fuenlabrada.**

Case 3: SÃO PAULO, BRAZIL

Population: 11,451,999 (2022)[53] **Migrants:** 3%[54] **Mayor:** Ricardo Nunes

Like most big cities, São Paulo has a long history of migration. For example, between 1872 and 1972, 57 percent of the roughly 5.4 million newcomers to Brazil would settle just in São Paulo. With mass immigration also came discontent and uprisings against harsh working conditions, and newcomers – as well as former slaves – organised for political action.[55] This migrant-rich social fabric created an important base of support for a more institutional guarantee of rights for migrants and refugees, which led to the establishment of the *São Paulo Municipal Policy for Immigrants* in 2016.[56] The municipal policy has a strong human rights focus and proposes a few concrete avenues for city action, including training of municipal staff, the establishment of a one-stop service centre for migrants, and the creation of a Municipal Council of Migrants and Refugees.[57] This council,[58] which offers parity between the city administration and elected representatives of migrants and refugees regardless of status, builds on a larger history of the city to enable newcomers to participate in local policymaking.[59] The city administration wanted to specifically allow immigrants to vote and be elected to these bodies to build local citizenship. This represents a larger desire in the city to experiment with new ways of democracy, including participatory budgeting, local referenda, public consultations and other thematic councils.[60]

Brazil's society became extremely polarised during the Bolsonaro rule (from 2019 to 2022) and, although this polarisation seems to have now declined,[61] elections

49 Ibid; Ayuntamiento de Fuenlabrada (n.d.) Proyecto Camus; Must-a-Lab (n.d.) Young Training Plan "SKILLS FOR PARTICIPATION.
50 Hedgecoe, G. (2022) Spain's far-right Vox seeks Italian inspiration. Politico.
51 González Enríquez, C. & Riken, S. (2021) Spanish Public Opinion on Immigration and the Effect of VOX. Real Instituto Elcano.
52 El Diario (n.d.) Resultados de Congreso: 23 de julio de 2023.
53 Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística - IBGE (n.d.) Population Data for São Paulo.
54 This percentage is significantly lower than in the other case studies in this essay. This may have several explanations, such as differences in definition and data collection methods, overall number of migrants in a given country, size of undocumented migrant population, naturalisation rates and size of the overall population of the city in question.
55 Wejsa, S. & Lesser, J. (2018) Migration in Brazil: The Making of a Multicultural Society. Migration Policy Institute.
56 Prefeitura de São Paulo (2016) LEY MUNICIPAL 16.478 de 8 de julio de 2016.
57 Intervention by Bryan Rodas, the then Coordinator of Immigrant Policies and Promotion of Decent Work, Prefeitura de São Paulo, UN Network on Migration Annual Meeting January 2024.
58 Cidade de São Paulo (n.d.) Estrutura do Conselho Municipal de Imigrantes (CMI).
59 Interview with Ana León, Coordinator of Immigrant Policies and Promotion of Decent Work, Prefeitura de São Paulo.
60 Prefeitura de São Paulo (n.d.) Participe Mais Conselhos.
61 Stuenkel, O. (2024) Brazil's Polarization Is Here to Stay Even As Politicians Have (Mostly) Dialed Down the Rhetoric. Americas Quarterly.

both nationally and at the city level have subsequently become more extreme – along the lines of social class and income. However, migration has not been picked up as a major political issue by political parties and public opinion has generally been favourable to it.[62]

This favourable attitude is also reflected in public policy, where the outdated *Foreigner Statute* – issued under the then-military dictatorship – was replaced, in 2017, by a new *Migration Law*, which now centres around the human rights of migrants rather than the securitisation of borders.[63] Therefore, the city of São Paulo is not going against a xenophobic tide in the country; it simply seems to be shaping the mechanisms required to help implement and concretise the national *Migration Law*, which experts have criticised for its vague nature and its lack of implementation guidelines.[64]

Case 4: OSTBELGIEN, BELGIUM

Population: 79,480 (2024)[65] **Migrants:** 21%[66] **Minister - President:** Oliver Paasch

Ostbelgien is the smallest of three linguistic communities in Belgium. It consists of the predominantly German-speaking municipalities in the province of Liege/Luik and its competencies are issues such as culture, education and language. The community has institutionalised the Ostbelgien Model, which includes a permanent citizen council that organises, decides on and follows up on thematic and ad-hoc citizen assemblies. Since it was set up in 2019, five topics have been discussed in these assemblies (healthcare, housing, education, digital skills and immigrant integration).

The assembly on migrant integration met throughout 2023 and came up with a set of recommendations on topics such as the labour market, school integration, access to language courses and information, to which the parliament provided responses and proposed next steps. The question put forward was not whether Ostbelgien should integrate newcomers, but rather what could be done to improve integration. At the moment, no further information is available on what has been implemented to date, as the changes have been too recent.

In terms of migration, around 21 percent of Ostbelgien residents have a foreign passport. 15 percent of these are German nationals and a large percentage comes from neighbouring countries (Netherlands, Luxembourg and France) as well as Romania, Poland and Russia.[67] Even if 21 percent is a high percentage, the Citizen Council chose the topic of migrant integration as it was considered non-contentious but required further practical deliberation. This is a very different reality when we compare it with overall Belgian politics, which may be due to several factors, such as the fact that Ostbelgien politics and public opinion consider migration as an opportunity, or that most migrants in Ostbelgien have a European background. Lastly, it may also be connected to a larger, party-political context.

In Belgium, votes are cast across a complicated system, in which parties are regionally and linguistically oriented. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, the far-right party Vlaams Belang was the second largest party with 13 percent of the votes (representing 21 percent of the votes in the Flemish Region). Even though polls had expected them to become the largest party in Flanders, these results still marked the most significant win for the party since its origin. In the other Belgian regions, far-right equivalents have not been as successful, in part due to a strict Cordon Sanitaire[68] and different historical contexts.[69] Indeed, in the June 2024 elections in Ostbelgien, the new far-right party Chez Nous gained 4 percent.[70]

It is difficult to showcase the impact of Ostbelgien's migration-related work on voting behaviour, which may require further analysis that also considers the broader context of the Belgian electoral system, the longer-term impact of the citizen assembly on this topic and the profile of migrants in Ostbelgien versus other bigger localities in Belgium.

62 Conectas (2023) Majority of Brazilians believe government should have more policies to receive migrants.
63 Correa, C. (2023) New Migration Law in Brazil: how does the statute of foreigners work? Koetz Advocacia.
64 Stuenkel, O. (2024) Op. Cit.
65 Statbel – Belgium in Figures (2024) Population Movement Statistics.
66 Bürgerdialog (2023) Informationsblatt zum Thema Integration von Zuwanderern in Ostbelgien.
67 Statbel – Belgium in Figures (2024) Op. Cit.
68 A written or verbal agreement between political parties to not cooperate with a specific political party. In Belgium, this structure was set up to block the far-right party Vlaams Blok (and later Vlaams Belang) from participating in government.
69 de Jonge, L. (2020) The Curious Case of Belgium: Why is There no Right-Wing Populism in Wallonia?' Government and Opposition.
70 FOD Binnenlandse Zaken (n.d.), Election Results June 2024 – Eupen.

Cities as urban alternatives to anti-migration attitudes?

Given the persistence – even when not an increase – of xenophobic discourse and adoption of far-right ideas by mainstream politics, it may seem like cities could struggle in depolarising the migration debate and successfully promote and implement more liberal migration policies. However, when zooming in on specific examples, such as those provided in this essay, it is possible to notice that the more people are in contact with diverse backgrounds, the less anti-migrant their positions become. This connects to the fact that the rhetoric of far-right and anti-immigrant parties is mostly (though not exclusively) a rural affair, as opposed to an attitude prevalent in cities and urban centres.

Of course, not all local governments have a pro-migration stance; whether the far-right ideology gains traction in a given context depends on factors such as history, socio-economics and party politics. It remains without question, though, that we can turn to decentralised levels of government to look for inclusive and new ways of decision-making that may hold the key for us to re-set the debate, bring people together and develop a more nuanced understanding of diversity.

The limitations of this essay: more research and experimentation needed

Some case studies in this essay operate in a strong anti-immigrant national context (such as Villeurbanne and Ostbelgien) but, when looking at their local context, migration was not politicised. All the cities (except for Ostbelgien) also have a long-term progressive government with a long history of work on inclusion and local citizenship. Whilst this essay could not point to the effectiveness of their work in depolarising the migration debate, these examples still provide a toolbox of ideas to test in more conflictive settings. Democratic innovations, such as citizen assemblies, have, in fact, succeeded in depolarising the debate on other contentious topics (such as end-of-life or same-sex marriage). Therefore, it might be possible for these innovations to tackle the migration debate in novel and more nuanced ways. Surprisingly, though, there are almost no examples of citizen assemblies that discuss it yet. Some interviewees blame the toxicity of the topic, its crosscutting nature and questions about national-local competency. Nonetheless, the same could be said about issues such as climate change which, on the other hand, have been subjected to countless local debates.

There is a lot of research on the potential of democratic innovation to counter the declining levels of trust in political institutions. However, knowledge of how anti-democratic narratives impact anti-immigrant sentiment and whether new forms of democracy might foster a more balanced migration narrative are currently lacking. Could think tanks that work on innovative democracy (such as Democracy Now or the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy – IOPD) help generate clarity there?

Conclusion

Even the more progressive cities cited in this essay referenced a shift in discourse to more antagonistic positions about migrants and refugees. The global context does not make it easy for them: the effects of climate change, inequality and the global housing crisis all play out at the local level, and cities are asked to do more with less. Yet, at the same time, this paper shows that innovation and experimentation happen mostly locally. How can decision-making spaces at national, regional and international levels build in the space for these decentralised levels of government to proactively inform and shape policy, as well as receive adequate mandates and resources?

The reality is that democratic innovation and citizen decision-making are happening at the local level and, to a lesser extent, at the national level. In fact, the democratic innovations occurring at many municipal levels are exciting and driven by necessity rather than ideology. If the same approach was applied to the migration discourse at the national level, it could provide a possible recipe against populism and toxic anti-migration politics, which are on the rise in a number of countries. Even if there is not yet sufficient evidence of a clear set of alternative democratic options and decision-making mechanisms on migration to effect a bigger change, there is a strong case for more innovation and courage, given that the current business-as-usual approach is becoming more divisive and polemical, whilst also dangerously accelerating a political shift to the far-right in Europe and across the world.

Interview

A bleak year for migration?

SR Gehad Madi is the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. Previously, he was a committee member of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, and served in different capacities to the Egyptian diplomatic corps. He holds a bachelor's degree in German language and literature, as well as an LLB in Law from Ain Shams University, Cairo, Egypt.

Many countries in the Global North are facing the pressing need to seek foreign labourers, which is leading some governments to embrace more open attitudes and policies towards migrants. However, the rise of anti-migrant attitudes – particularly spurred by far-right political parties – is showing no sign of slowing down.

In your first update at the 56th session of the Human Rights Council, you emphasise the significance of defending and enhancing migrant rights in the face of rising xenophobia and divisive political discourse. Can you talk a bit about your assessment of the rising trends that you are seeing?

It's a known fact that migrants have been victims of politics in many ways and for many years now. Particularly in Europe and in the United States, xenophobia against migrants started long ago. Of course, throughout election campaigns, migrants are victims of politics. As we have seen in the election of the European Parliament, the right-wing in Europe has risen considerably. This is a drawback for the human rights of migrants. My recent report to the Human Rights Council highlighted the contribution of migrants in host countries as well as in countries of origin and transit. It showed that migrants are contributing to all walks of life. If you look at the UK, for example, the last prime minister, the mayor of London and the former first minister of Scotland all come from families with a migration background. The UK has many MPs and peers who come from families with migration backgrounds and many other entrepreneurs who contributed to the workforce in the UK as migrants. For example, most of the physicians in the UK are not British. Those are the skilled migrants who contribute to society. They pay taxes, they employ people as well as they do the jobs that the native population refuses to do. So, in general, migrants are contributing to host countries as well as to the country of origin, of course, through remittances and so on. They are indispensable in that sense.

So where is this anti-migrant politics coming from, and how do you see it playing out? Why is it coming up at this point in history, do you think?

It is an old issue and it is increasingly on the rise because the far-right-wing parties use and abuse migration as a way of gaining votes. Migrants are not a threat to the country. They're not criminals in any way. If they have the opportunity to be integrated into society, they will definitely contribute to its welfare.

> **Migrants are not a threat to the country. They're not criminals in any way. If they have the opportunity to be integrated into society, they will definitely contribute to its welfare.**

I think there's also a problem in the media, and particularly within social media, in that it tends to highlight more xenophobia and overall anti-migrant sentiment, as opposed to showing their positive contribution. This has to change. There should be some balance in this respect. I can't deny that there are individual migrants who commit crimes like in any other society, but this should not be highlighted and generalised, or used to accuse all migrants of such crimes.

Could you see a time in the future when countries come out of these international agreements because the imbalance between domestic electorate demands clashes with international agreements on migrants and refugees?

Well, this is the point. Because of this concern, we are all paying great attention to these issues. Not just at the UN, but also in the media. I underline the term media because the media has a responsibility in this respect – not just to portray the negative aspects of migrants, but to try and balance out the whole situation and show the bigger picture. We are trying to advise states and, whenever there is a violation, we send letters to the states concerned highlighting the issue and asking for a response, which we often receive. Sometimes states are cooperative, other times less so. Either way, together with civil society and UN agencies, we keep the pressure on states in this respect.

> **The media, and particularly [...] social media, [...] tends to highlight more xenophobia and overall anti-migrant sentiment, as opposed to showing their positive contribution.**

Some have speculated that, in some countries, this journey of multiculturalism and increased migration has happened too fast. They argue that people could adapt to multiculturalism, but not if it happens too quickly.

Is it too fast or, perhaps, too slow? The point here is how to accommodate migrants and how to help them integrate into society. Those who have the opportunity to integrate will be successful and the host country will benefit from them. If we look at Europe, even in the UK, society is ageing right now, and there is a need for migrants in certain jobs. I read an article a couple of years ago saying that Germany was looking for almost 400,000 migrants per year. This is not happening only in Germany, it's almost all over Europe. There is a need for newcomers to take jobs to benefit the host country and to contribute to society in many different ways.

> **There is a need for newcomers to take jobs to benefit the host country and to contribute to society in many different ways.**

There are currently about nine million refugees in Egypt – your home country. How does the government manage this, and how do local populations perceive them?

I think I would say that most of the nine million are fully integrated into Egyptian society. Some of them have their own schools now. They have access to healthcare. Most of them are working in Egypt. The point is that Egypt has no detention camps for migrants, and this is very important because the detention of migrants all around the world is a very serious issue, particularly for minors. There are over 300,000 children being detained for migration-related purposes every year, and some states claim that the detention of children is in their best interest. Detention of children due to their or their parents' migration status can never, ever, be in the best interest of the child. Children need protection, particularly those coming from an armed conflict area. They should receive automatic protection.

I know you've had refugees for many decades in Egypt, but recently the numbers spiked, particularly with those fleeing Sudan. How are Egyptians reacting?

I think the overwhelming majority of Egyptians are welcoming and accepting of them, and they are mainly considering them as guests in this respect. This is the purpose and the idea that Egypt is an open country in Africa and attempting to welcome everybody despite its own economic problems. We have serious economic problems, but people are integrated into society. Those who committed crimes have been deported, but the majority are living in the country in good status.

What do you think will happen in the US Presidential election in November, and how do you think it will affect border politics and migration in the United States?

I don't know. I don't want to be involved in the politics of the United States, but we have witnessed already the policies of the former administration vis-à-vis migration and, of course, we all know about the wall on the Mexico border and so on. Mexico is facing a very high number

> **"Detention of children due to their or their parents' migration status can never, ever, be in the best interest of the child. Children need protection, particularly those coming from an armed conflict area."**

of migrant arrivals who, if they don't manage to enter the United States, will stay mainly in Mexico. This is a very serious issue for the country. In Latin America and the Caribbean, everybody is going north to Mexico, trying to cross to the United States. I'm not sure about the different US politics on a state level with regard to migration. I think former President Trump has said that he is going to deport all irregular migrants. I don't know how this will happen. What we can do is just wait and see. However, the US-Mexican border remains a challenge, whether the Democrats or the Republicans win in November 2024. Whoever is in power faces a major challenge with that border. Which country in the world would not find it hard to take two million undocumented migrants coming over the border every year? In some European countries, migration is referred to as a 'crisis', even though the number is much smaller in scale. The EU has recently passed the *European Pact on Migration and Asylum*. I sent several letters to all European countries showing my concerns regarding some aspects of this pact. In the UK, the previous administration had made asylum arrangements with Rwanda, which would have externalised the UK's asylum obligations and posed serious human rights risks for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, while also undermining the international protection system more broadly. This is a very serious issue, and I'm most grateful to the new Labour government in the UK for annulling the UK-Rwanda asylum partnership. Two weeks ago, I and a few of my colleagues issued a press statement welcoming this decision by the UK.

Your predecessors like François Crépeau and, more recently, Felipe González-Morales, were very vocal, and not shy to speak out. I wonder, are you taking the same role? How do you see yourself fulfilling this role?

We have a system that we are working within. My mandate is to promote and protect the human rights of migrants all over the world, as well as monitor the violation of their rights. We do this through transmitting letters to states, not to criticise, but to present allegations received and seek clarification, cooperation and remedy for victims. Of course, we also issue press statements and conduct official visits to states, fact-finding missions, and so on. In doing so, I am in constant contact with civil society partners all over the world, as well as UN entities and even individuals, when there are serious issues to be addressed. I don't remember how many letters I have already sent to states since I assumed my post, but it was many. None of us are shy. When you have the facts and you want to highlight them, you can't be shy. You have to be straightforward. I always tell my colleagues that I want to be straightforward, pinpoint the issue and clarify the whole situation. Then it's up to the states whether or not to respond. But we are continuing and we do follow up any response by states as well.

Almost all the violations and denials of rights perpetrated upon migrants and refugees today, such as pushbacks, pullbacks and detentions, are done mostly by states who are signatories to relevant international human rights treaties.

Yes, this is correct. In this regard each and every state's international reputation hinges on whether they fulfil their treaty obligations or not. They have this reputation internationally and within the UN system. As you know, there are 10 treaty bodies that also consider reports from states every five years or so. They highlight the whole issue, whether they criticise or welcome it, because there are some instances where states are changing their policies, not only for visa-free migrations, but in general terms. Again, it is the reputation of each and every state on the line and they have to respect the international obligations they sovereignly signed up to. They were not pushed to sign these agreements and being party to the international community in general.

I presume you're aware of the work of groups like the Border Violence Monitoring Network and their Black Book of Pushbacks. Do you think there needs to be a more formal investigative mechanism on human rights violations at international borders?

Yes, very much so. My mandate supports the call for the establishment of an independent international monitoring mechanism to investigate all human rights violations and abuses against migrants at international borders. We hope that the UN Human Rights Council may take this issue further. There is no magic wand here in this respect, especially concerning the establishment of a new body while the UN faces this current and very serious financial crisis. In general, these financial issues are undermining the whole system in this regard. It may be a bit difficult for the time being, but we continue to press for that.

> **"My mandate supports the call for the establishment of an independent international monitoring mechanism to investigate all human rights violations and abuses against migrants at international borders."**

Do you think there should be a European Union Mediterranean Search and Rescue Force?

Of course. I have sent several letters to some Mediterranean countries concerning the issue of search and rescue and their reluctance to do so, which caused a lot of migrant deaths. It is a very serious issue. And the issue of missing migrants and their families – left in limbo without support or information – is another important one. Of course, the issue of missing migrants is global now and not just happening in the Mediterranean. What about in Yemen, for example? Or the Darién Gap in Latin America, between Colombia and Panama? There are so many deaths there, so much sexual exploitation and so many more transgressions. Not to mention that this area is ridden with the activities of gangsters and traffickers. I have already asked for a joint visit to Colombia and Panama to assess the situation of the Darién Gap.

We're seeing a rise in the criminalisation of people who are trying to assist migrants and refugees. I think you've commented on this in one of your reports, is that correct?

Yes, we did. We follow very closely the issue of the defamation and criminalisation of NGOs and civil society who are providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in distress, even in the Mediterranean via search and rescue operations. Some of them were prevented, whilst others were criminalised. We are very much on top of this issue. It looks like it's obstructionism more than anything else, because the cases normally fall through in the courts. Judges often just throw out the cases. It's wasting time and prevents these agencies from saving lives while they fight pointless battles in court.

> **“Migrants are being abused by political parties to gain more voters, without taking into account their rights as human beings.”**

It's a big year for elections, but is it a good one for migration and asylum?

Well, unfortunately, it is a challenging year for migration within the context and in the light of those more than 60 countries where elections are taking place. We are very much following closely the rise of xenophobia and anti-migration narratives in this respect. I would finally say, unfortunately, it may not be a good year for migration.

Migrants are being abused by political parties to gain more voters, without taking into account their rights as human beings. Again, this is being supported by several media enterprises. And at the same time, the need for migrant workers has never been higher in many countries. That contradiction is going to be very interesting to watch but no, overall I think this will not be a good year for migration.

Donald Trump's election victory: mixed migration under attack

On 5 November 2024, Donald Trump won his second term as President of the United States. His strong focus on immigration was already pervasive during his first presidency (2017-2021), both through demeaning declarations and strict, exclusionary policies.

Trump's priority was to greatly reduce the number of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers entering the United States. To achieve this, he instituted a series of reforms, including policies to strip hundreds of thousands of people of their Temporary Protected Status (TPS), as well as trying – albeit unsuccessfully – to repeal the *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (DACA).[1] In parallel, Trump was also very vocal on completing the wall at the US-Mexico border, to curb entry from Central and South America.

His anti-Muslim views were exemplified by the so-called 'Muslim travel bans' – a series of executive orders preventing people from seven predominantly Muslim countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) from entering the United States.[2] In 2018, a third iteration of the ban was upheld by the Supreme Court, barring nationals of North Korea and Venezuela from travelling to the US.[3]

Interestingly, though, data shows that Trump's tough anti-migrant and controversial policies might not have achieved his desired outcome of decreasing immigration: the number of irregular migrants crossing the US borders in 2019, for example, reached the highest level since 2009, with 851,508 apprehensions between October 2018 and September 2019 – more than double the figures from 2017.[4] Similarly, in 2018, the Trump administration carried out a total of 337,287 deportations of irregular immigrants – a figure which, while representing a 17 percent increase from the first year he was in power, was still below those recorded under Obama, with an average of 400,000 people being deported annually between 2012 and 2014.

Anti-migration rhetoric and policies at the core of the 2024 Trump campaign

Trump's campaign for the 2024 elections featured a fierce anti-migration stance, with the President making further inflammatory comments against people from mixed migration backgrounds as well as advance promises of even more rigid policies to curb immigration. Following the deadly 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, for example, Trump stated that, should he return to the White House, he would immediately begin a process of "ideological screening" of all immigrants, banning those who sympathise with Hamas.[5]

During a much-publicised debate with his adversary Kamala Harris, Trump made false and derogatory remarks about immigrants from Haiti living in the city of Springfield, Ohio, alleging that they were eating the pets of the local residents. [6]

Whilst it remains to be seen whether or not Trump succeeds at his vision for "the largest domestic deportation operation in American history",[7] it is worth reviewing some of his most extreme policies to assess their potential impact on mixed migration.

Border controls

Trump proposes to curb immigration by further securitising and militarising the US borders. The President plans to build an extra 200 miles of physical barriers along the US-Mexico border (which would be added to the already-existing 654 miles, 458 of which were constructed during Trump's first presidency)[8], deploy 10,000 more Border Patrol agents[9] and leverage sophisticated technology to detect – and stop – illegal crossings.[10] Trump is also planning to build more Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facilities in the southern border area. The President also

1 DACA is a US immigration policy stating that irregular migrants who entered the United States as children at least five years earlier could be eligible for a two-year deferral action from deportation, as well as a work permit.
2 Hogan, M. (2024) Trump vs. Harris on immigration: Future policy proposals. Peterson Institute for International Economics.
3 Ibid
4 Gramlich, J. (2020) How border apprehensions, ICE arrests and deportations have changed under Trump. Pew Research Center.
5 The Guardian (2023) Trump vows to expand Muslim ban and bar Gaza refugees if he wins presidency.
6 Thomas, M. & Wendling, M. (2024) Trump repeats baseless claim about Haitian immigrants eating pets. BBC.
7 Hogan, M. (2024) Op. Cit.
8 Ibid
9 PBS News (2024) Trump proposes adding 10,000 Border Patrol agents after derailing a bipartisan border bill.
10 Long García, J. D. (2024) Trump's 'terrorizing' plan to mass deport immigrants: 'It would rip us apart'. America Magazine.

aims to overturn the Flores settlement, which prohibits the US federal government from detaining irregular migrant children – however, his administration already tried to do so during his first presidency, unsuccessfully.[11]

Mass deportations

Trump intends to ramp up deportations by harnessing both US military and National Guard personnel to round up and remove irregular migrants and expedite deportation processes. He also aims to end birthright citizenship for the children of undocumented migrants, as well as deport foreign pro-Palestinian students and remove sanctuary policies.[12] His overarching plan is one of "mass deportation", that would return the entire US "unauthorised" migrant population (approximately, 11 million people[13]), regardless of criminal background.

Refugees and asylum seekers

Trump's anti-migration plan also includes dramatically slashing yearly refugee admissions – which Biden had lifted from the 2021 record-low of 15,000 under Trump[14] to 125,000[15] – and limiting the asylum process even further. If enacted, this has the potential to affect millions of people in urgent need of protection. As of 2022, approximately 650,000 migrants in the US had Temporary Protected Status, 1.6 million people had pending asylum applications and many hundred thousand more were victims of trafficking and/or recipients of DACA.[16]

Regular migration

Trump intends to institute a "merit-based system" that would allow vetted, non-citizen US college and university graduates to receive permanent resident cards to live and work in the US indefinitely. Nonetheless, Trump has made it clear that "radical Islamists, Hamas supporters and America haters" are excluded from this proposal.[17] Moreover, considering Trump's past comments in favour of more migration from "countries like Norway"[18], it can be argued that most (if not all) non-white migrants are likely to be excluded from this policy, too.

What next for mixed migration in the US?

With Donald Trump back in the Oval Office, the outlook for mixed migration in the next four years is bleak, and the reasons are manifold. First, the President aims to restore the rigid and exclusionary immigration policies from his first term, focusing on securitising the wall along the US southern border, restricting both regular and irregular immigration, overturning policies such as DACA and the Flores settlement and subjecting all visa applicants to meticulous vetting. Then, there are all the new – and even more damaging – anti-migrant measures that Trump vowed to put in place during his 2024 campaign, including his "mass deportation" plan, the end of birthright citizenship, the further strengthening of the US southern border and the "ideological screening" of immigrants.

Lastly, precisely because several of the most extreme policies that he attempted to implement during his first term did not come to fruition or achieve the expected results, the newly elected President might go to greater lengths to institute even harsher measures to accomplish what he did not in the past.

11 Hogan, M. (2024) Op. Cit.
12 Leingang, R. (2024) The rightwing plan to take over 'sanctuary' cities – and rebuild them Maga-style. The Guardian.
13 Migration Policy Institute (n.d.) Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States.
14 Snow, A. & Watson, J (2020) Under Trump, US no longer leads world on refugee protections. AP.
15 Ward, N. &Batalova, J. (2023) Refugees and Asylees in the United States. Migration Policy Institute.
16 Moslimani, M. & Passel, J. S. (2024) What the data says about immigrants in the U.S. Pew Research Center.
17 Hogan, M. (2024) Op. Cit.
18 Scott, E. (2018) Op. Cit.

Narratives battles: immigration narratives, preferences and politicisation

Dr. James Dennison[1]

Migration will remain one of the world's most important and complex political challenges throughout the 21st century.[2] Not only do the politics of migration have vast economic consequences and opportunities, but its governance raises profound legal- and rights-based questions for millions of people worldwide. Debates on migration are granted further gravity and complexity by the highly charged political questions of identity, values and community that discussing the topic often engenders. Moreover, public attitudes to immigration increasingly represent the major parameter for policymakers working on this and numerous related policy areas. As such, understanding what public attitudes to migration are, how they are formed and what narratives are likely to affect them – negatively or positively – is of overwhelmingly practical importance. In particular, in the big election year of 2024, issues around immigration have been consistently among the key talking points and policy questions in campaign agendas around the world.[3]

Furthermore, explaining why people's views on migration vary – both as individuals and in terms of country averages – can offer deeper insights into key social scientific questions of why we, as humans, think as we think and do as we do – in short, what makes us 'tick'. Describing and explaining attitudes to immigration provides evidence in support of, at times, competing scientific theories that see public opinion as, on the one hand, volatile, uninformed, irrational and prone to manipulation or, on the other, the result of deep-seated and stubborn psychological predispositions or early-life experiences. More sophisticated, contemporary theories consider the interactions between these forces.[4]

This essay, therefore, discusses three topics related to immigration attitudes: narratives, preferences and politicisation. Each of these is regularly cited as vital to the politics of immigration today, yet it can – and should – be better understood using little more than assumption.

Narratives

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights underscores the role of migration narratives in shaping perceptions of migrants and migration, directly influencing their rights and equality.[5] It also expresses concern over the rise of harmful and dehumanising migration narratives and language that have become prevalent in various countries.[6] Descriptions of migrants and asylum-seekers are commonly made using water-related metaphors such as "tide", "flow" and "floods" or more incendiary notions of borders being "invaded" or authorities being overwhelmed, with the illegality aspect often repeatedly emphasised.[7] Such narratives have used migrants as scapegoats for deep-rooted societal problems and fears, often for political or financial gain. But what are narratives?

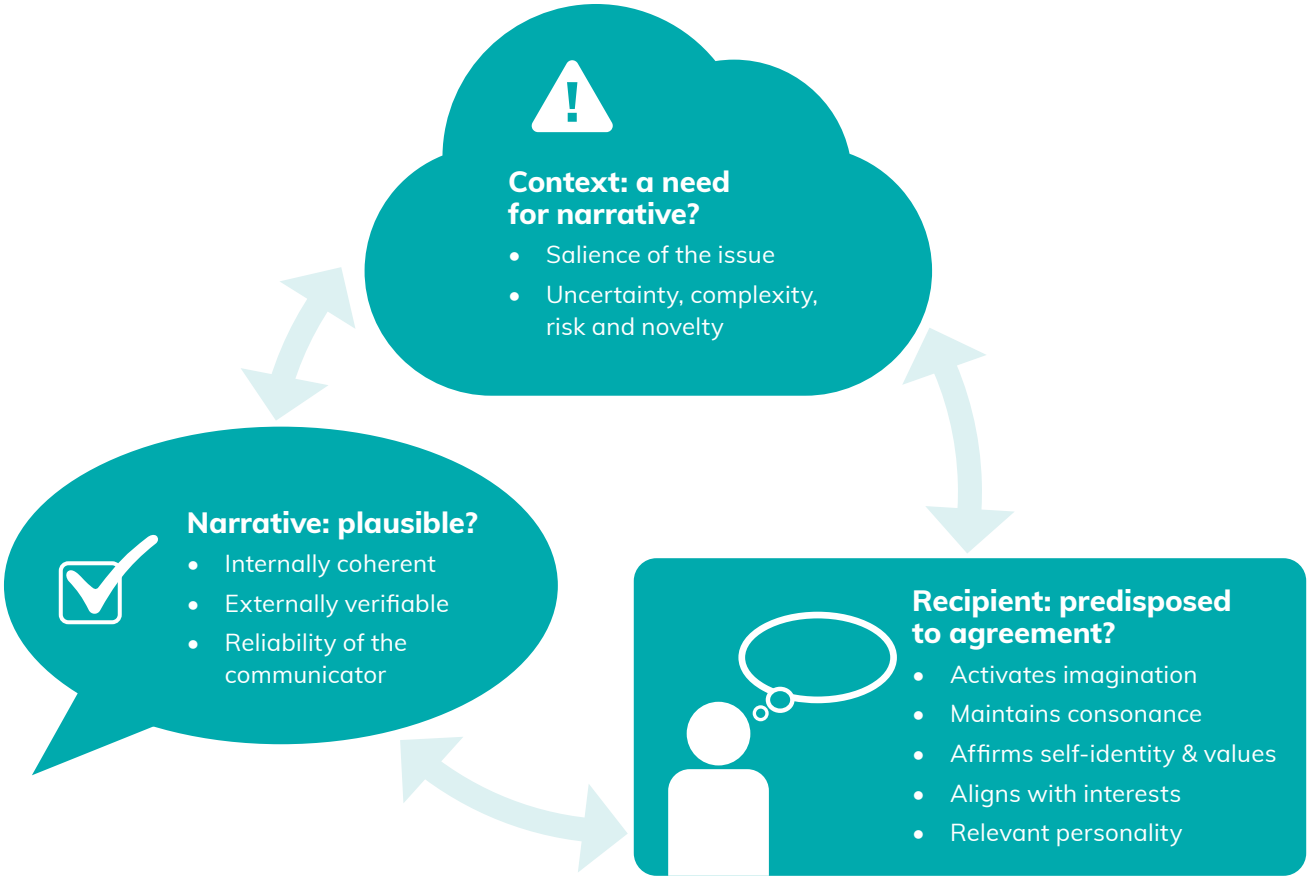
Most definitions agree that narratives involve the "selective representations of reality spanning multiple points in time, often incorporating causal elements".[8] One of the more potent roles of narratives lies not only in their explicit arguments but in the implicit assumptions underpinning their content selection – in short, setting the terms of the debate through their selective nature. Yet narratives are an inescapable part of humanity's attempts to understand reality. As such, policymakers and communicators must prioritise the effective use of narratives in their work to be both understood and believed. As demand for understanding an issue increases, multiple and sometimes competing narratives may simultaneously become popular. Therefore, the popularity of narratives must be used as a gauge of public opinion with extreme caution – not least because modern communication, including smartphones, AI-generated content, 'bots' and the rising prevalence of fake news, can distort popularity levels and exaggerate or underplay the salience of particular narratives. Furthermore, misinformation narratives can instigate major migration-related reactions and events. A prime example of this was the 'fake news' spread in the UK this summer after a fatal stabbing in Southport, for which a

1 Dr James Dennison is a part-time Professor at the Migration Policy Centre of the European University Institute in Florence, where he leads the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM).
2 Here and elsewhere in this essay. the term 'migration' includes the policy debate and issue of perceptions around asylum and refugees which could otherwise be grouped together as *mixed migration*.
3 Hardy, E. (2024) The Role of Migration in a Year of Crucial Elections. Carnegie.
4 Dennison, J. & Geddes, A. (2025 - forthcoming) What Europeans Think About Migration and Why It Matters. Oxford University Press.
5 OHCHR (2020) On Building Human Rights-Based Narratives On Migrants And Migration.
6 Frouws, B. (2021) Negative narratives, mistaken metaphors. The need for careful language on migration. Mixed Migration Centre.
7 van Houtum, H., & Lacy, R. B.(2020) The migration map trap. On the invasion arrows in the cartography of migration. Mobilities: Horwood, C. (2022) The war of words in the politicisation of human smuggling. Mixed Migration Centre.
8 Dennison, J. (2021) Narratives: a review of concepts, determinants, effects, and uses in migration research. Comparative Migration Studies.

Muslim asylum seeker was falsely blamed. This type of misinformation sparked major riots, protests and public disorder in many cities across the country.[9]

Academic studies show that a narrative's popularity is partially reliant on its plausibility, both in terms of being internally theoretically logical and supported externally with evidence. In short, facts – when combined with compelling logic and broader resonance – do matter. However, other factors matter too: communicators and policymakers must construct their narratives and make their points around the recipients' pre-existing cognitive pillars rather than challenge them or try to recreate them from scratch (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theoretical framework for variation in narrative success

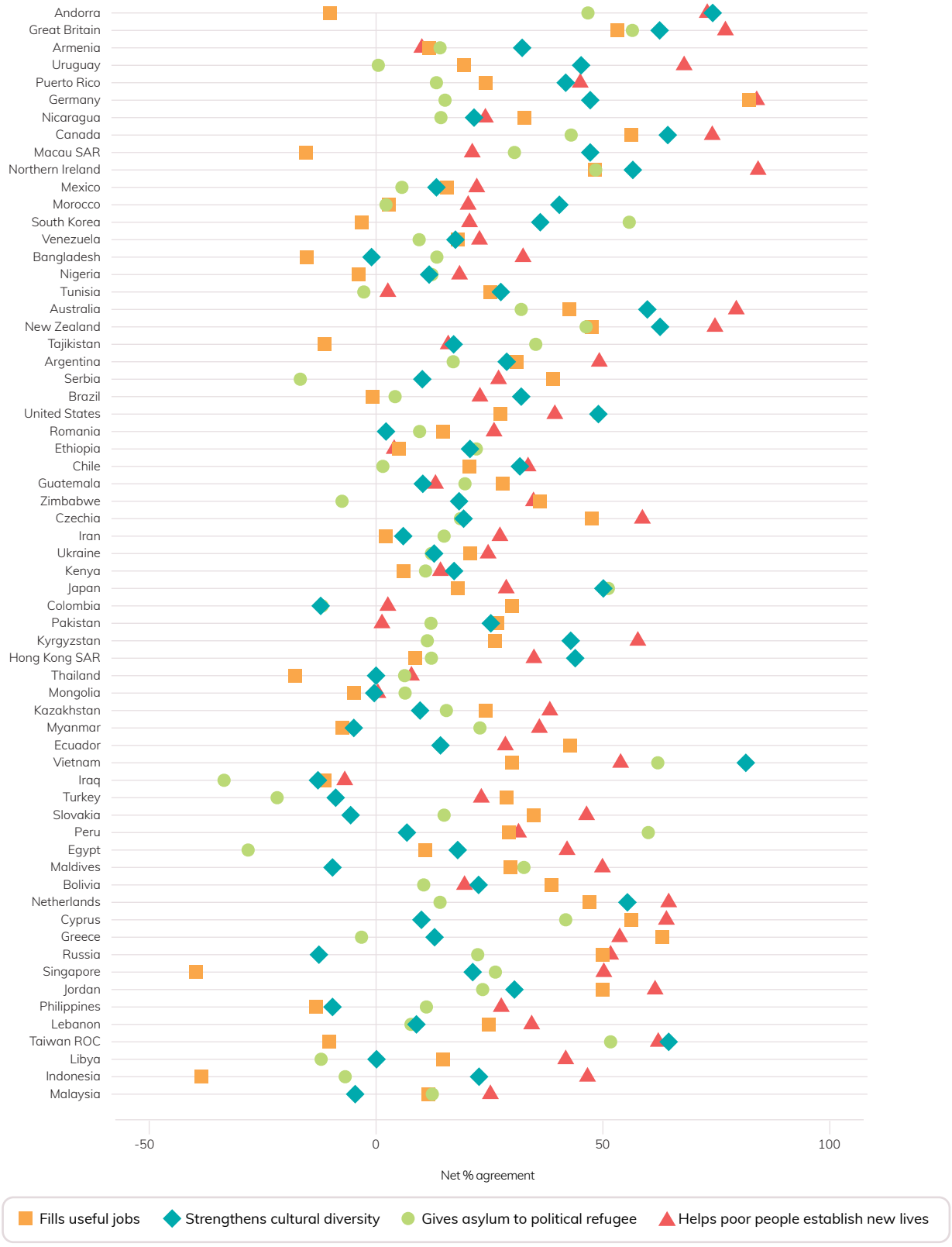


Source: Dennison, J. (2021) Narratives: a review of concepts, determinants, effects, and uses in migration research. Comparative Migration Studies.

What migration narratives do individuals across the world believe? There are many ways to answer this question and none is exhaustive. However, when the World Values Survey (WVS) asked representative samples of individuals across around 60 countries if they believed eight respective narratives to be true or not, they found interesting trends. Individuals across the world are likely to agree with most positive (Figure 2) and negative (Figure 3) narratives on migration simultaneously. In both figures, the countries are listed in order of immigration preferences, with the most pro-immigration electorates (in terms of policy preferences) at the top and least at the bottom. In almost every country, as shown in Figure 2, there are majorities in agreement that immigration has had all four of the positive effects – in short, people recognise that immigration has positive effects wherever they are and regardless of their immigration policy preferences.

9 Quinn, B. (2024) Misinformation about Southport attack suspect spreads on social media. The Guardian.

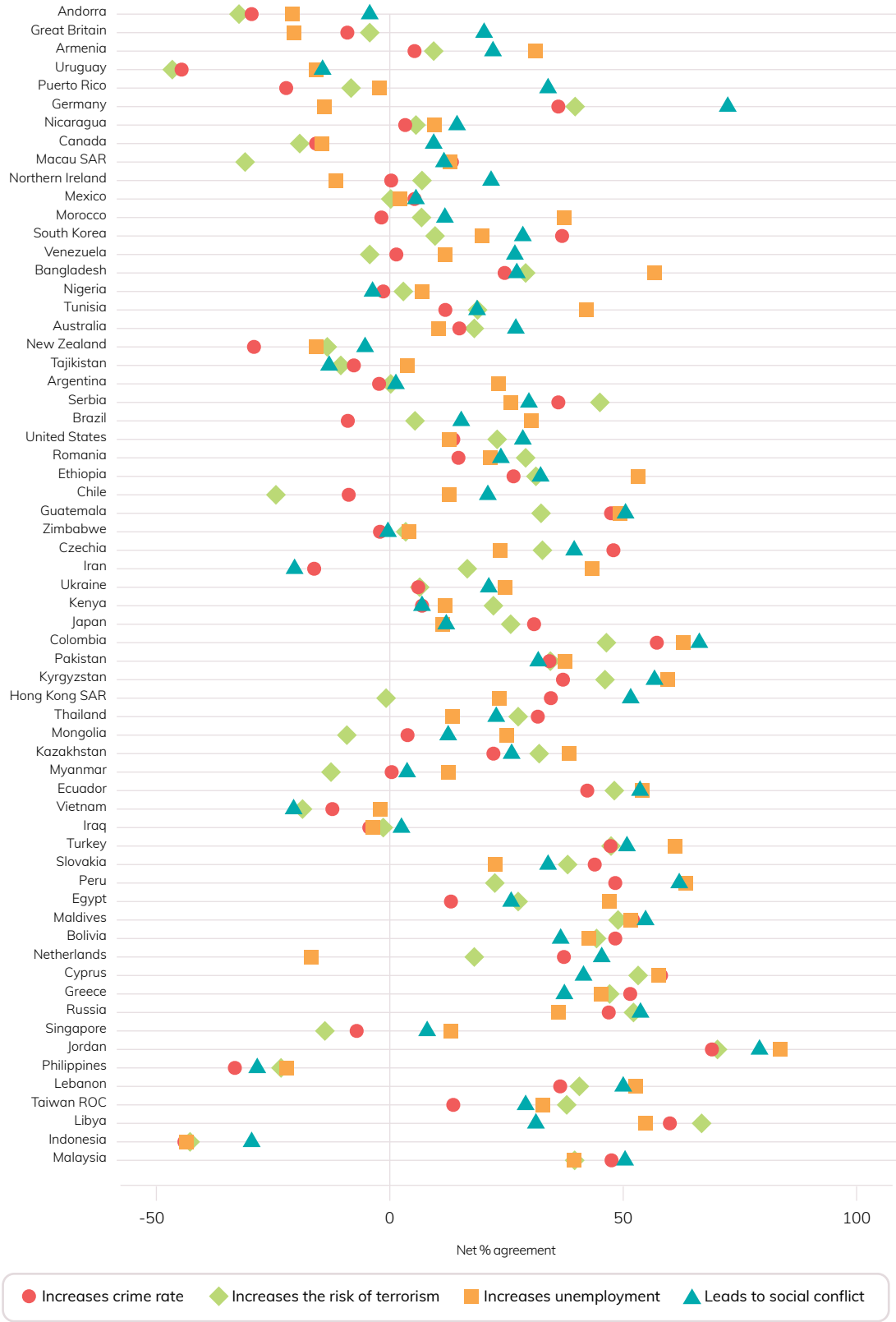
Figure 2. Net belief in positive narratives about the effects of immigration



Source: World Values Survey, 2017-2022.

In Figure 3, we again see a net agreement that immigration has had four respective negative effects by country. Again, countries are in order of descending preference for open immigration policies shown in Figure 3. There is considerable variation in the extent to which there is a net agreement with the four negative effects – that immigration increases the crime rate, increases the risk of terrorism, increases unemployment and leads to social conflict. Net agreement with each of the four negative effects is correlated with policy preferences. Even in pro-immigration countries, there is widespread agreement that immigration "leads to social conflict".

Figure 3. Net belief in negative narratives about the effects of immigration



Source: World Values Survey, 2017-2022.

Preferences

What kind of immigration policies do people want? Between 2017-2022, the WVS measured such preferences across 63 countries by presenting participants with four options:

1. Let anyone come who wants to
2. Let people come as long as there are jobs available
3. Place strict limits on the number of foreigners who can come here
4. Prohibit people coming here from other countries.

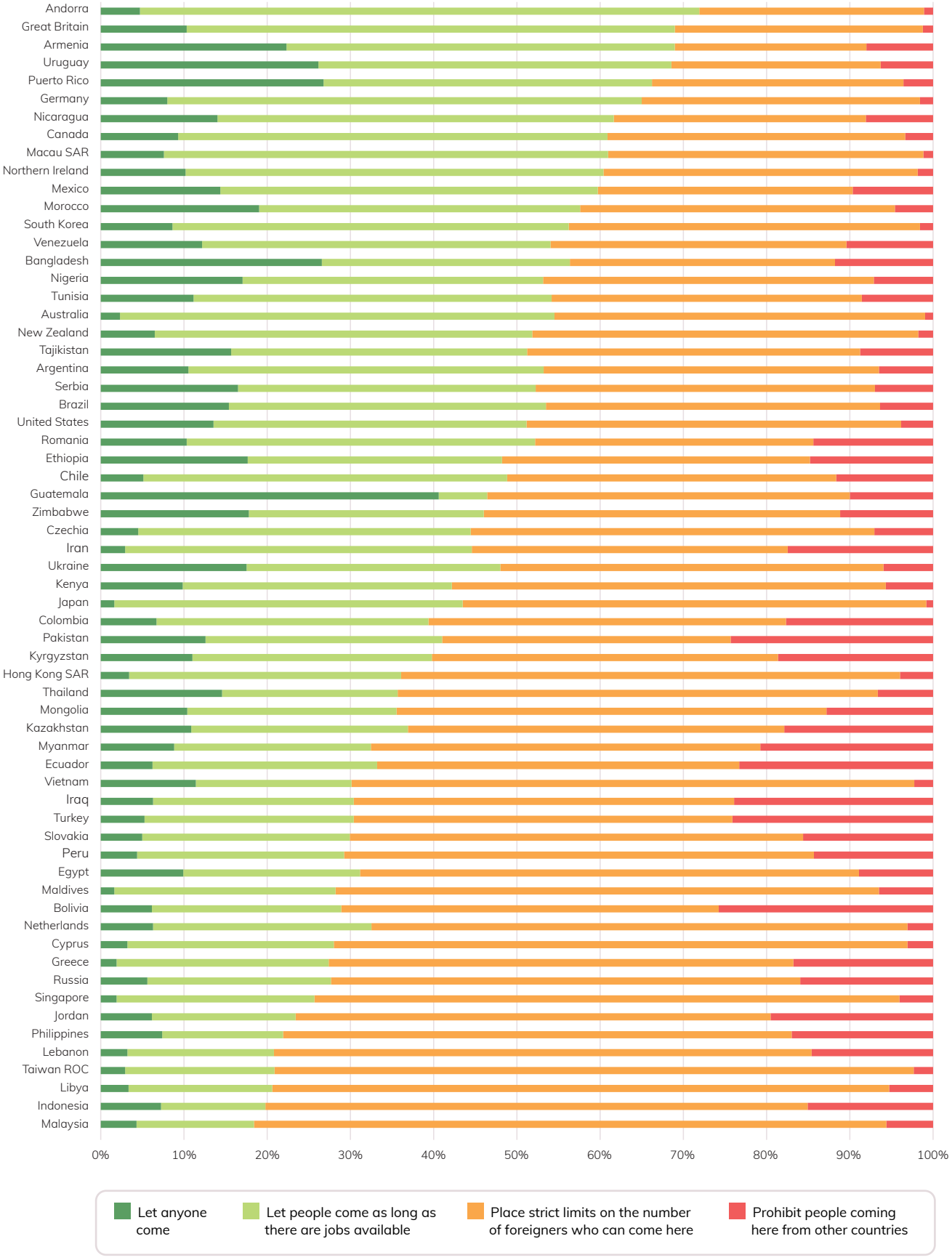
In Figure 4, we see the distribution of responses across all participating countries in order of the sum of those choosing one of the first two – more positive – responses. Countries do not vary significantly in the proportion of individuals at either extreme – for entirely 'open' or 'closed' borders – which almost everywhere represent a small minority. Yet there is significant variation by country among the two "moderate" responses. There is generally strong support for "strict limits" on foreigners, and where "strict limits" are preferred, the proportion of those wanting more extreme exclusion ("prohibit people coming") is often, but not always, higher.

Figure 4 also illustrates how widespread attitudes are concerning migration. Often the problematisation of migration is associated with OECD countries, but it is also high on the political agenda elsewhere and particularly in the Global South – where most global mobility actually takes place (internal and international). The 2024 election campaigns in developing and emerging economies have shown how hot the political discourse around immigration, refugees and asylum was.[10] For example, in South Africa, India, Chile, Türkiye, Malaysia and Mexico migration narratives had particularly high salience.[11]

10 More details of specific elections can be found in the essay, *2024: global elections and the politicisation of migration*, page 152. Also see Election outcome chart on page 148.

11 Dionne, K. Y. & Wellman, B. (2024) How immigration issues are steering South Africa's 2024 elections. Good Authority; Domínguez, D. (2024) Election Countdown: the Migration Phenomenon in Mexico. Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom; Uras, U. (2022) Rising anti-refugee sentiment leads to debate in Turkey. Aljazeera.

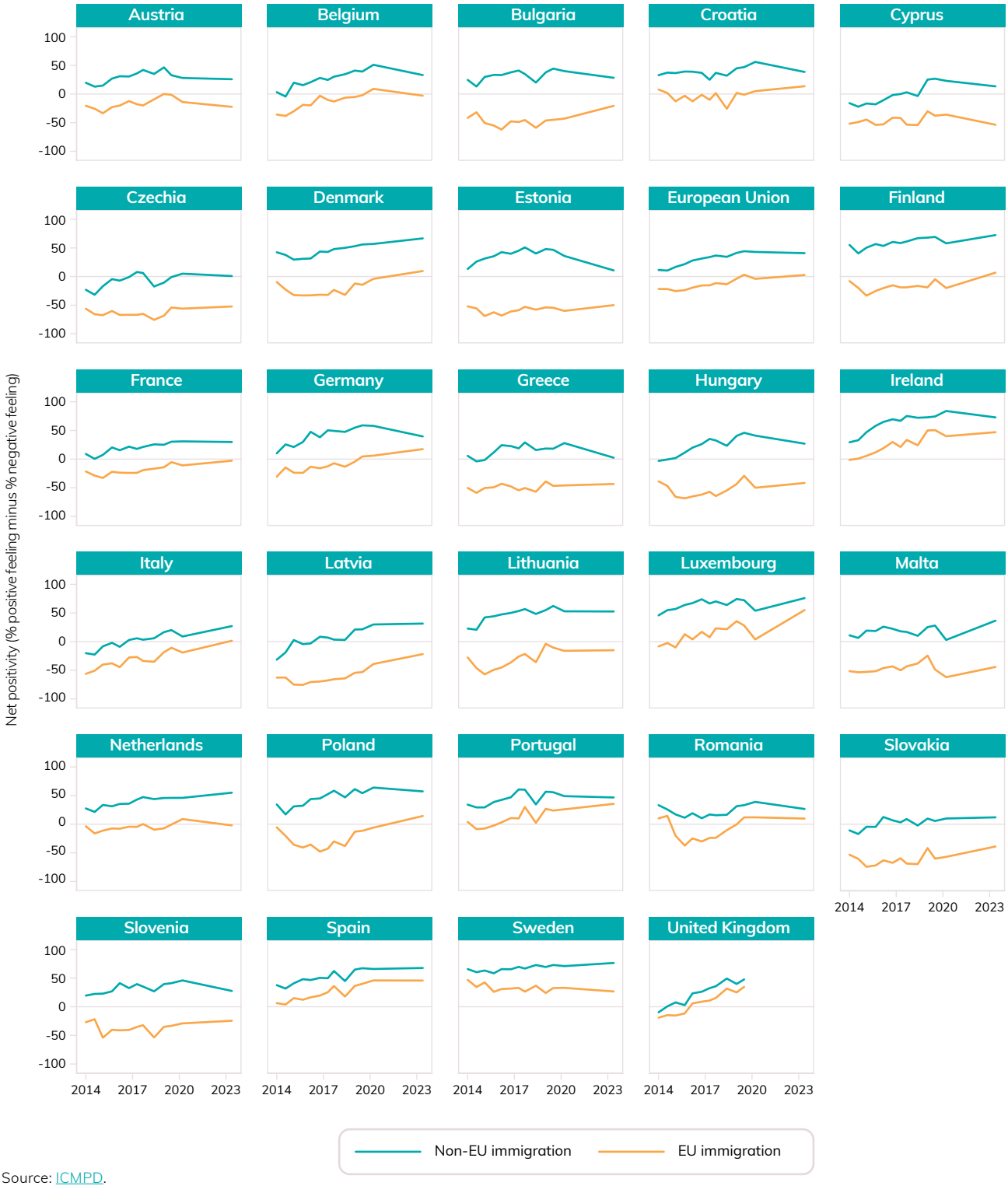
Figure 4. Immigration policy preferences by country



Source: World Values Survey, 2017-2022.

In the case of Europe, as shown in Figure 5, feelings about immigration from other EU member states as well as from outside the EU show a relatively stable trend over time, alongside a fixed difference between attitudes to each group (in most countries). Perhaps somewhat surprisingly given the seemingly toxic and negative rhetoric and narratives on migration in media and political debates in many countries around the world, there appears to be a slight shift towards positivity.

Figure 5. Feeling towards immigration from other EU member states and outside the EU, by country

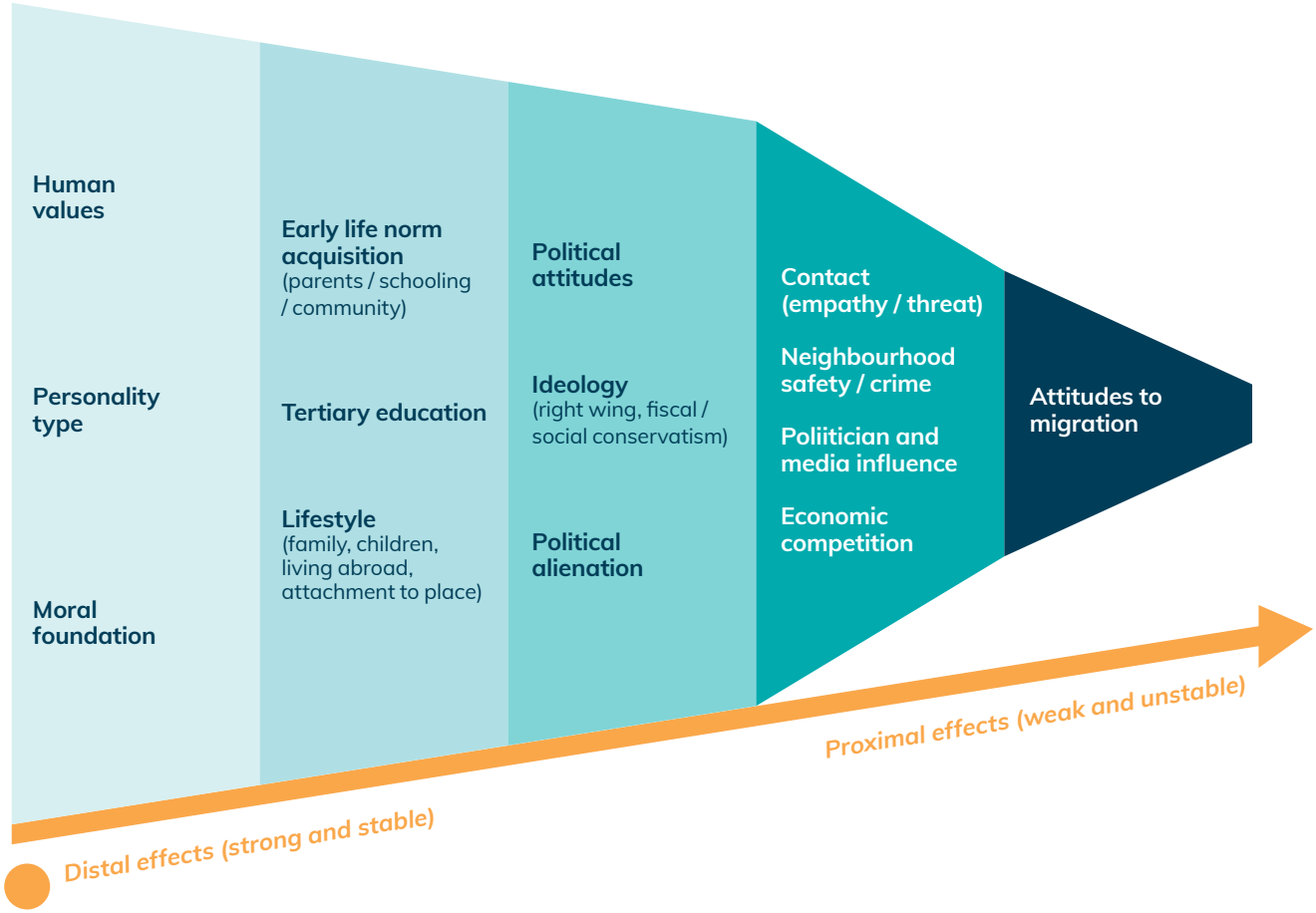


Source: ICMPD.

These distributions in migration preferences and the slightly more favourable attitudes over time are seemingly at odds with voters' increased support to populist, anti-migration, far-right parties. How can this contradictory trend be explained?

Academics have devoted thousands of studies to answering questions about voter motivation and attitudes around migration, producing dozens of theories and hundreds of factors. Many of the causal mechanisms identified are related to and often reliant upon one another. One of these mechanisms combines distal effects on attitudes that are deep-rooted and difficult to shift with more immediate proximal effects, such as media coverage. How an individual reacts to media coverage or contact with migrants, which media coverage they choose and whether they choose to meet migrants, for example, are all reliant on deeper factors like early-life socialisation and psychological predispositions. Short-term, present effects are, therefore, dependant on earlier, more profound processes both in terms of exposure and effect size and even direction. This process is shown heuristically in Figure 6.

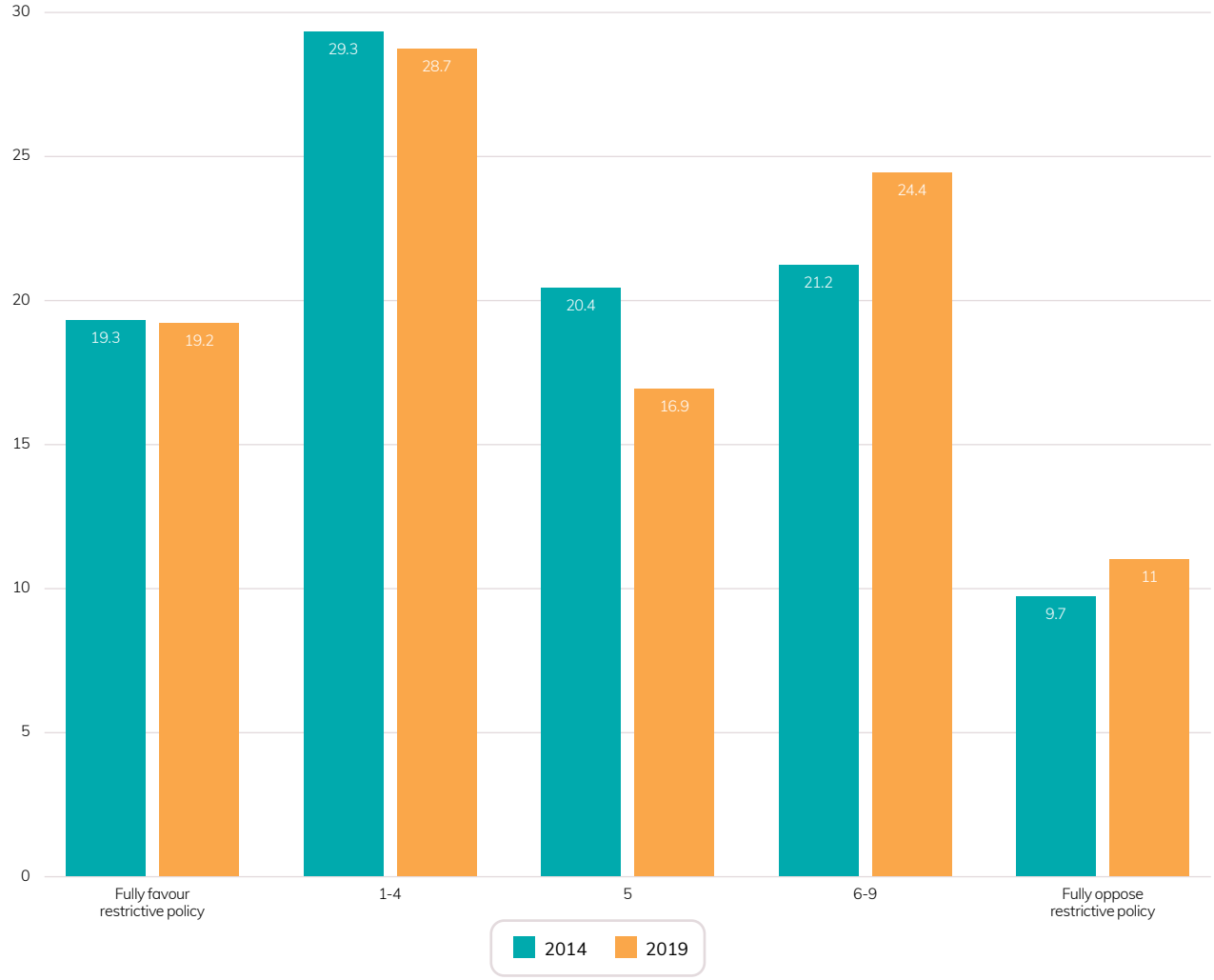
Figure 6. A "funnel of causality" of attitudes to immigration



Source: Dennison, J., & Geddes, A. (2020). Why COVID-19 does not necessarily mean that attitudes towards immigration will become more negative. IOM.

Another interesting factor to consider is the polarisation of migration-related attitudes. The kind of immigration policies Europeans want, for example, is ultimately of more substantial importance and may account for voting behaviour that differs from attitudes and transcends abstract feelings and emotions. Figure 7 illustrates the responses given by representative samples of European Union citizens when asked about their views of immigration on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means "you are fully in favour of a restrictive policy on immigration" and 10 means "you are fully opposed to a restrictive policy on immigration". The distributions of these responses in 2014 and 2019 are highly similar. By 2019, Europeans were almost equally split on their opposition to a restrictive immigration policy, with neither side being a majority and many people feeling ambivalent with respect to pro-immigration preferences. However, there remains a far larger proportion of Europeans who are extremely opposed to immigration – around 19 percent – than extremely in favour – around 11 percent. Furthermore, considering the voting outcomes in a wide range of EU member states and the EU parliament itself in 2024 – and in the years since 2019 – it would seem that people are far less favourable to increased migration today.

Figure 7. European preferences for a restrictive immigration policy, 2014-2019

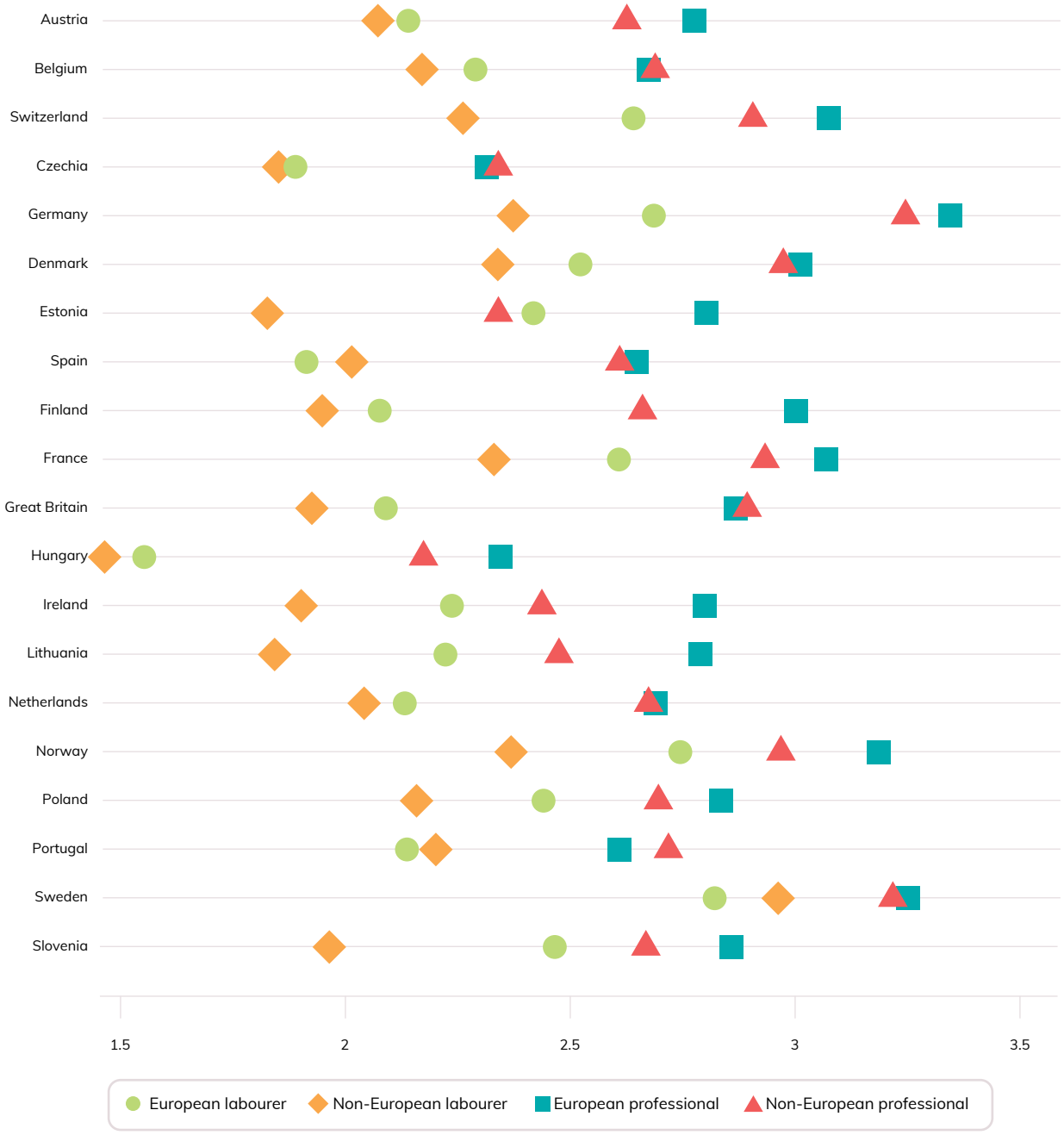


Source: European Social Survey 2014 and 2019 versions.

How do these policy preferences change when we consider immigrants of varying backgrounds? In 2014, the European Social Survey asked about policy preferences, but instead of asking individuals separate questions for each group, it asked for their preferred policy towards one randomly selected group of four. The four hypothetical groups of migrants varied according to whether they were European or non-European and whether they were professionals (high-skilled) or labourers (low-skilled). Mean responses to these 'randomised' questions were more unambiguously differentiated by group, as shown in Figure 8. In every country, the group for whom the preferred policy was most open was a professional, usually European one (though not in the case of Belgium, Czechia, Great Britain or Portugal). Notably, in many cases, the mean score was between "allow some" and "allow many" for European professionals. European labourers were still generally preferred to non-European labourers – in every case, except the two Iberian countries. This general European preference for foreigners from other European countries was also tellingly illustrated through policy in relation to Ukraine, when, after February 2022, six million Ukrainian refuges were rapidly granted a wide range of rights and support under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive. Meanwhile, non-European asylum seekers to the EU were being deterred, deported and generally problematised.[12]

12 Venturi, E. & Vallianatou, A. I. (2022) Ukraine exposes Europe's double standards for refugees. Chatham House.

Figure 8. Admission policy preferences to four randomised groups of immigrants, by country

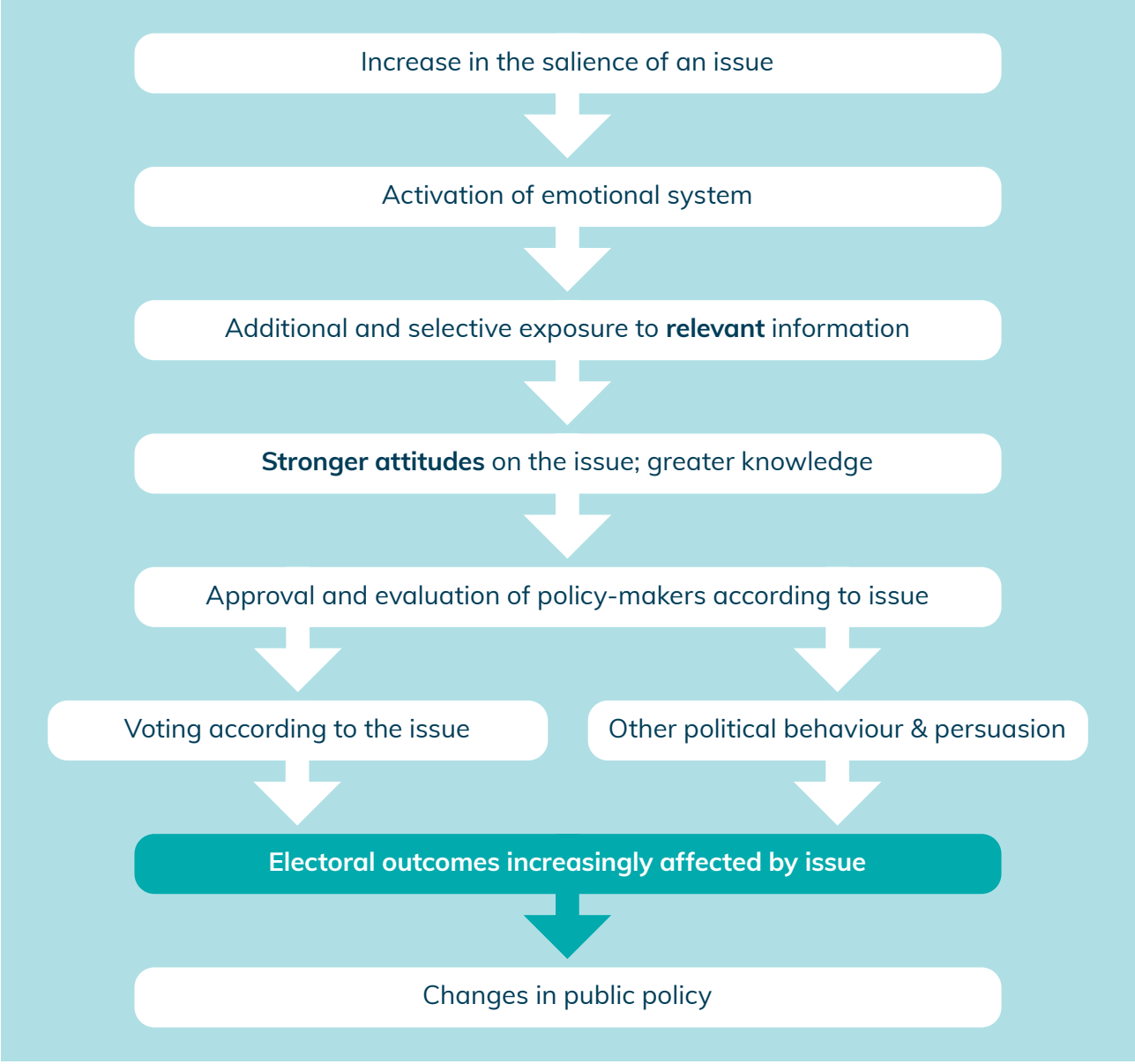


Source: European Social Survey, 2014. 'Please tell me to what extent you think [country] should allow unskilled labourers from [poor European country providing largest number of migrants] to come to live in [country]?'

Politicisation

Earlier, this essay highlighted the importance of people's deep-seated dispositions on immigration issues and the likelihood that external factors such as media coverage could be significant by activating existing feelings or dispositions rather than changing them. It is, nonetheless, also crucial to look more closely at this topic by discussing the perceived importance or salience of immigration within politics. Salience can be described as "the degree to which a person is passionately concerned about and personally invested in an attitude".[13] Higher salience has been shown to have numerous effects on behaviour – not least voting – and on policies as "attaching importance to an issue may activate and engage a person's emotion systems".[14] When an issue is more salient, it has also been shown to make attitudes on that issue more accessible, certain and stable. Even more, attitudes to highly salient issues can become influential on attitudes to less salient attitudes. Yet these effects are only observable at the highest level of salience, with psychologists showing that individuals are only able to prioritise a few issues at a single time (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Theoretical model of how public salience affects electoral and policy outcomes



Source: Dennison, J. (2019). Impact of public attitudes to migration on the political environment in the Euro-Mediterranean region: First chapter: Europe. European University Institute.

13 Krosnick, J. A. (1990) Government Policy and Citizen Passion: A Study of Issue Publics in Contemporary America. Political Behavior.
14 Dennison, J. (2019) A Review of Public Issue Salience: Concepts, Determinants and Effects on Voting. Political Studies Review.

In the case of the UK, salience is prevented from a natural expression through policy because of the country's electoral system's lack of proportional representation. The results of the UK elections in July 2024 exemplified this: the victorious Labour Party gained a 174 (MP) seat majority (out of 650 seats) with 34 percent of the popular vote. Meanwhile, the right-wing Reform party, proposing more restrictive asylum and migration policies, gained only five seats but with 12.4 percent of the popular vote.[15] Arguably, the salience of the migration issue had, for some, been frustrated due to its competition with other political priorities ("getting the Conservatives out", the cost of living crisis and so on) as well as the electoral system. Not only that, but the Conservative party – who were closely associated with more restrictive migration policies and whose Brexit campaigns were dominated by the 'border control' narrative – manifestly failed to deal with the 'small boats' phenomenon or control sky-rocketing regular migration in the years before it was voted out. Considering the high salience of migration in the UK, these frustrations – in addition to social media misinformation – are likely to have contributed to the extraordinary outbreak of sustained anti-migrant protests and riots in multiple urban centres in parts of the UK during the summer of 2024.[16]

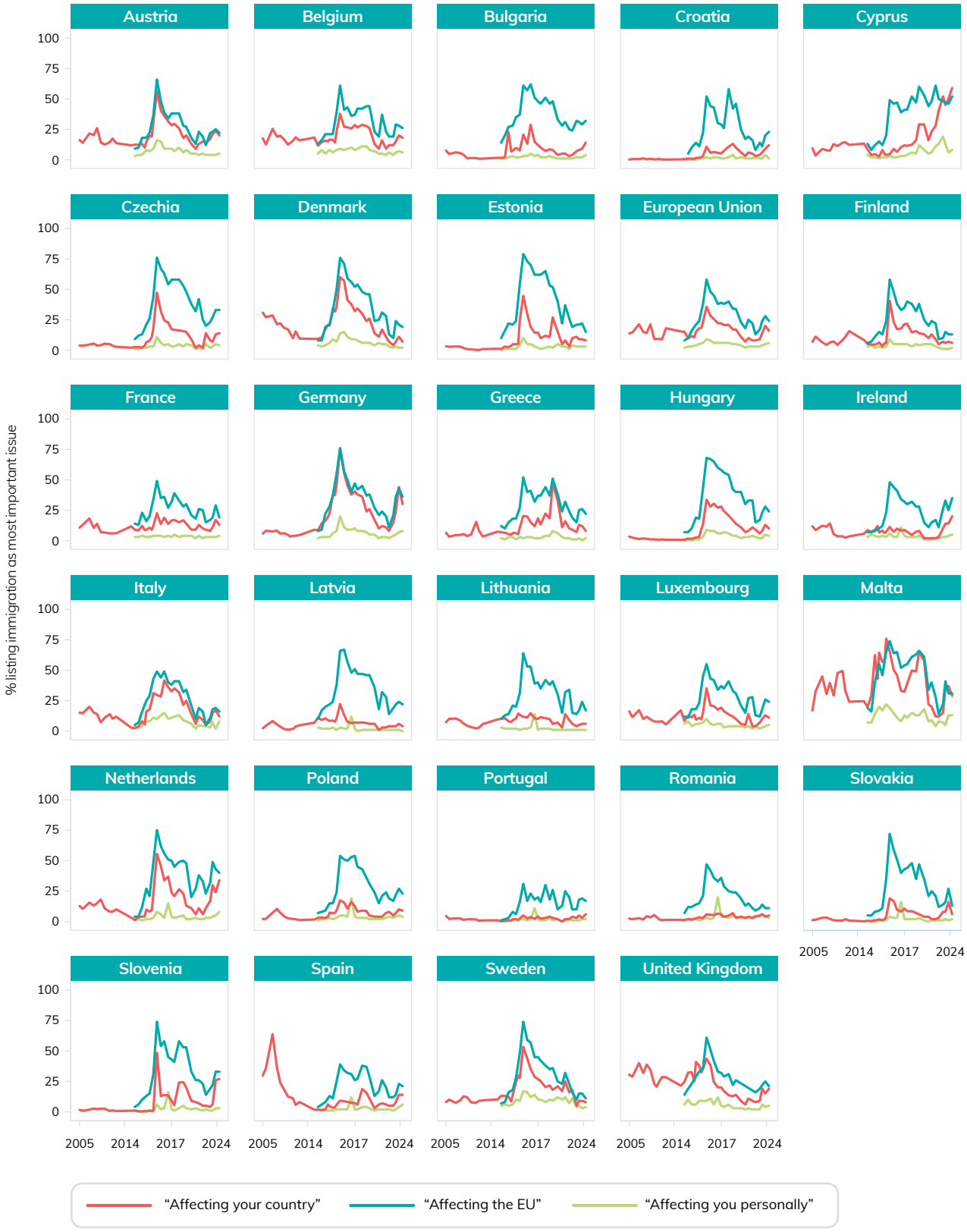
In Europe, since 2005, the Eurobarometer has asked a representative sample of every EU member state one question: "What do you think are the two most important issues affecting your country?". Since 2012, it has also asked: "What do you think are the two most important issues affecting the EU?" and "What do you think are the two most important issues affecting you personally?"

Surveys are typically biannual (though occasionally less) and respondents are offered around 14 responses, always including "immigration". Figure 10 shows the percentage of Europeans across the EU, and in each member state, responding that "immigration" is one of the two most important issues affecting their country, the EU and themselves personally. Contrary to expectation, perhaps, there is evidence of strong immigration salience and anti-migrant sentiment among the youngest voters in parts of Europe.[17]

The salience of migration in European politics was illustrated in the June European Union parliamentary elections, where far-right parties made gains at the expense of centrists. Two groups with far-right parties – the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) – won over 140 of the parliament's 720 seats.[18] Nevertheless, centrist parties continued to dominate the chamber and of course far-right campaigns were not the only ones to have mixed migration issues feature at the top or near the top of their agenda. Analysts expect that the higher presence of anti-migrant parties in the EU will likely result in a further restrictive impact on mixed migration. In France, the anti-migrant and anti-Muslim National Rally very nearly won the vote, while in Germany the anti-migrant AfD continues to gain voter support.[19]

15 Topping, A. (2024) 'Disproportionate' UK election results boost calls to ditch first past the post. The Guardian.
16 Gurcov, N. (2024) Anti-migrant rioting and anti-racist response in the UK. ACLED Insight. Also see *Thematic snapshot*, page 165.
17 Duncan, P. & Clark, A. (2024) Young more anti-immigration than old in parts of Europe, polling shows. The Guardian.
18 Westfall, S. (2024) How big elections are changing the world in 2024. The Washington Post. Shortly after the EU results, the ID was disbanded as two new far-right, anti-migrant parties were formed - Europe of Sovereign Nations and Patriots for Europe.
19 Caulcutt, C. (2024) French left beats Le Pen's far right in election shock; Kampfner, J. (2024) As the far right gains ground, Germany deserves better from its mainstream politicians. The Guardian.

Figure 10. Percentage of Europeans by EU member state who respond that immigration is one of the two most important issues affecting their country, the EU and themselves personally



Several key trends can be observed in Figure 10. Starting with the salience of immigration to one's country, the EU average shows that immigration was a secondary political concern between 2004 and late 2014. During this time, the salience of immigration was volatile, though within a range between 9.1 percent and 21.3 percent. Thereafter, the issue rapidly shot up in perceived importance, reaching a peak of 36 percent in November 2015, making it one of Europe's two most important issues. This was at the height of the so-called European 'migration crisis' when large numbers of Syrians and other refugees and migrants arrived in Europe along the Eastern Mediterranean route. Then, the issue declined in importance – at first steadily, then rapidly during the Covid-19 pandemic, as the issues of health, the economy and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 took over. After 2022, the perceived importance of the immigration issue began to slightly increase again and, by 2024, was significantly higher than pre-2015 levels. The salience of immigration in Europe and elsewhere has been repeatedly illustrated during the many elections in 2024. During campaigns for national elections and the EU parliament, few political parties could avoid announcing their position on migration – often with the pace being set by more restrictionist and exclusionary populist right and far-right parties, forcing more mainstream and centrist ones to adopt harsher immigration positions than they conventionally would.

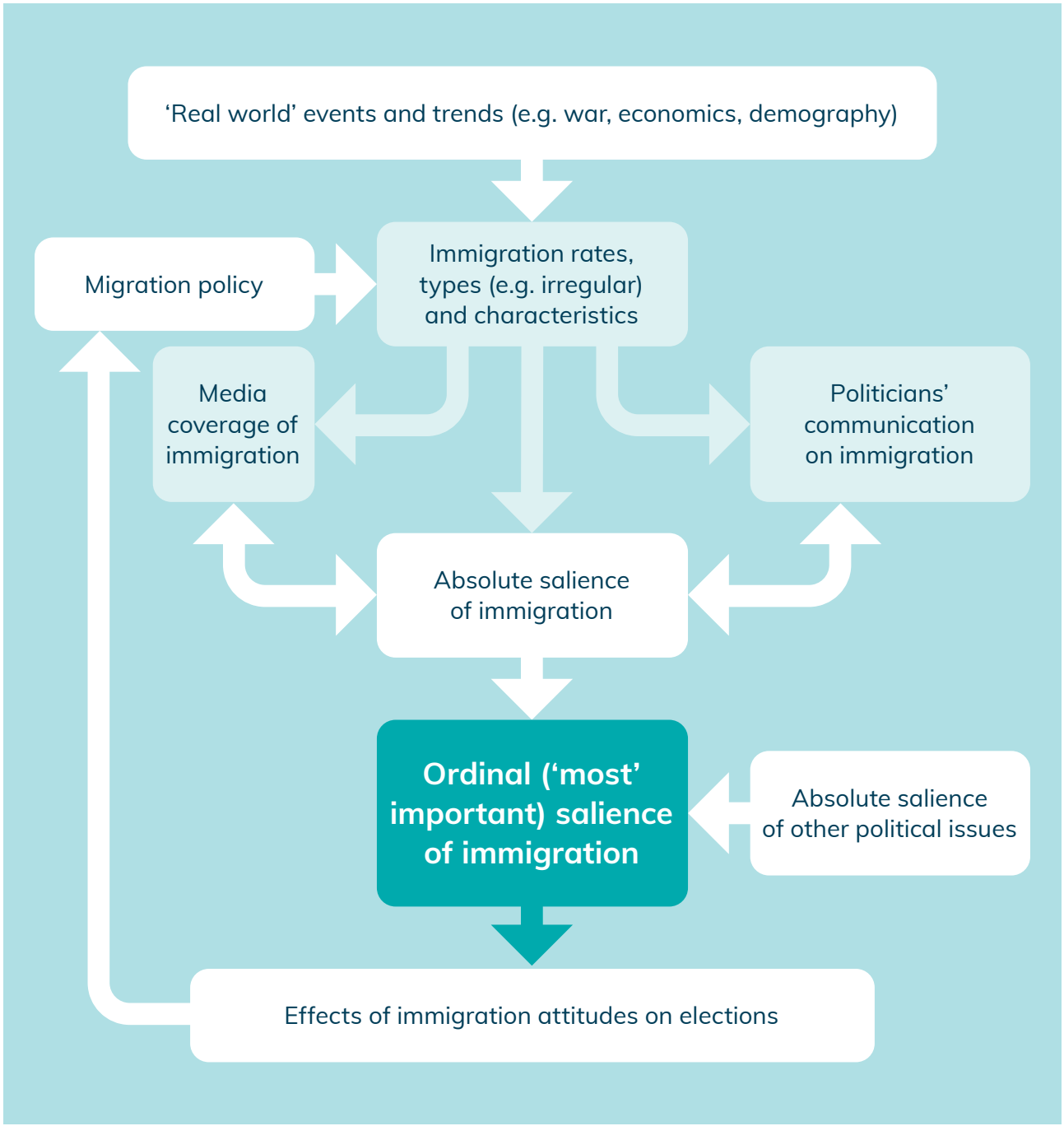
The other two indicators follow partially distinct trends. In terms of the percentage of Europeans seeing immigration as one of the most important issues affecting the EU – as opposed to one's country – the issue was considered even less important prior to 2015, with only eight percent seeing it as salient in November 2012, when the question was first asked. By November 2013, however, it had overtaken national salience and, in November 2015, it peaked, with 58 percent of Europeans seeing immigration as one of the two most important issues and, by far, the most important affecting the EU. Unlike national salience, it has still to return to pre-migration crisis lows; even at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, it never fell below 18 percent and, by early 2022, had already returned to 22 percent. The percentage of those who see immigration as one of the most important issues affecting them personally is striking for how low it remains – even at its peak in November 2015, only nine percent of Europeans saw it as one of the two most important issues affecting them and, with the onset of the pandemic in early 2020, immigration had returned to being a personal political non-issue.

In short, over the years and across most countries, migration has been seen as a far more important issue at the European level than at the national level, and as more important at both European and national levels than affecting people personally. Even if seen as relatively important at the European and national level, migration is generally not seen as important in terms of affecting people personally.

Academics are still only beginning to properly ask what causes this trend, but most early results suggest a process captured in Figure 11 based on real-world events, media coverage and politicians' coverage to explain national-level variation in the salience of the issue of immigration. Political campaigning, in particular, may act as an accelerator when populist and far-right populist parties continually raise the issue of migration which, in itself, stimulates publicity and puts migration at the top of the electoral agenda – normally, directly benefitting anti-migrant parties. Left to its own devices, the media covers migration issues in the course of current affairs reporting, but it starts to highlight migration dynamics and problematise migration when political leaders focus on it (keeping it at crisis point), lobby for change and also when social media (open to disruptive manipulation) focuses on it. Furthermore, the combination of actual events and explosive media coverage can catalyse a policy panic, causing reactions across all political parties as they scramble to reassure voters they have the correct policy remedies. In the case of Germany, a murderous act of terror perpetrated by a Muslim asylum seeker shortly before three prominent September state elections obtained maximum publicity and played into the far-right AfD's hands, delivering the highest-ever results for them in all three states.[20]

20 Nöstlinger, N. (2024) Migration smashes into German elections after deadly knife attack. Politico; Sabet, N., Liebald, M. & Friebel, G. (2023) Terrorism and voting: The rise of right-wing populism in Germany. CEPR (Vox EU). Also see the *Thematic snapshot*, page 179.

Figure 11. Theoretical model of national-level causes of the salience of immigration



Source: Dennison, J. (2019). Op. Cit.

Parties and politicians with the most to gain from keeping immigration and refugee/asylum issues salient and in their manifestos often capitalise on anxiety, fear and distrust. They frequently evoke and sustain negative narratives by deploying partial arguments, selective 'facts' and counterfactuals, which pro-migration lobbies find hard to counter using evidence or rationality.[21]

21 Banulescu-Bogdan, N. (2018) When Facts Don't Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration's Costs and Benefits. Migration Policy Institute.

European Union: In June, the European Union parliamentary elections saw far-right parties make strong gains at the expense of centrists, though this was not enough to win a command of the parliament. All parties had mixed migration issues feature at the top or near the top of their agenda. Shortly after the results, the party under which most right-wing parties grouped (ID) was disbanded, as two new far-right and explicitly anti-migrant parties were formed – Europe of Sovereign Nations and Patriots for Europe. [See *Keeping track in Europe*, page 87 and the essay, *2024: global elections and the politicisation of migration*, page 152]

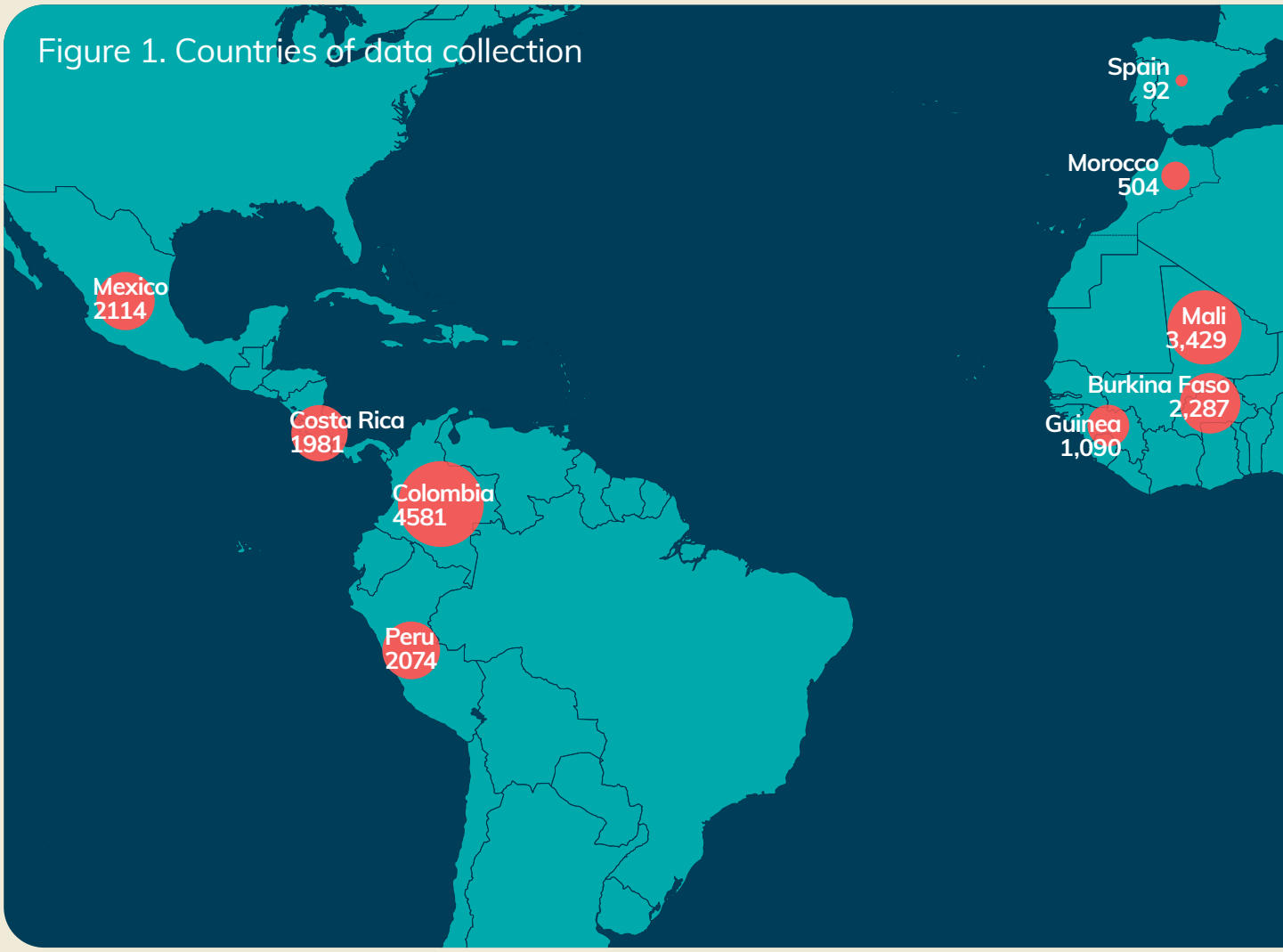
4Mi: primary data collection on mixed migration

4Mi: primary data collection on mixed migration

4Mi is the MMC's flagship data collection project. Regional teams in West Africa, North Africa, East Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America collect and analyse data on mixed migration through interviews with migrants about their motivations and aspirations, protection concerns and experiences along mixed migration routes. Launched in 2014, 4Mi today consists of a network of around 165 enumerators in 20 countries. Targeting known gathering points for migrants on commonly used routes, 4Mi enumerators use questionnaires to conduct in-depth structured interviews on a continuous basis. 4Mi also conducts short-term, topic-specific surveys. To date, the 4Mi teams have conducted more than 150,000 interviews, all surveys combined.

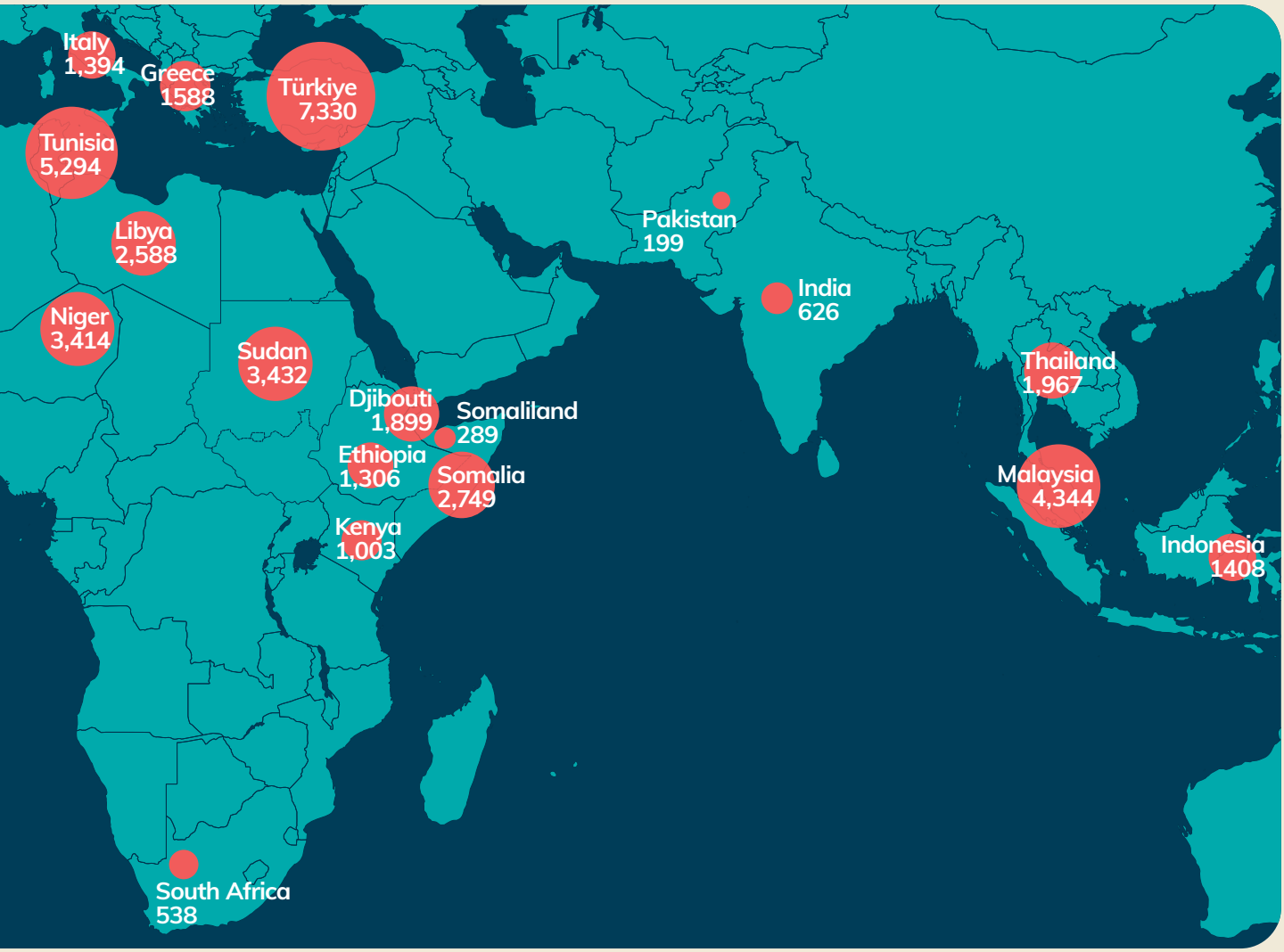
As well as analysis published by the MMC throughout the year, 4Mi data can be accessed via 4Mi Interactive, which enables users to analyse our latest data according to their population and topic of interest. More information about 4Mi is available here: mixedmigration.org/4mi/

Figure 1. Countries of data collection



4Mi in the MMR 2024 and the value of evidence and myth-busting

The 4Mi data presented in this year's *Mixed Migration Review* speak directly to some of the persistent migration myths that continue to dominate migration narratives and policymaking, a key topic that runs through this edition in what has been an exceptional year for elections and one in which immigration issues have played such a prominent role. Migration and asylum are subjects on which people hold strong and often fixed positions, which appear to be formed and maintained irrespective of evidence and analysis. The level to which migration research and evidence influence government and public policy can seem to be inversely proportional to the depth and quantity of research available. Research is used more as ammunition to reinforce existing political positions and policies rather than to drive reflective policy change.[1] Even if policymakers are well aware of the evidence, they can be under political pressure to ignore it, which is how myths and misconceptions about migration persist. Meanwhile, some of these myths continue to be actively pushed by politicians and opinion makers in the media, while part of the general public has had enough of experts.[2] The challenge for those, like the MMC, who provide the evidence is how to make sure this evidence does ultimately find its way to policymaking. Nevertheless, continually refining our understanding of migration dynamics and correctly representing migrants is critical to 4Mi and the MMC's vision and the information provided to the MMC by talking to over 150,000 migrants in the past decade is an evidence base that cannot and should not be ignored.



1 Natter, K. & Welfens, N. (2024) Why Has Migration Research So Little Impact? Examining Knowledge Practices in Migration Policy Making and Migration Studies. International Migration Review.

2 Reed, C. (2023) Why so many people have had enough of experts – and how to win back trust. The Conversation.

4Mi sampling and interview volume

The 4Mi analysis is based on 59,533 interviews conducted between January 2021 and March 2024 with migrants who were on the move or had been in the country of interview for less than two years.[3] The sample comprises 62 percent men and 38 percent women interviewed in 28 countries.

The analysis presented here is necessarily a simplification, grouping a diverse sample of respondents to give a brief and global snapshot of what migrants around the world say on the subjects covered in the essays. The MMC regularly publishes more nuanced and targeted insights on particular routes, locations and population groups, and 4Mi Interactive allows for this more specific analysis.

Totals may vary in the analysis we present, as some questions may not be asked to all respondents. Each thematic section includes additional notes on the data, to explain differences in sample size and composition.

Limitations of 4Mi data

4Mi targets a very diverse, hard-to-reach and highly mobile population, which means that we cannot conduct random sampling and our data cannot be generalised to the overall population of migrants. 4Mi uses a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. We do not provide estimates of the volume of migration or the prevalence of particular incidents along routes, but our large dataset and efforts to reach a diverse sample means we can provide useful insights, highly indicative of the actual mixed migration trends and dynamics. With regard to gender, 4Mi strives to adhere to a policy of at least one male and one female enumerator in each data collection location.

In some places, restrictions and security risks can prevent face-to-face data collection. Altogether, 36 percent of interviews were by phone: this was most frequent in Malaysia, Türkiye, Libya, Tunisia, Sudan, Niger and Mali. The use of remote interviews means that MMC's access is more constrained and enumerators can only interview respondents with access to a phone.

Finally, 4Mi data is self-reported. It depends on respondents' recall and the information they choose to share. This may vary according to a range of factors, including the personality, profile and circumstances of the respondent, the location and environment in which the survey takes place, and the rapport between the enumerator and the respondent. 4Mi continuously reviews and improves its methodology. For more information, see the MMC website: mixedmigration.org/4mi/

3 Except Greece and Italy, where respondents are likely to have been in the country for more than two years before reaching some locations of interview. Therefore, the selection criteria is modified to less than two years in the city or town of interview.

Smugglers as influencers on the decision to migrate

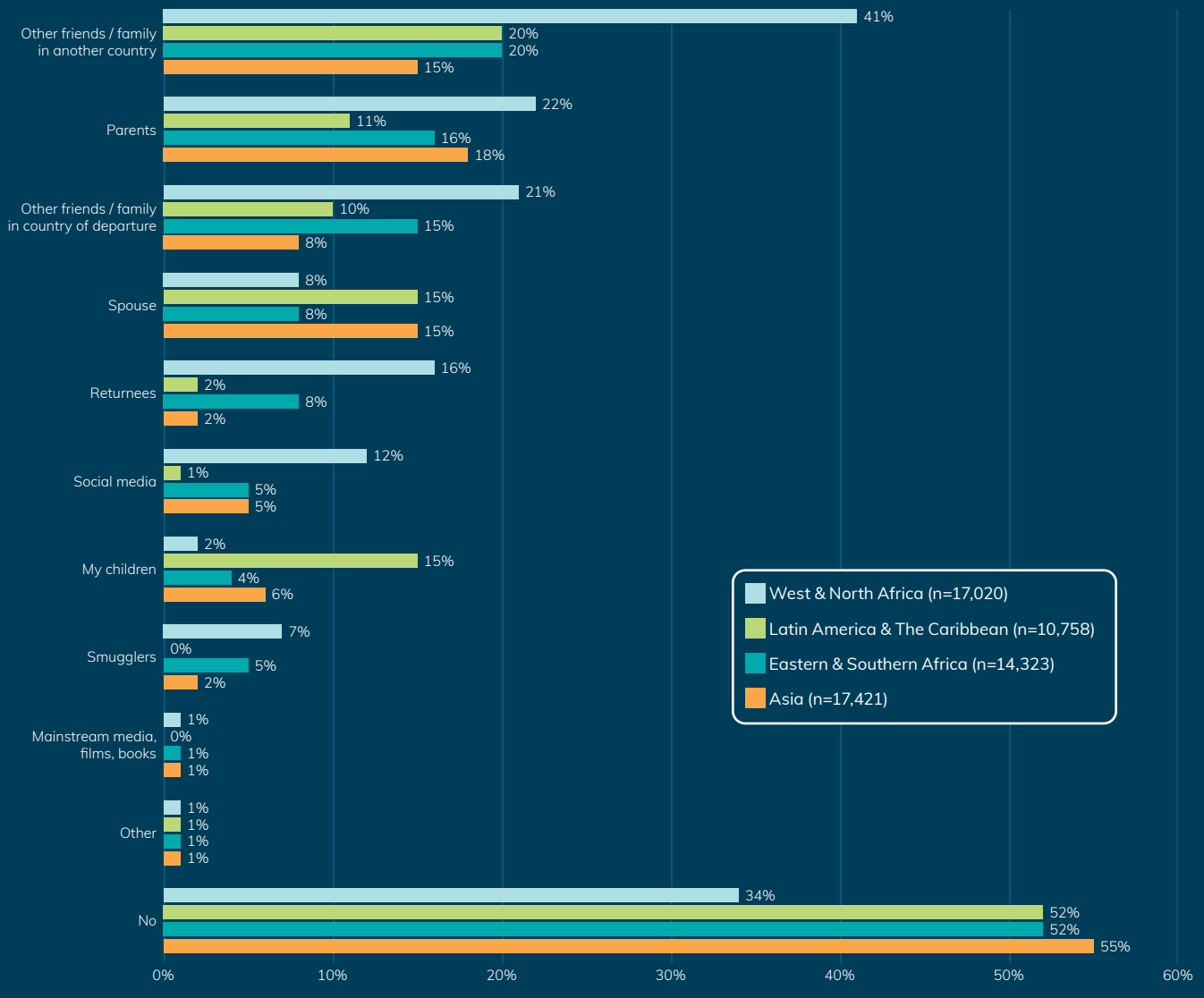
Smugglers are often portrayed in media, policy and political debates as having a major role in luring individuals into undertaking irregular migration journeys. Is this really the case? Using 4Mi data collected from a diverse global sample of almost 60,000 surveys with migrants across the world we observe the influencers to migrants' decisions to embark on their journeys and to what degree smugglers play a role in such a decision. Based on actual evidence coming from 60,000 individuals, the simple answer is no: **smugglers are not luring people into undertaking irregular migration journeys**.

Figure 1 shows the influencers identified as having had a role in respondents' decisions to migrate. In only four percent of respondents globally, smugglers were indicated as influencing the decision to migrate. No respondent from Latin America and the Caribbean cited being influenced by smugglers, while this was the case for only two percent of respondents from Asia, five percent from Eastern or Southern Africa and seven percent from West or North Africa, with Nigeria being the country of origin with the highest proportion of smuggler influence (15%).

Contrary to the common perception and narrative that smugglers significantly sway potential migrants, evidence shows that, for the most part, such decisions are made either fully individually or in consultation with family/social networks.

Figure 1. Did anyone or anything influence your decision to migrate?

By region of origin (multi-select when 'No' is not selected)



Is a clear-cut distinction between refugees and migrants accurate?

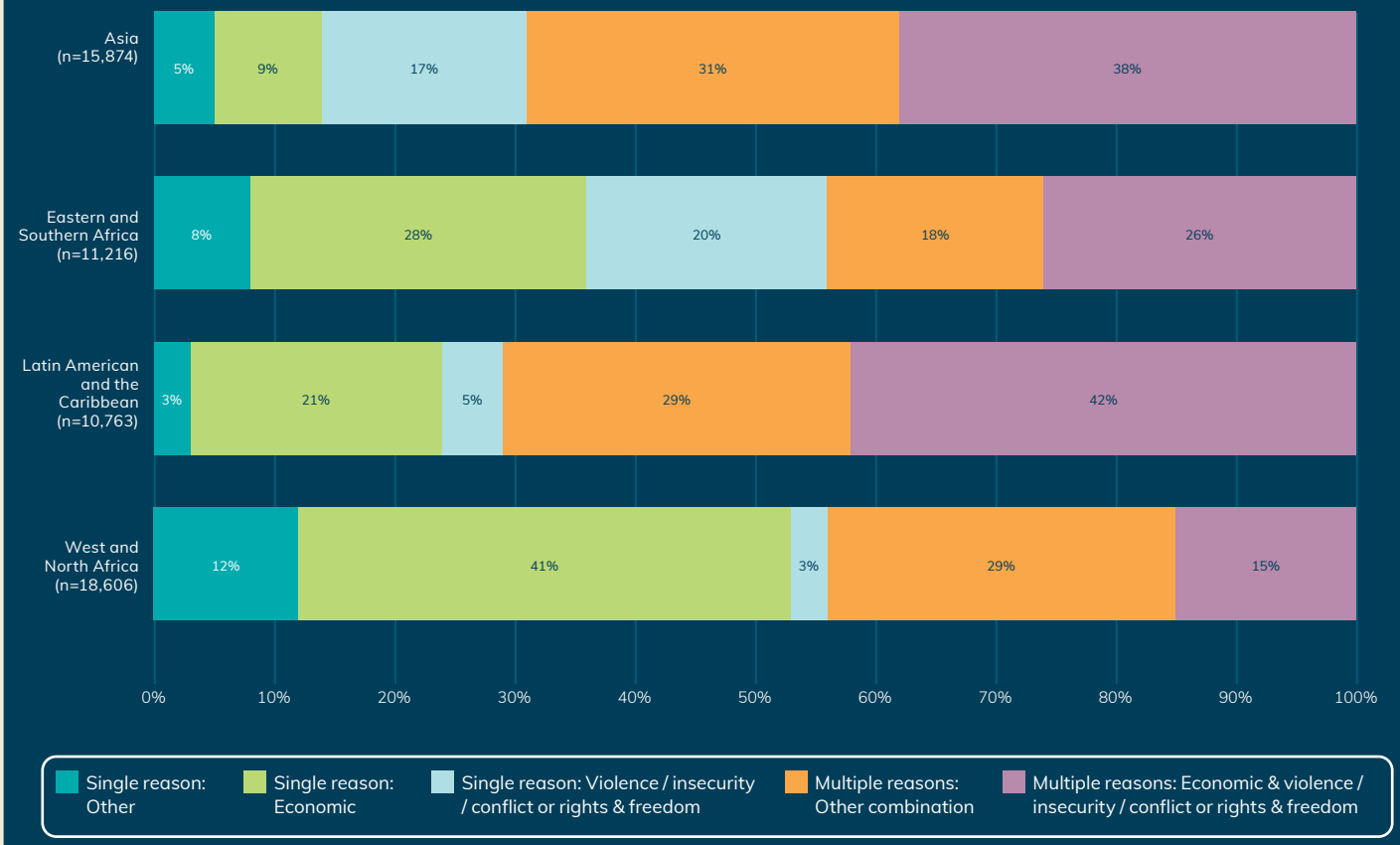
The distinction between refugees and migrants has significantly shaped the understanding of migration and its related policies, influencing the legal frameworks and humanitarian responses that govern it. This binary classification has led to differentiated treatment, with refugees typically receiving international protection under specific legal conventions, while those considered migrants are often left subject to more stringent immigration controls and policies. While the importance of the specific legal rights of refugees under the *1951 Refugee Convention* and its *1967 Protocol* should always be recognised and upheld, this clear-cut distinction between refugees and migrants has sometimes overlooked the complex and intertwined motivations behind people's movements, with refugees seen as purely moving for safety reasons and migrants moving for economic reasons. Is this reflective of the reality on the ground? Using 4Mi data collected from a diverse global sample of almost 60,000 surveys with migrants, we observed the reported drivers of migration and whether these allow us to distinctly categorise and differentiate between the motivations for moving for refugees and migrants.

First, the data reveals that 56 percent of the almost 60,000 respondents cited that more than one reason had contributed to their decision to migrate. This was true for the majority of respondents from Latin America and the Caribbean (70%) and Asia (69%), and for 43% of respondents from Africa. This already suggests that migration decisions are, in most cases, triggered by a multitude of factors where clear-cut categorisation is not evident. Observing the specific migration drivers prevalent in the global sample, economic factors are the most commonly cited driver (68%), particularly by respondents from West and North Africa (80%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (88%). However, in most cases, economic considerations went hand in hand with other reasons (64% of those who cited economic drivers also cited other reasons). In the same way, the migration drivers that could define an individual as a refugee – namely, violence, insecurity and conflict, which is the second most common driver reported globally (43%) as well as a lack of rights and freedoms, which is the third most common driver (29%) – are, in most cases, cited simultaneously with other reasons (in 79% and 91% of cases, respectively). In fact, more than a quarter of respondents (29%) cited both violence, insecurity and conflict/rights and freedom along with economic drivers as the factors that led to their decision to migrate. These overarching figures outline how the majority of respondents had several and likely interconnected reasons for migrating, some of which may be underlying long-term factors, such as access to livelihoods, and other more proximate factors acting possibly as triggers.

The findings from our survey demonstrate that, as global migration patterns become increasingly complex, individuals on the move are often driven by a multitude of factors often intertwined with each other. This **multifaceted nature of migration challenges the traditional binary classification between refugees' and migrants' reasons for moving**, suggesting that such distinctions may oversimplify the realities faced by people on the move, and calling for a more nuanced understanding of mixed migration.

Figure 1. For what reason/s did you leave (country of departure)?

By region of origin



4Mi on...

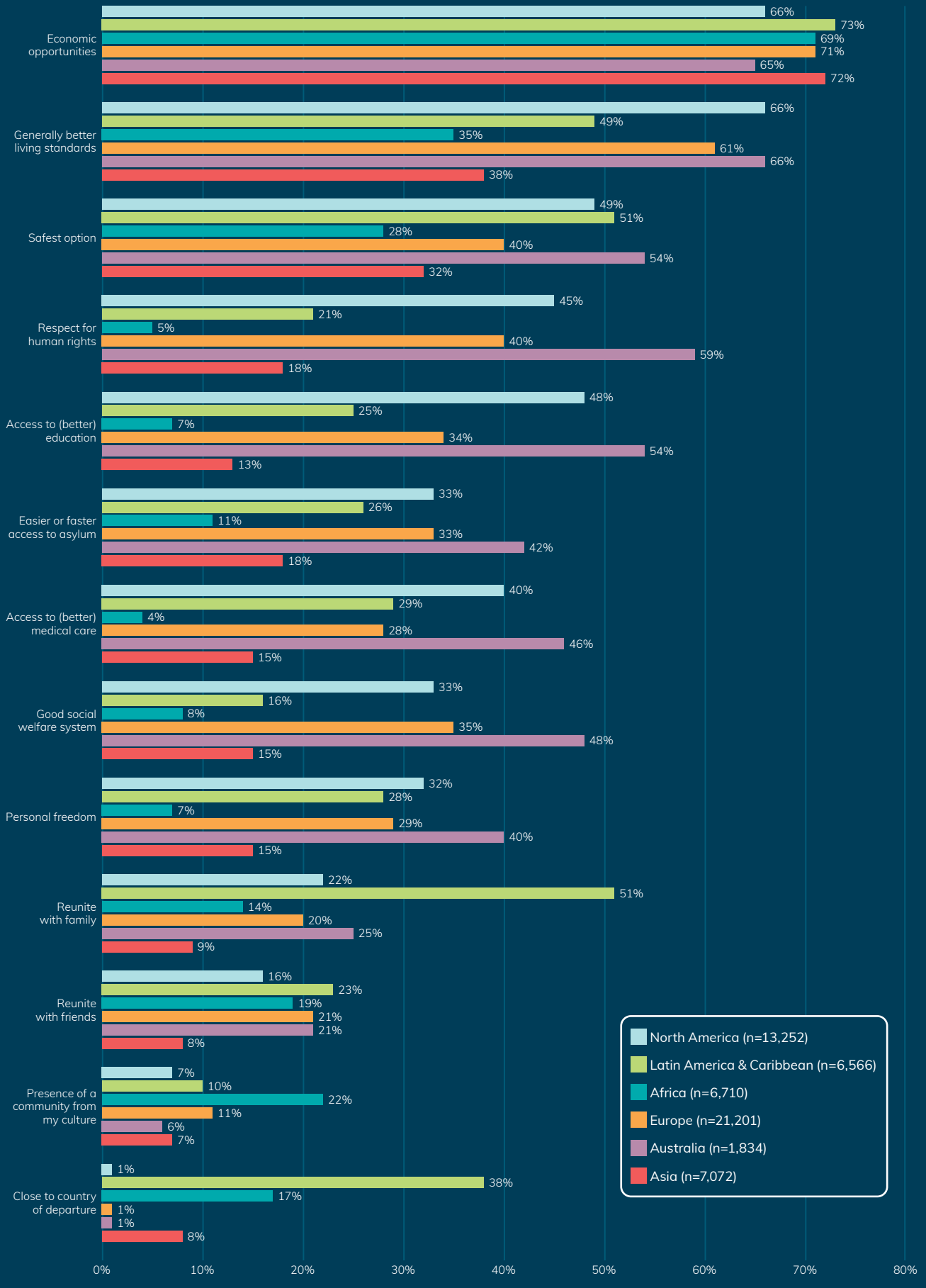
Asylum policies in the choice of destination: is an attractive asylum policy a pull factor?

The narrative of attractive asylum policies acting as a pull factor and defining people's choice of destination remains pervasive within the media and among certain politicians, ultimately influencing asylum policies. Using 4Mi data collected from a diverse global sample of almost 60,000 surveys with migrants, we investigated to what extent access to asylum is a factor in the choice of destination for people on the move.

Figure 1 outlines the reasons cited by respondents for selecting their migration destination, categorised by region of destination. Globally, access to asylum was identified by 27 percent of the sample, ranking as the sixth factor overall. The primary factor determining the choice of destination are economic opportunities in the destination country, cited by 68 percent of respondents. Better living standards (54%) and safety at destination country (41%) follow as the second and third most common factors. However, there were notable variations between destination regions: access to asylum is a more important consideration for migrants aiming for destinations like Australia (42%), North America (33%), Europe (33%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (26%) while less important for those travelling to destinations in Africa (11%) and Asia (18%). As these figures show, **access to asylum is not the most decisive factor for the majority of migrants**. While ease or speed of access to asylum is not to be completely disregarded as playing a role in people's choice of destination, it is not the most important reason. In Europe, where this narrative of access to asylum as a pull factor is particularly pervasive, respondents cite six other more important reasons for wanting to reach Europe before mentioning access to asylum.

Figure 1. Why did you select this destination?

By region of preferred destination (multi-select)



Climate as a driver of international migration: is it as momentous as commonly portrayed?

Nowadays, it is widely recognised that climate change and other environmental factors are having an impact on people's lives and human mobility. However, the magnitude, nature and outcomes of climate mobility are less well known or understood and often depicted and overstated by climate activists, politicians and policymakers, as if millions or hundreds of millions will be moving from south to north due to climate change. Using 4Mi data collected from a diverse global sample of almost 60,000 surveys with migrants, we evaluated how and to what extent climate is a driver of migration.

4Mi respondents were asked why they left their countries of origin, with the possibility of selecting multiple answer options. Figure 1 illustrates responses amongst the global sample, outlining economic-related factors as the most important driver in most regions (68% globally), followed by reasons related to violence, insecurity and conflict (43%) and rights and freedom (29%). Through this question, environmental factors were the least cited reason for the decision to migrate (4%) for all regions of origin, except Eastern and Southern Africa (where they were cited by 9% of respondents). While this does not mean that climate is not an important driver of migration, it does suggest that, upon first thought, respondents do not directly link their decision to migrate to environmental factors. When the same respondents were posed a targeted follow-up question which specifically enquired whether environmental factors played a role in their decision to depart, results changed markedly. As shown in Figure 2, when asked a direct question, the proportion of respondents in all regions citing environmental factors as playing a role in their decision to migrate increased (globally, from 4% to 23%). The different responses to the two questions reveal how climate-related factors are not being considered as direct drivers of migration, but can still be an underlying factor and stress/vulnerability multiplier of primary drivers, especially in slow-onset environmental changes.

Figure 1. For what reasons did you leave (place of departure)?

By region of origin (multi-select)

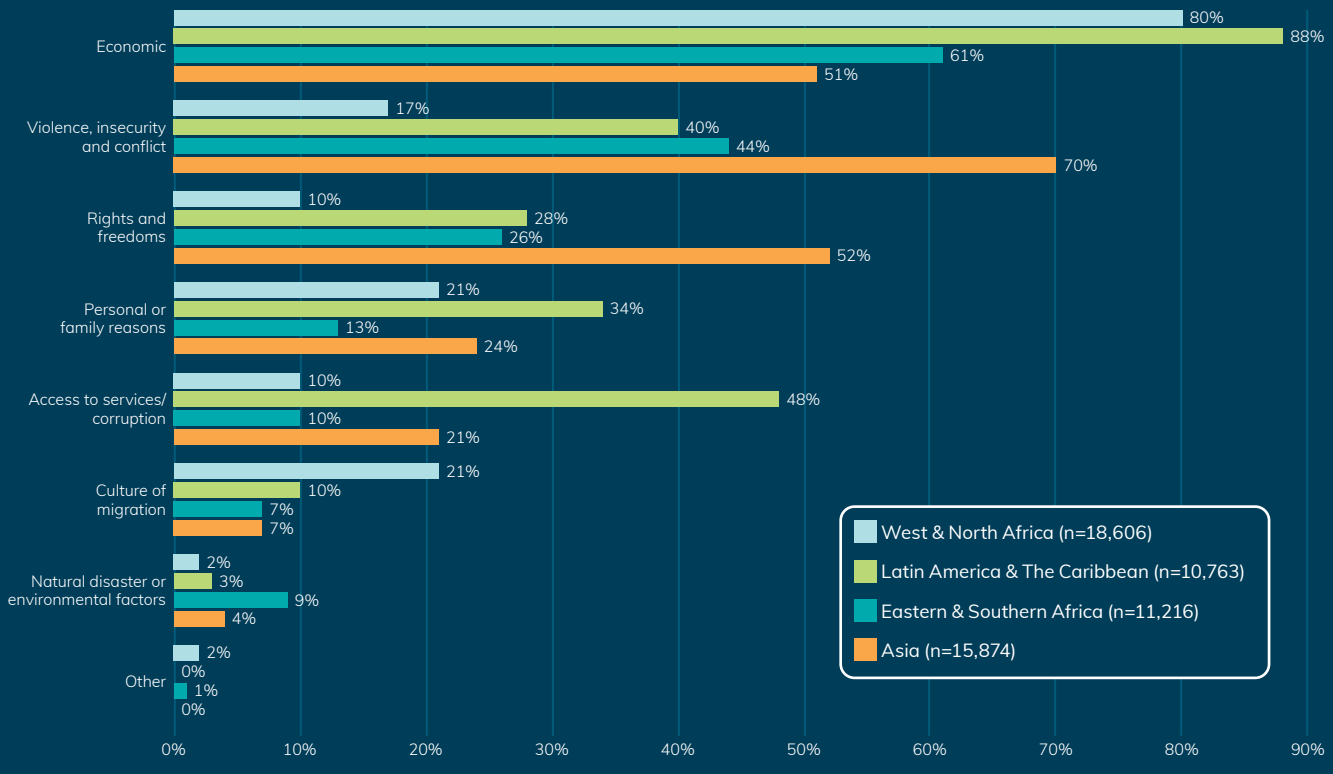
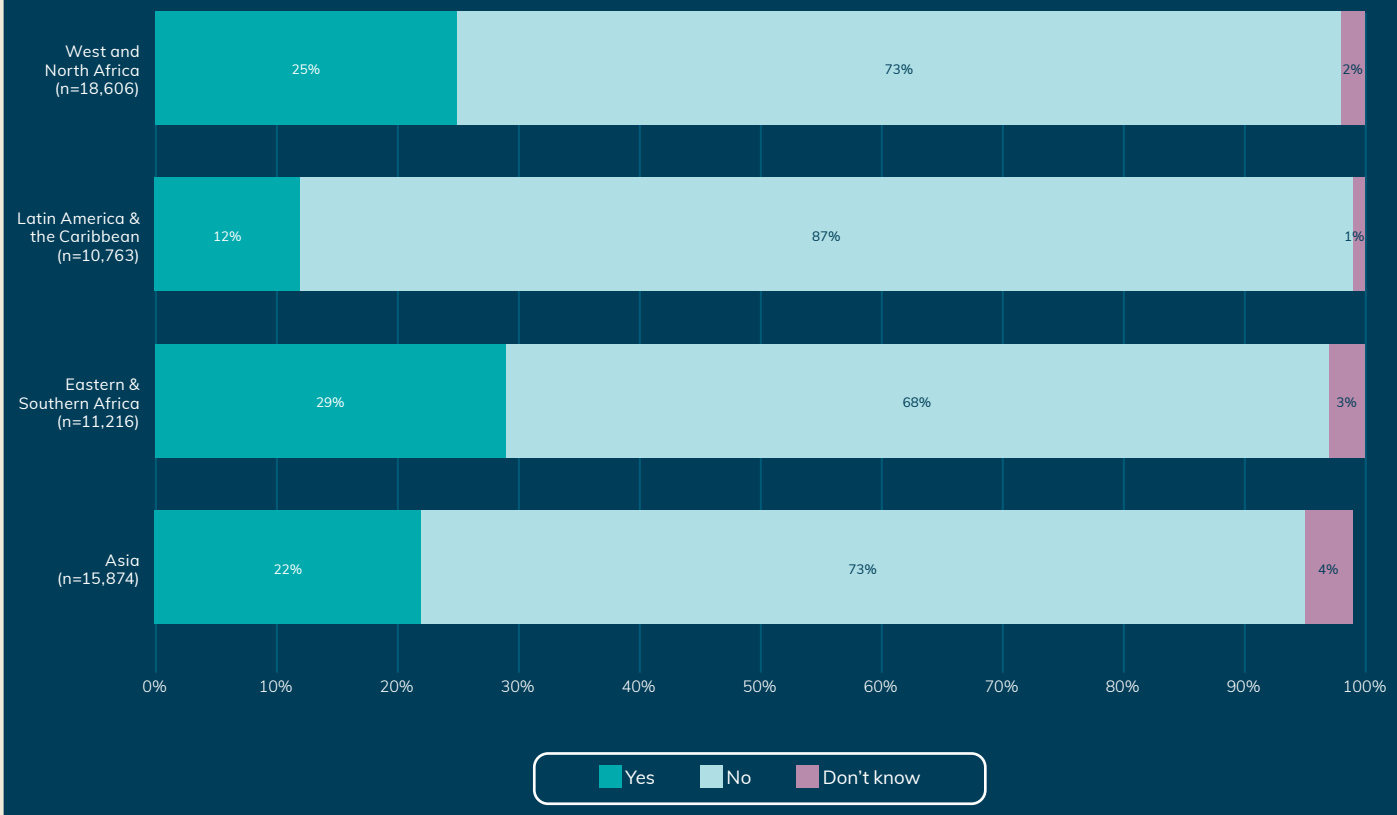


Figure 2. Were issues relating to the climate or the natural environment a factor in your decision to leave your country of departure?



After considering the environment's role as an indirect factor triggering and accentuating other primary drivers, 23 percent of respondents acknowledged its importance in their decision to migrate cross-border. However, this remains far behind the most common migration drivers: economic-related (68%) violence/insecurity/conflict-related (43%) and rights and freedom (29%). Our research has found that, where climate-related events have a role in mobility, people tend to move nearby, primarily to local urban centres within their own countries, or sometimes crossing one border within the region. For many affected by climate change, transregional and even cross-border migration demands resources that people – especially those most affected and who may have exhausted other coping mechanisms already – cannot put together, and often do not want to. Except for communities living in borderlands, cross-border migration due to the direct consequences of climate change remains the exception. **So, while very large numbers of people are indeed being displaced due to climate change and environmental factors, the overstated predictions of mass climate migration crossing continents are unlikely to be realised.**

4Mi on...

The persistent portrayal of smugglers as perpetrators of abuse

The persistent portrayal of smugglers as primary perpetrators of abuse to migrants is common in public and policy discourse and media narratives and, to some extent, seems to be used to justify a tough, criminalised response to migrant smuggling and – by extension – irregular migration in general. To better understand to what extent this is reflective of the reality on the ground, we used 4Mi data collected from a diverse global sample of almost 60,000 surveys with migrants.

On average, smugglers are the fourth most common group of perpetrators cited, at 21 percent. More commonly cited likely perpetrators of abuse are criminal gangs (cited by 31% of respondents), followed by military/police (29%) and armed groups/militias (23%). However, importantly, despite extensive training of the 4Mi enumerators, respondents are not always able to clearly distinguish between criminal gangs, armed groups/militias and smugglers, which are listed as three separate categories in the 4Mi survey and the graph. In some contexts, like Libya, it is known that militias and other armed groups and criminal gangs run migrant smuggling operations as well.[1] When taken together, these three separate but sometimes overlapping categories of potential perpetrators are indeed seen as the most common perpetrator of violations against migrants.

There are, however, some notable regional differences: while respondents interviewed in West Africa (3%), Eastern and Southern Africa (14%) and Latin America and the Caribbean (16%) less commonly cited smugglers as perpetrators, interviewees in Europe, Asia and North Africa did cite smugglers more frequently (48%, 31% and 28% respectively). Respondents interviewed in Europe are at later stages of their journeys, with dependency on smugglers often increasing the further people travel from their countries of origin, and having transited countries like Libya, where smuggler activity and abuse is well documented.

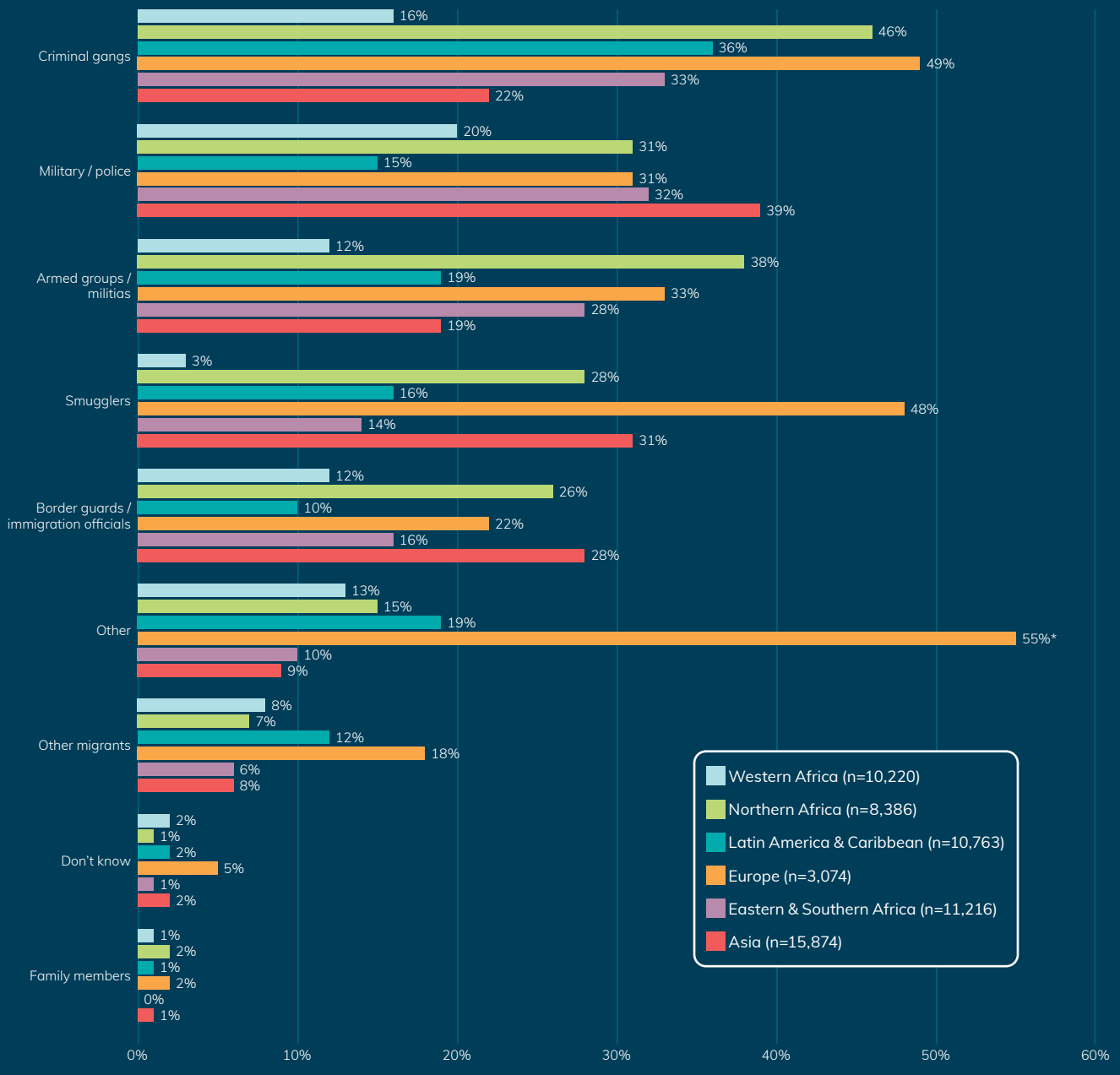
What is missing in the persistent narrative of smugglers as primary perpetrators of violence is the frequent involvement of state officials. Though it varies by route, military/police and border guards/immigration officials are also among the main perpetrators. Both in West Africa and Asia, military/police are the most common perpetrator mentioned by migrants.

In short, the narrative that smugglers are primary perpetrators of violence is only partly correct and requires more nuance. It is verified and undeniable that smugglers often engage in deceptive, exploitative and abusive practices. However, it is important that this common characterisation does not overlook other major perpetrators of abuse seen in 4Mi data and the systemic issues that exacerbate migrants' vulnerability, such as restrictive immigration policies and state violence. It should also not overlook the diversity among smugglers, with some indeed responsible for violence against migrants – and hard to distinguish from or even part of other criminal gangs and militia – and others merely providing a service to help people cross borders and find safety.

1 MMC plans to revise the 4Mi survey in 2025 to be able to better distinguish between these categories

Figure 1. Likely perpetrators of protection violations on journeys.

By region of data collection (multi-select)



*Not all risks/incidents respondents can list can be directly linked to a perpetrator. This explains the high number of 'other' responses in Europe (55%) where respondents indicate risks/incidents related to natural dangers in crossing the Mediterranean Sea and the Sahara Desert as major risks but do not directly link this to a perpetrator.

Interview

Migration – the 'hot potato' that civil society is willing to handle

While legally binding agreements and conventions have been pivotal in addressing issues around people on the move, the role of civil society in sparking real change – albeit sometimes in more informal and non-binding settings – should not be underestimated, argues **Colin Rajah**.

Photo credit:
© Nora Teylouni / ICMC

Colin Rajah is the senior advisor to the International Catholic Migration Commission's (ICMC) Policy Department. He was the former coordinator of both the Civil Society Action Committee and the GFMD's Civil Society Mechanism. He has spent over three decades facilitating international civil society networks and alliances for migrants' rights and social justice.

You have spent most of your professional life engaged with civil society. Why civil society instead of other kinds of intervention, say from a state level or a mandated international organisation?

Growing up, I was inspired by my parents, mostly through their volunteer work in social welfare. I saw the compassion that they brought to the people they met, and that helped put me in touch with those communities on a very day-to-day, real level, addressing really immediate humanitarian needs. That stuck with me for a long time. As I went to college, I started to get more politically involved in, at that time, the push for democratic reforms in Malaysia, where I grew up and am from. I think that had a second profound impact on me, showing me how civil society can bring about social change and social justice.

I realised that civil society has the power to cause change. At university, I studied sociology and political science and began to look at the history of social change movements and international policy specifically, and I realised that that's where my heart was. So, as soon as I started my career, it's always been with one civil society organisation or another.

And then why migration, specifically?

Firstly, I come from a mixed-raced background, with a long history of migration within Asia. When I came to the US, I realised I was also very much an internationalist at heart, and working at the global level was really important to me – cutting across cultures and regions and bringing people together. And the more I focused on international development, the more I noticed that one of the obvious effects of unequal development is that human mobility happens, almost as a way to try to balance the inequality.

People move when they are poor and don't have a steady source of living, when there's something better elsewhere and they're looking for better lives, or when

> **"One of the obvious effects of unequal development is that human mobility happens, almost as a way to try to balance the inequality."**

they're pushed to do so from a humanitarian standpoint. So, society's always trying to find the equilibrium in that inequality. I realised that migration was so much a part of that, but it was also something very personal to myself, my family and the community immediately around me. We were dealing with it on a day-to-day basis and we were experiencing the struggles and the challenges of that. So, one thing led to another, and you have what ends up being about 30, 35 years of work in civil society that starts off in development and then becomes more focused on migration.

> **"People move when they are poor and don't have a steady source of living, when there's something better elsewhere and they're looking for better lives, or when they're pushed to do so from a humanitarian standpoint. So, society's always trying to find the equilibrium in that inequality."**

Looking at today's context compared to when you started, do you think the world's a kinder or a harsher place for migrants and refugees?

Probably somewhere around the last five years or so, the geopolitical context has certainly gotten a lot harder around migrants' protection and migrant's rights, and there's just a much more negative political climate around migration. This year, a large portion of the world's population will have a general election. So much of those politics are underlined by some rhetoric around migration by parties on both sides of any debate. It is really critical for us to have a sense of hope and semblance of where we need to move forward.

If we look over the past decades, things have certainly been bad before. Migration has always been a hot potato that governments are reluctant to touch and deal with at an evidence-based, concrete, substantive level and that's because it's so politically volatile. And so even those who have a desire to do something about it, policymakers who want to try and make some kind of progress, they find it really challenging to do so, and that's always been the case. We have seen periods, and I would say probably before these last five years, the previous decade and a half before that, when there has been some tremendous movement forward. We can take a lot of lessons from that period and say, 'What is it that happened? What were the different variables that came into place to make that environment much more conducive than it is now and in the last few years?'

You've had quite a lot to do with the ICMC (International Catholic Migration Commission). It was formed in the same year as the Refugee Convention, can you describe its key work?

As an organisation, the ICMC does a lot for the resettlement of refugees first and foremost. That's not the only work we do, but it's a big part of the ICMC. Where we see the need, we try to pursue the most humane ways to enable refugees to find a new living, to be empowered and have all the tools and everything necessary to begin new lives. I think the underlying factor is that the ICMC as an organisation brings some core Catholic values to the table and these drive its work and mission.

That mission is about the protection and the rights of migrants, refugees and people on the move worldwide, regardless of faith or anything like that. That's the bottom line that drives our mission. In that respect, the ICMC recognised early on in the big bulk of the work that it was doing for refugees, that it's not enough just to be working on the end line of where people are moving, the resettlement phase of it. We also recognised that there was a need to address the policy side, too. That's why the ICMC's own resources are so invested in the policy advocacy angle.

> **"This year, a large portion of the world's population will have a general election. So much of those politics are underlined by some rhetoric around migration by parties on both sides of any debate."**

The Refugee Convention is more than 70 years old now. Do you think it is under threat at the moment?

If we look at the history of all conventions where the UN comes in in terms of setting instruments and benchmarks, I think we can certainly say that all conventions are consistently under threat, not just the Refugee Convention. This is because of the fundamental fact that multilateralism – the thing that makes this possible – is a very finite thing. It's something that's very fragile, and I think we need to understand, especially in this current context, that there are always times when there will be shifts in governments in different countries and member states, signatories of the convention and anything else, that will say: *we want to qualify what we mean by this*. Is the convention under threat? I don't think so. I think this is particularly true with the existence of such a robust UN agency like the UNHCR that is there to ensure its protection, and I think that because of its accountability to its own member states, UNHCR is ensuring that it continues that way and there are

> **"Migration has always been a hot potato that governments are really reluctant to touch and deal with at an evidence-based, concrete, substantive level, and that's because it's so politically volatile."**

certainly champion countries to ensure that the core aspects of the convention stay in place. By contrast, this is not at all the case with the *Compacts for Migration and Refugees* which are very shaky at the moment.

What do you think would happen if the convention was reformed and its articles had to be opened up to a fresh round of state ratification right now?

It'd be a disaster. It would be a disaster because I think at the current moment the whole focus on a country's obligation towards its refugees is being questioned not just by policymakers, but by their supporters who are normally a very vocal minority but have become politically extremely strong in many countries. I think reopening the convention would be a mistake. And I think if you surveyed civil society, most of us would probably say it's not necessary to do that, that the tenets of the Refugee Convention are very much existent today as they were 70 years ago, and that there are people forcibly displaced today for various reasons that are enshrined in the convention for the same reasons.

If we reopened it today it would just get, first of all, extremely watered down, and secondly, I'm not even sure if we would get anything substantive passed. We see the same with the *Global Compact for Migration*. The consensus around where the compacts are going is a very fragile one. So getting something with a binding agreement like the Refugee Convention is going to be a monumental task.

Is there a risk the international refugee regime is becoming too inclusive, trying to embrace all manner of discriminations and human flight, which in turn kind of devalues its currency?

Yes, kind of. I think there is a danger that we lean on the Refugee Convention too much because we don't have sufficient regular pathways otherwise. What you have is a standing convention with binding obligations that you can hold countries accountable to, because legal processes are set for it. It's the one thing that's highly structured and standing quite well, so to speak, in the current climate. So that's what everybody leans on. It does put a lot of pressure on it, but that's only because countries are not addressing all these other things in the ways they should be addressed and deserve to be addressed. I think that without these pathways for regularisation and human mobility, people are left at a dead end, and so they are of course scrambling to look for the tiniest opening. And when they think that seeking asylum under the Refugee Convention is the only viable option, that's what they're forced to turn to. I think it's all about how there's been a lack of political will to address this in a real and comprehensive way.

Some still ask why the failures of some states become an obligation for others. What would you say about that?

That's part of the populist narrative these days. But I think that the obligation is on all of us, and we should try to look at it from a global perspective, and this is why the multilateral system is so critically important for this. When you take that global approach, rather than standing back in a very nationalist and closed-door way, and say, 'What do we need to do to address these global issues?', then human mobility is not a national issue, as much as countries want to claim sovereign rights to that. It is a global issue, and you cannot address it sufficiently by yourself as one country. We all need to work together on it.

> **"Human mobility is not a national issue, as much as countries want to claim sovereign rights to that. It is a global issue, and you cannot address it sufficiently by yourself as one country. We all need to work together on it."**

It's what happens in another country that determines the flow of people moving back and forth all the time. And that's been throughout the course of human history. So nothing is going to change that now. It's just how it's being spun and how people are beginning to look at it in a highly politicised way.

I think you can always look and see the role played by various countries, whether purposefully or inadvertently, in their economic and development policies, and also the cause of conflict in many parts of the world. None of us can just sit back and say, 'That's not my problem.' There are all kinds of ties and connections. And in an increasingly globalised world, there are effects that are going to just spread everywhere. So, dealing with the problem, understanding it and finding ways to address the necessary human mobility aspect of it is certainly in every country's best interest. It's perhaps not the sexy thing to say when you're in an election campaign, but it's certainly the right thing to do, and there's lots of evidence to show that.

You were closely involved in the development of the *Global Compact for Migration*, and in the run-up to the 2018 signing. How did it feel?

It was an immensely exciting moment. I would say it was the highlight of my career. I remember the exact

moment on 13 July, 2018, a Friday morning. We had had this series of negotiations for a week every month leading up to that final round of negotiations in July, at the UN HQ in New York. When the co-facilitators for the *Global Compact for Migration* announced that we'd reached an agreement on the compact, and it was finalised, and that basically we had a compact in our hands, we all stood up and cheered. Civil society was very, very much a part of ensuring that the best parts of the compact were in the draft. Those included even helped to draft certain aspects of the language and certainly pushed and advocated for all of that. I remember that moment really well and I remember thinking, boy, this is going to change everything, this shifts a lot. I think the sentiment was felt across governments, across the UN agencies involved, across all of us stakeholders as civil society and others in the room. That was a special moment for us. I never saw what was to come right after that, though. We're talking about the months following that moment, not even the years. Many countries made a major shift: Switzerland, whose ambassador was one of the primary co-facilitators of the *Global Compact*, pulled out and refused to sign it. I never saw that coming. And the dominoes then started to fall. We were so deeply involved in the negotiation of the *Global Compact*, but I think if we had taken a step back and looked at the political climate overall around the world and the shifts that were about to happen, we probably might have seen it coming, but at that moment we certainly didn't .

That really took us aback. So as a result, we have a great compact, I stand by it, I think that it's certainly not perfect, but given everything that's come before in the last 20, 30 years, the Global Compact for Migration was the best we could have gotten. It's a landmark achievement for the multilateral system, for the UN, for member states and for all of us that were involved in it. Since then it's shifted so dramatically that all of us are left questioning what its value is anymore.

Is it really in such a bad state?

Yes, and I used to give this example or metaphor in 2018: I said, you can imagine that there was a perfect plant that was highly engineered and highly modified to be something that would grow and produce wonderful things and beautiful branches and leaves and everything. But you took the seedling of that plant, put it in a tiny pot, stuck it into a dark room with no windows, and asked someone to go in there and water it once a month, and that's it. If you came back a year after that, what would you expect? Something withering or dead! But if you took a simple plant that's not so great, put it outside and gave it lots of sunlight and lots of nutrition, and you had farmers tending to it every day, what would you get after a year? A nice thriving plant. I think the compact can be looked at in that way. Even if it was imperfect to begin with, had it been given the necessary attention and the right environment to be implemented and to be improved, I think we would be seeing significant progress. Not only that, but I also think aspects of the compact would grow and be deepened and go further than what's written in the compact, that the spirit of the compact would carry forward. Instead, what we've seen is a complete reversal. What we've seen has been put in a closed room and given very little attention by member states – the bare minimum to keep it going.

In the last International Migration Review Forum, which was four years after the compact was signed, the review forum was to review the progress of the compact. The underlying success in that review forum that was mentioned time and time again by key member states and the UN overall was that hey, at least nobody pulled out! We can consider it a success because nobody pulled out of the compact. And I said, is this what we envisioned four years ago on that Friday afternoon in July in New York, when we said we have a compact? Absolutely not. We envisioned something that would grow and thrive, and we would be so excited about the progress made for migrants and migration overall because there were such good aspects of the compact and its objectives. Instead, what we see is its erosion, its slow and painful erosion.

> **"We envisioned something [the Global Compact for Migration] that would grow and thrive, and we would be so excited about the progress made for migrants and migration overall because there were such good aspects of the compact and its objectives. Instead, what we see is its erosion, its slow and painful erosion."**

I know many UN colleagues might not agree with this and the states might not agree with this, but I think a lot of us in civil society are feeling a little bit of despair about the compact, and we are rethinking where we need to go from here.

Some critics say the GFMD (Global Forum on Migration and Development) is just a state-dominated annual talking shop that achieves nothing because none of its outcomes are binding. How would you assess the role of the GFMD?

I think anybody who's been involved in this, even for a little bit, would be forced to agree that something like the *Global Compacts* – especially the *Global Compact for Migration* – would not have been possible without the 10, 12 years of the GFMD preceding it. And I'll be the first to admit I was absolutely wrong in the beginning because we have all been used to binding agreements. That's what we wanted. We wanted UN protocols and

all of that put in place, and especially civil society's active engagement and participation in it.

We felt that was necessary. So, the call was to make sure that migration discussions, policy and governance were all happening within the UN construction. And, with binding agreements and all that, that's what we were accustomed to, and we felt would work. The reality is that, if we look at the political sentiment at that time, there was a real reluctance for countries to talk about migration in a multilateral way. But I think what was important with the emergence of the GFMD was that it gave a safe space for all aspects of the country, not just a country as a whole – from the foreign affairs departments, the diplomats, the staff who wanted to work, who were working on migration to say, 'We can have a safe space to have a real discussion about migration governance and policy without all the politics attached to it, and make progress on it without binding agreements which would become too politicised.'

As soon as you have a binding agreement, then it becomes a whole political affair. But we could have this almost informal discussion at a real level and talk about what needs to happen. So we found that we were able to address some significant issues, again, without outcomes. And it was designed not to have specific outcomes. A cynic might look at it from the outside and say, well, it's just a talking shop, nothing is really coming from it. But actually a lot came out of it because, first of all, it built trust among countries and that took years and years to happen. But there was now an understanding and trust built among countries as well as other stakeholders later on, to see which direction we could move in.

And I think, again, when we go back to talking about the staffers and the people who are really working at it, rolling up their sleeves and getting things done, away from the politics of it, we can see that the GFMD is the perfect environment to do that. Real discussions in an informal setting, nothing binding, without very political outcomes. It's a place where you can really have that discussion and have trust building and move forward on some very, very touchy subjects, including labour migration, climate change, even regular pathways now, and human rights.[1]

This year is a big one for elections around the world. Do you see a growing rise in populism or a tilt at least in that direction? And what's the significance of this generally for the asylum and migration spaces?

I think we need to look at each of these elections specifically in their context and significance. If we just take the big ones that have happened so far like Mexico, there hasn't been any real, substantive change. With India, you could probably also say the same, but certainly, there's an erosion of power of the ruling party. I think the UK will be a big one , and perhaps we'll see a change there. And South Africa, of course. The US is going to be a big question mark as well, but I think overall, if we talk about populism, we've seen its rise over the last five years and maybe the building blocks happening even a decade before that, if you really start to track it back. I think we're probably seeing the peak moment in the present cycle, at least I hope so. But I don't think that's going to dramatically shift one way or another in the near future. Overall, in terms of the actual policymaking and governance of migration, especially at a global level, I think what we see now is what we'll get for the next couple of years, at least, before anything major will start to move in one way or another.

I certainly have hope. I also view it as a call to take a more active role and not just sit back passively and say, 'what's going to happen with the elections is going to happen.' I think, as civil society, we can play a major role in not just relying on the elections and what's said by policymakers, but in helping to build the kind of political environment we want to see, to ensure that migration and refugee policymaking and governance move towards a better state. I hope that swing will come in the next few years, but we need to take an active role in doing that. We can't sit back and just say, you know, things are so bad now, there's nothing much we can do, and just throw up our hands and give up. There are different ideas on how that happens. Do we do it incrementally? Do we push for major change? You know, that's all debatable, but certainly we need to do something about it. I think the danger for us is taking a very, very, fatalistic view at the moment. And that's very easy to do in the current environment. If we just look at what's happening, it's very easy. But I think if we do that, then we're definitely going to be stuck with this for a long, long time.

"As civil society, we can play a major role in not just relying on the elections and what's said by policymakers, but in helping to build the kind of political environment we want to see, to ensure that migration and refugee policymaking and governance move towards a better state."

1 Rajah, C and Frouws, B (2024) The Global Compact for Migration Six Years On: Time for a Shake-up?

Thematic snapshot

Punitive populism: a solution to displacement and flight in the Northern Triangle? The case of El Salvador

In early February 2024, Nayib Bukele – El Salvador's self-described "world's coolest dictator" and former mayor of the capital, San Salvador – won a second-term landslide victory with 85 percent of the vote, with his party, *Nuevas Ideas* ('New Ideas'), winning 54 of the 60 Legislative Assembly seats.[1] In what he described[2] as a "pulverising" defeat of opposition parties, his party also achieved "the biggest difference between first place and second place in history" and where "one sole party rules a country in a completely democratic system." As one observer commented,[3] "He is essentially a democratically elected dictator now, most of the country loves him." Bukele's remarkable victory, riding on the wave of extraordinary public popularity, has important implications for mixed migration in the country and the Northern Triangle region. The key reason for Bukele's popularity is Salvadorans' endorsement of his platform of emphatic 'punitive populism', where public support for more severe criminal justice policies (most specifically, incarceration) has become a primary driver of policymaking and political electioneering. In the case of El Salvador, the voters are seeing results and feeling the change.

According to some analysis,[4] in 2015 El Salvador was the deadliest country in the Western Hemisphere, with 105[5] homicides per 100,000 people and with violence, conflict and insecurity caused by gangs – and government response to gangs – pervading every aspect of society and terrorising the country's 6.3 million population. By many accounts, previous attempts to cut deals with or interdict the gangs had not worked and had often instead exacerbated the violence. However, since March 2022, Bukele's more draconian approach led to violent crime declining spectacularly, with official figures from 2023 indicating that the homicide rate had fallen to 2.3 killings per 100,000 people.[6]

This was enabled through a government-declared state of emergency ('State of Exception'[7]) which allows the government to suspend basic civil liberties and mobilise the armed forces to carry out mass arrests and build mega-prisons, such as CECOT. With a capacity for 40,000 inmates, El Salvador's CECOT is the largest prison in Latin America and one of the largest in the world by prisoner capacity. As of mid-2024, 78,000[8] or more[9] alleged gang members (most highly identifiable by tattoos) had been incarcerated in militarised special service detention prisons. That's 1.6 percent[10] of the population – mostly young males. Those arrested are primarily alleged to be members of transnational gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18).

Since 2022, the state of emergency has been extended[11] some 24 times and, judging by the recent massive electoral margin, Salvadorans seem to have an appetite for more[12] if it means they can live in safety. The government has fenced off and militarised[13] gang-affected cities, such as San Salvador and Soyapango, affecting people's mobility out of these 'hot spots' and other freedoms.

Specifically, when it comes to mobility, the painful reality of recent years is that militarised gang rule, gang violence and the confrontations they engender have been a major driver of migration from and internal displacement in El Salvador – similarly to Guatemala and Honduras, the other countries in the so-called Northern Triangle.

In a 2017 El Salvador public survey,[14] 5.1 percent of respondents said they had been forced to move in the previous year because of threats, representing (if extrapolated) a figure of 296,000 displacements, with over a quarter of people having moved twice or more.

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2 BBC (2024) El Salvador's President Bukele wins re-election by huge margin.
3 Reddit (2024) El Salvador's homicide rate is now lower than the USA's.
4 Roy, D. & Cheatham, A. (2023) Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle. Council on Foreign Relations.
5 Statista (2023) Homicide rate in El Salvador from 2014 to 2023.
6 Ibid
7 Silva Avalos, H. (2023) States of Exception: The New Security Model in Central America? WOLA.
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9 Porter, E. (2024) An iron-fisted war on crime in Latin America will fail. The Washington Post.
10 Ibid.
11 Flores-Macías, G. (2024) The Costs of El Salvador's Crime Crackdown. Foreign Affairs.
12 Latinobarómetro (2023) Informe Latinobarómetro 2023: La recesión democrática de América Latina.
13 ACAPS (2023) Complex crises and migration in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua.
14 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (2018) Understanding and estimating displacement in the Northern Triangle of Central America.

Another analysis[15] claimed that, between 2020 and 2022, violence and conflict internally displaced 362,000 people, while natural hazards displaced just 22,000.

According to the UNHCR, just before the 2022 crackdowns, the global number of asylum-seekers with pending decisions from El Salvador reached 148,758[16] and the total number of Salvadoran refugees was 58,637. Apart from a temporary fall during Covid-19, Salvadorans attempting to enter the US have been around 100,000 per year between 2019 and 2022, but the number of encounters that US authorities had with Salvadoran migrants dropped from 97,000 in 2022 to 61,515 in 2023,[17] possibly signalling that violent crime as a push factor for migration may be receding.[18]

Equally, internal displacement within El Salvador appears to have experienced significant drops. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) calculated that, at the start of 2023, there were 66,000 IDPs[19] from conflict and violence in El Salvador, but by the end of the year that number had fallen to 49,000.

Under President Nayib Bukele, El Salvador has experienced one of the "most spectacular declines in violent crime in recent memory, anywhere in the world."[20] As a multidimensional scourge, it makes sense that reducing gang crime with its reduced productivity, low-trust economics and rampant corruption will have a positive impact throughout society. Not least, a reduction in crime and the removal of those perpetrating it will decrease the salience of crime as a driver for internal and international displacement. The knock-on effects in terms of restricted mobility and, in particular, the reduced pressure the US feels at its southern borders and on its asylum apparatus will gain El Salvador high approval from Washington, not to mention Mexico and others under pressure to curb migration towards the US.

Bukele's 'punitive populism' and his rejection of alternative approaches[21] have been so successful that some are wondering if his 'States of Exception' may become the new security model[22] for Central America and beyond. Already, Honduras[23] and Ecuador[24] are implementing similar iron-fist policies of intolerance against state and society captured by gangs. According to some analysis, Honduras[25] has seen a similarly dramatic fall in crime[26] to El Salvador since 2022, although this is disputed.[27]

Many external and some internal observers are unhappy with these trajectories despite the appearance of short-term gains. Arguably, there might be a danger that El Salvador and others will become victims of their own success in curtailing crime – or, as Amnesty International fears, they might witness a "gradual replacement of gang violence with state violence."[28]

Most sceptics argue that when constitutional and civil rights are suspended to fight crime during states of exception or emergency, they are rarely restored at a later stage. Human rights abuses may become normalised and security forces may come to believe there is no such thing as the illegitimate use of force, which could ultimately lead to democratic backsliding.[29] These analysts even argue[30] that the short-term gains of reduced crime with eventually fail, and might give way to a rise in "systematic detentions; forced disappearances and torture."[31]

Human rights groups have wasted little time to report on[32] substantial abuses of rights and process,[33] as well as the weakening of already somewhat fragile institutions. As Foreign Affairs states,[34] militarised states of emergency are no silver bullet: "for any public safety measures to permanently succeed, they must not come at the expense of the democratic institutions that protect civilians from abuse at the hands of the

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21 International Crisis Group (2021) Breaking the Cycle of Violence in Mexico and Central America.
22 Silva Avalos, H. (2023) Op. Cit.
23 The Guardian (2023) Honduras starts El Salvador-style crackdown on gangs after massacres.
24 Palacio, M. G. & Díaz Pabón, F. A. (2024) Ecuador's crackdown on violent crime helped turn the country into a narco state. The Conversation.
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27 Montoya, H. (2023) Honduras Makes Few Advances Against Crime During 6-Month State of Exception. Insight Crime.
28 Amnesty International (2023) El Salvador: 'Extremely alarming' rise in torture and abuse leaves marginalised communities living in fear - new report.
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30 Porter, E. (2024) Op. Cit.
31 Amnesty International (2023) Op. Cit.
32 Amnesty International (2024) El Salvador: The institutionalization of human rights violations after two years of emergency rule.
33 Labour Hub (2024) Op. Cit.
34 Flores-Macías, G. (2024) Op. Cit.

government." In short, by successfully eliminating the country's biggest problems, the dictatorship inevitably becomes a new problem in itself.

The paradox of 'punitive populism' is that democratically elected leaders with strong anticrime mandates may undermine liberal democracy through iron-fist policies that are both popular and effective in the short run. Nonetheless, it's hard to see how they offer sustainable solutions to more intractable issues of poverty, unemployment and the impact of climate change, which are also key drivers behind international mobility, and simultaneously root causes for criminal activities.

Collision path? Migration, the economy and electoral choices

Carlos Vargas-Silva[1]

In many countries across the world, public opinion surveys often suggest that the state of the economy is a major concern and a public policy priority.[2] It follows that voters in those countries should support policies that are beneficial for the economy. Yet, even with the substantial evidence of the strong economic benefits of immigration, many voters support political parties with a restrictive platform on migration. Often their position extends to all forms of immigration, whether it be labour migrants (regular and irregular), asylum seekers or refugees – in a nutshell, mixed migration. This support has led to important electoral gains for those political parties across Europe and other regions of the world.

This raises the question: why do some voters concerned about the economy also support political parties with a restrictive agenda on migration? There are various reasons for this apparent contradiction between prioritising the economy and supporting political parties that oppose immigration. The discussion below explores this key question by focusing on three aspects: the role of adjustment periods related to immigration, the differences between migration policy preferences and voting choices, and the importance of intergroup dynamics for electoral choices.

Migration (in all its forms) expands the global economy

Before exploring the paradox of support for political parties with a restrictive agenda on migration and prioritising the economy, it is important to understand the ways in which immigration affects the economy of a country. Immigration increases the number of workers in the economy. This means there are more people looking for jobs across different occupations and industries. However, migrants are not simply taking away the existing jobs of the local population. Immigration expands the demand for workers and thus creates new jobs. Migrants contribute to the economy not only through their work but also by buying and consuming goods and services (that is, creating additional demand). This increased demand stimulates economic activity across sectors. In other words, the number of jobs in the economy is not fixed. Immigration can lead to the creation of more jobs, thus expanding the economy.

The expansion of the economy resulting from immigration explains the evidence suggesting that immigration has no negative impacts on the employment outcomes of local workers in receiving countries. For instance, the evidence for OECD countries suggests that immigration has a positive effect on the wages of less educated local workers, and it increases or leaves unaffected the wages of more educated local workers.[3] These dynamics are not exclusive to the richest countries and a substantial portion of the recent evidence on the labour market's impacts of immigration is for middle- and upper-income economies.

For instance, research looking at Venezuelan migrants in Colombia suggests that giving Venezuelans the right to work in the country only had negligible impacts on the employment outcomes of local workers.[4] Evidence for Venezuelans arriving in Peru suggests that this immigration had a favourable impact on the employment outcomes of local workers.[5] These are important findings given the large scale of out-migration experienced by Venezuela over the last decade, with an estimated 7.8 million Venezuelans now living abroad and most settling in neighbouring Latin American countries.[6] The example also illustrates what happens when governments allow migrants to work instead of forcing them to be inactive in the labour market. They are more likely to make a positive contribution to the coffers of the country, rather than being a burden on public finances.[7]

In addition, migrants often do jobs that local workers do not want to do, particularly in sectors such as care, agriculture, hospitality and domestic services. In that way, migrants fill key labour shortages in destination countries, a factor that could become even more important as many high-income economies experience

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4 Bahar, D., Ibáñez, A.M., & Rozo, S.V. (2021) Give Me Your Tired and Your Poor: Impact of a Large-Scale Amnesty Program for Undocumented Refugees. Journal of Development Economics.
5 Groeger, A., León-Ciliotta, G., & Stillman, S. (2024) Immigration, Labor Markets and Discrimination: Evidence from the Venezuelan Exodus in Perú. World Development.
6 R4V (2024) América Latina y el Caribe, Refugiados y Migrantes Venezolanos en la Región.
7 IOM (2024) Venezuelan Migrants Drive USD 529.1M Boost to Colombia's Economy: IOM Study.

population ageing and additional demand for many of these services.[8]

Immigration contributes beyond the lower end of the labour market. Migrants bring diverse perspectives and experiences. This diversity creates an environment where new ideas and solutions can flourish, as individuals from different cultures approach challenges in varied ways. As a result, immigration is a major driver of innovation in high-skill industries, such as science and technology. For instance, migrants are disproportionately responsible for patent creation in many high-income countries and among the winners of prestigious scientific prizes.[9] This is not a random coincidence, but results from many migrant inventors being "positively self-selected", that is, looking to move to destinations that reward their ideas and experience more than their home country.[10]

The positive economic contribution of migrants is present regardless of the motivation for migration of those moving, not just for those moving for work reasons. People moving for humanitarian, family and study reasons, among others, join the labour markets of their host countries and contribute to the expansion of the economy by engaging in entrepreneurship. For instance, evidence from the UK suggests that those who initially migrated for asylum reasons to the country are six percent more likely to engage in self-employment, a form of entrepreneurship, than the UK-born.[11]

Yet this positive contribution can only occur if destination countries provide migrants with the lawful right to engage in productive economic activities in the formal sector. Many countries still restrict the access of different groups of migrants to the labour market, pushing them into the informal sector and precarious forms of employment.[12]

Migrants maintain ties with their countries of origin and support their home economies. Every year, migrants send billions of US dollars back home in remittances. For many countries, remittances are significantly higher than official development assistance and foreign direct investment, providing a key source of external financing.[13] Remittances to low- and middle-income countries reached $669 billion in 2023, a four percent increase compared to the previous year. Some countries, such as Mexico ($67 billion) and the Philippines ($40 billion), receive large absolute amounts, while for smaller countries the monetary flows represent a substantial share of their GDP (Nicaragua, 27%; Lebanon, 28%).[14]

Receiving families use remittances to cover basic needs (e.g. food, education, health) and for investment purposes.[15] Remittances also play a major role as an insurance mechanism in countries where insurance markets are not well developed. For instance, it is common to see major increases in remittances after droughts, floods or other natural disasters.[16]

However, the links between migrants and their home countries are not just about sending money home. Migrants also send home ideas about the attitudes and behaviours that they are exposed to abroad.[17] This transfer of ideas, often referred to as social remittances, includes aspects related to entrepreneurship and other key factors that support economic growth.

Migrants' knowledge of foreign markets, languages and cultures can enhance business opportunities and create economic linkages between their home and host countries. These economic linkages often result in increasing trade in goods and services.[18]

Return migration also has positive impacts in many countries. Returning migrants bring home skills, knowledge and experience, and are often more likely to enter entrepreneurship upon return.[19] For instance, research exploring the impact of refugee return from Germany to the former Yugoslavia found a positive effect on export performance. This was driven by the fact that refugees exposed to particular industries in Germany brought back valuable technical knowledge, which translated into higher productivity in those same industries.[20]

The potential economic benefit of immigration has led to some scholars referring to migration as the "trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk" that are being ignored by policymakers. Reducing barriers to migration would

8 Di Rosa, M., Melchiorre, M. G., Lucchetti, M., & Lamura, G. (2012) The Impact of Migrant Work in The Elder Care Sector: Recent Trends and Empirical Evidence in Italy. European Journal of Social Work.
9 Bosetti, V., Cattaneo, C., & Verdolini, E. (2015) Migration of Skilled Workers and Innovation: A European Perspective. Journal of International Economics.
10 Lissoni, F., & Miguelez, E. (2024) Migration and Innovation: Learning from Patent and Inventor Data. Journal of Economic Perspectives.
11 Kone, Z. L., Ruiz, I., & Vargas-Silva, C. (2021) Self-Employment and Reason for Migration: Are Those Who Migrate for Asylum Different From Other Migrants? Small Business Economics.
12 Zetter, R., & Ruaudel, H. (2016) Refugees' Right to Work and Access to Labor Markets – An Assessment. World Bank.
13 Raga, S. (2022) More Action is Required to Lower the Costs of Remittances Through Mobile Money. ODI.
14 World Bank (2023) Remittance Flows Continue to Grow in 2023 Albeit at Slower Pace.
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17 Tuccio, M., & Wahba, J. (2020) Social Remittances. Handbook of Labor, Human Resources and Population Economics.
18 Parsons, C. R., & Winters, L. A. (2014) International Migration, Trade and Aid: A Survey. International Handbook on Migration and Economic Development.
19 Wahba, J. (2014) Return Migration and Economic Development. International Handbook on Migration and Economic Development.
20 Bahar, D., Hauptmann, A., Özgüzel, C., & Rapoport, R. (2024) Migration and Knowledge Diffusion: The Effect of Returning Refugees on Export Performance in the Former Yugoslavia. The Review of Economics and Statistics.

lead to a large increase in income at a global scale, an increase that is higher than the equivalent from eliminating remaining trade barriers.[21] Eliminating barriers to mobility would also be the most impactful way of reducing global poverty, having a greater impact than all poverty reduction programmes in existence.[22] And yet resistance to immigration is high in countries around the world and illustrated in the outcomes of many recent elections.

Migration leads to a period of adjustment

Some local workers benefit more than others from immigration. Local workers with skills that complement those of migrants, for example, tend to gain a lot from immigration right away. An increase in low-skilled immigration leads to more workers being available to do childrearing, housekeeping and care for the elderly, which decreases the cost of those services. This allows local workers to rely on migrants for those services and spend more time at work, a factor that is particularly beneficial for the employment conditions of local women.[23]

Yet the story could be very different for those local workers who compete directly with migrants for employment, at least in the short term. They could have fewer job opportunities and see their wages stalled. There are plenty of stories of local workers being replaced by migrant workers and even having to train their migrant replacements.[24] It is difficult to argue that these local workers are better off because of immigration.

However, as explained above, the economy will eventually expand because of immigration. Once this economic expansion occurs, there will be additional opportunities for local workers directly affected by immigration.

Moreover, many of those local workers will adjust to the presence of more migrants in the labour market and move across locations or occupations. For instance, they could look for employment in regions that are less popular with migrants or change to jobs in which they hold a competitive advantage over migrants. This includes jobs that require local language skills or substantial local knowlege, which migrants often lack, such as customer-facing jobs. The key is that migrants and local workers have different skills, even among high- and low-skill groups. For instance, among high-skill workers, migrants tend to work in more technical areas than natives (for example, maths and engineering), while among the low-skill, migrants tend to focus more on manual employment rather than jobs which require local language skills.

The evidence suggests that over time, after a period of adjustment, most local workers directly affected by migration will also benefit economically as they change occupations and the economy expands.[25] Yet losing a job, periods of unemployment and changing location or occupation could all be distressing experiences for many local workers. Therefore, whilst immigration is good for the economy, it is not necessarily good for everyone's economic situation right away. This is a factor that could explain opposition to migration, particularly from those working in industries that switched to using more migrant labour. The long-term economic benefits of immigration are not as important as immediate economic concerns for these voters.

Nonetheless, it is not only about adjustment in the labour market. Regions experiencing high levels of immigration may need to expand their infrastructure, including additional housing, schools, transportation and hospitals. These expansions require time, planning and investments, leading to a period of adjustment, which can see higher housing costs and overcrowded schools, buses and hospitals. Many voters with concerns about these adjustments could also support political parties with a strong restrictive agenda regarding migration.

Options presented to voters do not reflect migration policy preferences

In political debates, migration policies appear in bundled forms, rather than allowing individuals to select among policies' constituent parts. This means that voters are often asked to simply give a thumbs up or down on immigration, in all its forms, even if the issue at hand, and their view of it, is much more complex.

Migration policies are multi-dimensional. There is a lot of focus on policy debates on controlling inflows into a country, which provides a simplistic view of migration policy. Controlling inward flows through enforcement or admission criteria is just one of several kinds of policy levers that are available to any government. Many other factors are relevant for policymaking on migration, ranging from

21 Clemens, M. A. (2011) Economics and Emigration: Trillion-Dollar Bills on the Sidewalk? Journal of Economic Perspectives.
22 Pritchett, L. (2006) Let Their People Come: Breaking the Gridlock on International Labor Mobility. Center for Global Development.
23 Cortes, P., & Tessada, J. (2011) Low-Skilled Immigration and the Labor Supply of Highly Skilled Women. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics.; Ruiz, I., Vargas-Silva, C. (2018) The Impact of Hosting Refugees on the Intra-Household Allocation of Tasks: A Gender Perspective. Review of Development Economics.
24 O'Brien, S. A. (2016) Disney Sued for Replacing American Workers with Foreigners. CNN.
25 Foged, M., & Peri, G. (2016) Immigrants' Effect on Native Workers: New Analysis on Longitudinal Data. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics.

policies regarding naturalisation and access to services and employment to family reunification policies.

Even across policies regarding admission, there are major differences across categories, such as immigration for work or study, and within these categories. As stated previously, all forms of immigration are ultimately beneficial to the economy. Yet the positive effects of some forms of immigration occur more quickly than others. For instance, many of those moving for work reasons can join the labour market immediately and often face strong restrictions on their access to the welfare state. Meanwhile, those moving for asylum may need additional state support initially and will join the labour market more gradually.[26]

Second, many combinations of migration policies involve trade-offs. It is possible for an individual to have concerns about the lack of workers in the local care industry and concerns about the cost of local housing, both of which are affected by immigration.

For instance, evidence from Colombia suggests that Colombians favour liberal policies on Venezuelans' right to work, healthcare access, and family reunification.[27] Yet they also support placing restrictions on the number of Venezuelans entering the country and the length of their initial residency. Evidence from Peru suggests similar differences in policy preferences towards Venezuelans in that country.[28]

Some voters may not be opposed to immigration in principle, but support parties with a restrictive agenda because they believe these parties will address some particular aspects of migration policy that they have concerns about (for example, irregular border crossings), even if they do not support restrictions on other aspects of migration policy.

Aware of the complex links of immigration to the economy, often politicians rally around restrictions on an unpopular type of immigration for electoral purposes, but support other types after the election period. For instance, ending EU free movement, a key facilitator of immigration to the UK, was the main promise of those political leaders campaigning for Brexit. Yet some of those same leaders later established a relatively liberal post-Brexit immigration system that has led to record net migration levels in the country, even without EU free movement.[29]

It's (not just) the economy, stupid

Coined by the campaign team of Bill Clinton in the United States during the 1992 presidential election, the phrase, "It's the economy, stupid" states that politics and the job of politicians were essentially about maintaining strong economic indicators. According to this view, the way to win elections is to talk about how the policies proposed by a party or candidate will boost the economy.

However, while better economic prospects will convince many voters, there are deeper divisions in society. For several decades, social identity theory has postulated the existence of intergroup behaviour.[30] People separate themselves based on characteristics of belonging to a group (for example class, profession, race, religion or country of birth) and increase their self-esteem by improving the conditions of their in-group and, particularly, discriminating against out-groups (that is, against the 'Other').

Voters, therefore, may choose political parties not solely based on an objective evaluation of policies, including economic ones, but on emotional connections to groups that align with their perceived social identity. Voters could support parties with a restrictive agenda on migration because they perceive migrants as members of out-groups that threaten the values or culture of the in-group. They could support these political parties even if they feel that reducing immigration will have negative economic consequences.

The likelihood of supporting political parties with a restrictive agenda on migration is greater for voters for whom national or ethnic identity is highly salient (very important to their self-concept) and with lower levels of trust in out-group members. Evidence from Peru, for instance, suggests that those with lower levels of interpersonal trust (that is, trust in other people) are less likely to support open migration policies.[31]

It is also argued that increasing incomes and education levels lead to people valuing national and ethnic identity less, and focusing more on other aspects, such as professional identity.[32] This has led those with higher incomes and education to feel less connection to the needs of their fellow nationals on lower incomes, for whom national and ethnic identity is more important, and more

26 Ruiz, I., & Vargas-Silva, C. (2018) Differences in Labour Market Outcomes between Natives, Refugees and other migrants in the UK. Journal of Economic Geography.
27 Allen, W. L., Ruiz, I., & Vargas-Silva, C. (2024) Policy Preferences in Response to Large Forced Migration Inflows. World Development.
28 Allen, W. L., Bird, M. D., Freier, L. F., Ruiz, I., & Vargas-Silva, C. (2024) Migration Policy Preferences and Forms of Trust in Contexts of Limited State Capacity. Nottingham Interdisciplinary Centre for Economic and Political Research.
29 The Migration Observatory (2024) Net migration remained unusually high in 2023, while visa data indicate further declines may come in 2024.
30 McKeown, S., Haji, R., & Ferguson, N. (2016) Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory: Contemporary Global Perspectives. Springer.
31 Allen, W. L., Bird, M. D., Freier, L. F., Ruiz, I., & Vargas-Silva, C. (2024) op cit.
32 Collier, P. (2020) Diverging Identities: A Model of Class Formation. Oxford Economic Papers.

sympathy for the conditions of groups such as vulnerable migrants. Hence, those of higher socio-economic status are less likely to be moved by the adjustments related to immigration that are directly experienced by those of lower socio-economic classes. The result is a gap in support for immigration across the social class divide.[33]

The speed of demographic change also plays a role. Rapid demographic and cultural changes can create more anxiety among voters. This is particularly the case in new migrant destinations, where residents are less used to diversity and the infrastructure might need some time to adjust to the new demographic reality. Academics have even used the revised phrase "It's the demography, stupid" to highlight this point.[34]

In-group and out-group dynamics could even lead some voters to discard the evidence of the positive economic impacts of immigration. This evidence is often presented by experts working for academic or international institutions (for example, the World Bank or the OECD), which some voters distrust and see as part of an out-of-touch elite that does not have their best interests at heart and does not belong in their in-group.[35] In other words, it is not just about the message, but also about the messenger.

The media also often plays a pivotal role in framing immigration as a threat to the cultural fabric of the nation or in-group, reinforcing the message from some political leaders.[36] Even a relatively small flow of irregular migrants across a land border or body of water can be presented in the press as a major crisis. Media in many countries also uses migrants as scapegoats for broader economic challenges, such as deindustrialisation, reductions in the quality of public services, wage stagnation, rising crime and income inequality.

As explained above, immigration can put pressure on public services and local wages while the infrastructure and economy adjust to the new demographic reality. A nuanced perspective on these issues would differentiate between the short- and long-term effects. Yet the news cycle, like the political one, tends to focus on immediate concerns, rather than taking the long view. Simple narratives that link immigration to the existence of key economic challenges can be more persuasive to some voters than comprehensive economic analysis from institutions that may be perceived as "elite".

Conclusion

We can now return to the main question introduced at the start of the essay: why do some voters concerned about the economy also support political parties with a restrictive agenda on migration?

We explored three key aspects in response to this question. First, some voters could have legitimate concerns about the economic adjustments that immigration brings to a country. Whilst migration is beneficial in the long term, there could be some negative impacts while the economy absorbs the new labour force. Second, intergroup dynamics are more important for some voters, who see migrants as a potential threat. Their priority is to remove that threat and other issues, such as the economy, become secondary. Third, it is likely that many voters have complex views on migration policy. They are not fully against or pro-migration. The policy offering of political parties does not reflect their views, but they must choose between the offers that are on the table in any given election. These explanations are not mutually exclusive. Some voters could identify with all three aspects or any combination of these.

There is no simple answer to the question raised in this essay. Yet at least we can gain some clues about the right direction of travel regarding this issue. In particular, we can discard simplistic narratives that ignore the complexity of the issue at hand. Such narratives, whether in favour or against migration, lead to misinformation, increased polarisation and, ultimately, ineffective policymaking. This has been illustrated by the discussion of immigration in recent elections around the world. There is a need for a more nuanced debate on the link between migration and the economy in order to ensure an informed political process.

33 Collier, P. (2018) The Future of Capitalism: Facing the New Anxieties. Penguin.
34 Kaufmann, E. (2014) 'It's the Demography, Stupid': Ethnic Change and Opposition to Immigration. The Political Quarterly.
35 Desmond, H. (2022) Status Distrust of Scientific Experts. Social Epistemology.
36 Strömbäck, J., Meltzer, C. E., Eberl, J. M., Schemer, C., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2021). Media and Public Attitudes Toward Migration in Europe: A Comparative Approach. Routledge.

USA: Throughout 2024, with hundreds of thousands of people from around the world – and especially from South America and Central America – passing through Mexico and travelling towards the US southern border, migration played an important role in the run-up to the US presidential elections of 5 November. Both candidates – Democrat Kamala Harris and Republican Donald Trump – promised to be strict on undocumented migration, with Trump promising mass migrant expulsions that would be a "bloody story". [See *Keeping track in Europe*, page 87; *Normalising the extreme*, page 264 and the *Thematic snapshot* on page 192].

Interview

Migration as a tool for sustainable development in a warming, post-Covid world

Migration is a complex phenomenon, which should not be managed independently by countries, states IOM's DG **Amy Pope**. A concerted effort that recognises both the drivers and the human side of migration is required for countries to reap the myriad benefits that people's mobility brings – not least, the positive contribution to local economies and labour markets, which was apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic and will keep being a crucial factor as environmental changes continue to displace people globally.

Amy Pope is director general of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a post she has been covering since October 2023 as the first woman in IOM's 73-year history. Prior to joining IOM, DG Pope served as the senior advisor on migration to US President Joe Biden as well as deputy homeland security advisor to President Barack Obama. Her areas of expertise include the development and implementation of comprehensive strategies to address issues such as human trafficking, refugee resettlement and climate-related crises.

This has been a big year for elections worldwide. We seem to be witnessing a shift against migration and multiculturalism and towards right-leaning populism in many countries. How do you explain this? And is IOM trying to counter these trends?

I will start with what I believe is the primary factor, which is that migrants by definition can't vote in most of these elections. So it's very, very easy if you're a politician to lay the blame for anything that has gone wrong within your community, whether it's crime or inflation or housing, and to place it at the feet of migrants. It's a very low-cost political strategy. And unfortunately, I think that politicians have realised that there's value in pointing the finger at someone who cannot hold them accountable by voting. So, honestly, I think that this is what's happening, and it's a strategy that's playing out across the world, not just in places like North America and Europe. Because it's playing out everywhere, it's something we are watching closely.

As an international organisation, we do not interfere with political processes in any government or any member state. Instead, we look for opportunities to

highlight why migration matters. And frankly, the facts are good on that front. The demographic forces that are at play, the pressures on people to move and the opportunities that are growing around the world are so significant that having better migration policies is in everyone's best interest. So, we're looking to identify the bright spots and the key stakeholders who benefit when migration is well-managed, and stay out of the political fray as much as possible.

Irregular migrants represent a relatively small group of the total number of people on the move, and yet they attract a huge amount of media attention and political energy. Do you feel that the issue of irregular migration is damaging to the wider cause of asylum and migration generally?

Absolutely. I think there are a couple of things going on when we talk about irregular migration. On the one hand, there is the pressure on communities, particularly border communities. These are valid concerns because they are people's experiences, whether it's about access to services, seeing migrants who don't have shelter and are sleeping on the streets or the sense of insecurity that comes from seeing repeated negative news about migration. There's also the fact that irregular migration is being used as a proxy for governments not having sufficient control over their processes. It's a very vivid illustration of where the government process has failed. And so it triggers a reaction from the public.

> **"The issue of irregular migration is being exploited, which undermines political support for what is very much in the strategic interest of nearly every country in the world right now."**

But I think it actually distracts from the much bigger issue, which is that migration is needed and is important for economies to develop. It doesn't matter whether you're a country of origin or a receiving country, migration is critical in most development strategies now around the world. Therefore, the big problem I see is that the issue of irregular migration is being exploited, which undermines political support for what is very much in the strategic interest of nearly every country in the world right now.

How do we explain this seemingly global contradiction between countries that need labour migrants desperately and yet are more and more right-leaning and restricting access – at least publicly?

It's a dangerous phenomenon, frankly, because the political rhetoric does not match the reality or the evidence. What is ultimately so dangerous about it is that this will weaken the economic progress of many, many countries around the world if they were to actually end migration to their country. Take a look at the United States, for example. Just a few months ago, The Economist did an excellent spotlight on post-Covid economic recovery. It showed that much of the US strength in recovering from Covid was because of migration. Interestingly, a lot of that migration included irregular, as well as regular migration, but the relatively easy access to the job market for migrants was critical to the economic progress of the United States.

> **"Every time I speak to private sector leaders, I consistently hear that migration is critical for achieving a sustainable workforce in many parts of the world."**

I meet with the private sector nearly everywhere I go. Every time I speak to private sector leaders, I consistently hear that migration is critical for achieving a sustainable workforce in many parts of the world. In some places, I've even heard companies say that they choose markets where there is a more open migration policy because they know they will have the workforce they need to deliver on their objectives.

How concerned are you about Europe's continued drive to externalise its borders, as well as more restrictive border policies within the EU itself, as we have recently seen with Germany implementing some emergency, six-month border control measures? Will this threaten the free mobility agreements within the Schengen Area?

Every government has the right to set its own migration policies. Our job is to help inform them based on best practices and promote the alignment of these practices and policies with international law standards.

While externalisation policies can be agreed between states, in line with the principles of international cooperation and responsibility-sharing, these actions must guarantee the respect of fundamental rights.

So, for our purposes, and this is something we do in partnership with UNHCR, we seek to ensure that the rights of migrants, displaced persons and affected communities to seek and claim asylum and protection are upheld and their needs fulfilled.

Now, that being said, there are some interesting practices that are going on in the Americas, for example. The US has been experimenting with the Safe Mobility Offices, where they evaluate the claims of migrants who are already on the move, as to whether they have protection claims, family reunification claims or particular skills that may be of interest to various destination countries.

Combining screening for protection, access to labour markets, and access to other education and livelihood opportunities is a more efficient and potentially promising response to a situation where you otherwise would have people just coming up to the border in large numbers, with different needs and vulnerabilities.

Leading a multi-government agency like yours, how do you find negotiating or dealing with governments that are often the very perpetrators of pushbacks and pullbacks involving migrants and asylum seekers?

We're a member state organisation and, because of this, we are perhaps negotiating more behind the scenes than if we were an advocacy organisation where we could be more open about concerns. That said, our approach is to speak directly with governments about practices and, again, to work in support of our colleagues at UNHCR to ensure that everyone has the basic right to seek asylum. Then, we work with governments to make sure they have necessary protections in place, for example, for children, victims of trafficking, persons who may have experienced gender-based violence, etc. More than anything, we're here to help provide capacity and solutions. In my experience, governments are often looking for ways to address significant challenges. If the possibility allows, you can often work with them to help provide the capacity, advice or support that they did not know was available before. That's where I think we can add value. We have built trust and we have people on the ground. We are active in over 180 different countries, which I think enables us to be an honest broker between all concerned parties.

What is your approach to a situation like Saudi Arabia, a country that has been accused of severe violence against irregular migrants on its southern border with Yemen? When you recently visited the government there, how did you discuss human rights and a rights-based approach to migration?

Actually, I was very pleasantly surprised by the fact that they took those issues straight on when I visited. Particularly, with their Minister of Human Resources and Social Development. He took some time to outline the number of policy and practical changes they're making within their government to improve access to services and labour standards for people who are coming and working in their country, as well as to partner with governments from the countries of origin of migrants. They demonstrated a real commitment to achieving some very specific performance indicators, so that they could demonstrate progress.

What I heard was a recognition that they do not want to be in a position where they're perceived to be a violator of migrants' rights. And it was particularly interesting because they also recognise that they desperately need foreign workers, and that they need to start building the processes now to protect these workers.

Now, there's a long way to go from here to there. Their efforts cannot be just about engaging with their companies at home, but also need to be about working with the countries of origin to build/raise awareness and build internal capacities, while encouraging the protection of rights. There's work to do, but they did not shy away from recognising that they need to do that work. And, at least in terms of what they shared with me, they seemed to have a very well-thought-out plan to address some of those issues.

You often talk about creating safe and legal pathways for migration, but few countries have been doing this since the *Global Compact for Migration* was agreed upon in 2018. Do you think the compact is making a difference? Some people have suggested it's lost its energy already.

What I think is groundbreaking about the compact is the recognition that the issue of migration should be in the global conversation. I think before the compact, there was, especially with many states, a sense that migration was not the business of the international community, that it was purely a domestic issue. What the compact has given us is the ability to have things like our regional reviews right now, where we assess the progress of various states in achieving the goals of the compact. It gives us the opportunity to have a multi-stakeholder dialogue on what's working and what's not working.

> **"What I hope more than anything is a recognition that migration is a tool for sustainable development, as opposed to migration as something we just need to stop at borders."**

For example, it helps us ensure that migration is part of the conversation at events like the Summit of the Future and the Pact for the Future. I don't think anybody believes that the compact was the be-all and end-all. I think the compact allows us to drive a policy agenda, which ultimately will result in more inclusive policies. And what I hope more than anything is a recognition that migration is a tool for sustainable development, as opposed to migration as something we just need to stop at borders.

Specifically on Objective Eight of the compact, we're still seeing a lot of people dying while being mobile. The same governments that are also party to the compacts are often creating an environment or policies where people are forced to take great risks, sometimes lethally.

There are a lot of inconsistencies in governments. Migration is an interesting issue because it's one that resonates in domestic political spheres and is also a key issue in many domestic elections, but the phenomenon of migration, by definition, is beyond any one country's control. It requires a multilateral approach.

> **"The phenomenon of migration, by definition, is beyond any one country's control. It requires a multilateral approach. [...] If you only have strong border policies, if you only fund border enforcement efforts, you will fail in managing migration."**

What advice would you give the next president of the US on the troublesome political and humanitarian issues of the US southern border?

Recently, we've seen the US government try to take a much more holistic approach. Like many governments, they are also pulled between a strategic comprehensive approach and one that is much more focused on border politics. Ultimately, because I've worked on migration for my entire career, I believe very strongly that if you only have strong border policies, if you only fund border enforcement efforts, you will fail in managing migration.

A successful migration policy is one that looks specifically at the communities where people are coming from, identifies very concrete and pragmatic ways to engage with them, builds resilience and creates opportunities within those communities, while also recognising that there are pull factors for migration. So, if you have a million jobs that are not being filled, like we are seeing in Mexico, for example, there are going to be people who find those jobs, whether they come regularly or irregularly. For the best outcomes, we need to plan ahead.

> **"A successful migration policy is one that looks specifically at the communities where people are coming from, identifies very concrete and pragmatic ways to engage with them, builds resilience and creates opportunities within those communities, while also recognising that there are pull factors for migration."**

One of the tools you must have for successful migration policies is visas that meet your economic needs as a country. Ultimately, I think it's critical that you have not just the development support to address the root causes, but a rational migration approach that enables people to move safely and to move through a regular channel. I think it requires that governments work in partnership with one another and, as much as possible, move away from a view of "this is all the responsibility of the home affairs minister, the secretary of homeland security or interior".

When migrants, for example, move into communities, it has an impact on education, healthcare and access to social services. That should be a part of the planning, and a part of the conversation domestically. There should also be a look at what the regional demographic trends are. What are the regional labour market trends? What are the opportunities that will exist? What is the existing training and development capacity within countries? I believe that we need to move closer to the 360-degree approach of the *Global Compact*, and very, very few governments are doing that comprehensively.

Coming back to this year's elections, do you think that this groundswell of popular antagonism is due to these rapid demographic and workforce changes, even if they are necessary and even if this represents a contradiction?

What I would love to see are politicians who humanise the story of migration in a way that will resonate with their domestic political populations. So, telling the story, for example, of the healthcare worker who took care of your mom when she was in the hospital, or the story of Covid, which in the United States was a story of migrants, frankly, who were there on the front lines, providing some of the most critical services.

> **"[...] I would love to see [...] politicians who humanise the story of migration in a way that will resonate with their domestic political populations."**

Too often, I'm afraid, we see politicians go for the fear factor rather than lift up what we know are incredible examples of how migration is enabling better outcomes for people. But there are bright spots, too. We see fantastic stories from mayors, for example, who will say, we need migrants to revitalise our ageing community, or we need migrants to bring in the innovation that we have lost as so many of our young people have moved away, or as families have not continued to have children. We tend not to tell those stories, but that is where we, as an organisation, can add value.

As an organisation, we have a responsibility to identify the stakeholders who are benefitting from migration, whether they're in the private sector or at the community level, and to change the way we talk about the issue. I don't pretend this is easy, but right now the

alternative to the very negative narrative that is out there is just not sufficiently well developed.

Talking about municipal mayors, do you think they hold a powerful key to the future of migration and migration integration?

Yes, definitely. This is where the rubber meets the road, right? In our experience, mayors are often very pragmatic, they are recognising and addressing the impact of migration when it comes to how we ensure access to education. How do we ensure access to housing and social services, etcetera? But they also have very specific and many really excellent examples that are coming from mayors of how to use migration as a tool to facilitate better outcomes. So, whether it's high-skilled, low-skilled or across the range, some of the best practices we've seen are coming from mayors all over the world.

Can you speak about any tension between the mandates of IOM and UNHCR? Or, maybe, we are at a point now where the distinction between a migrant and a refugee has become more vague, meaning that IOM and UNHCR are working much more in cooperation just to deal with displacement rather than categorising people separately?

First of all, I have to say it's critically important that we have a strong partnership with UNHCR and that they are one of the key agencies that we most frequently work with. But it's also important to distinguish refugees as they are defined as a distinct category of people with specific protections under international law.

It is, thus, important to emphasise that refugees are entitled to the full protection of refugee law, including protection from expulsion or return to situations of persecution where their life and freedom are at risk.

At the same time, it is similarly important to recall that international law protects all individuals, regardless of their migratory status, and there can be important overlaps in the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by people who move along the same routes and who can be similarly exposed to human rights violations, abuse and xenophobia.

I actually think these are still quite distinct categories. In Sudan, for example, we work with people who are displaced internally. We do mixed work with UNHCR which is mostly an all-hands-on-deck situation. Sudan has one of the highest number of displaced people in the world, their needs are enormous and there's not one agency that can do it alone. When it comes to people who are leaving Sudan, the division of responsibility has primarily been with UNHCR, and we are supporting the nationals who are fleeing back home from Sudan. In places like South Sudan and Chad, the number is significant – it's hundreds of thousands – and they're not people who are coming back into a network of support, as many of them had lived in Sudan for decades.

We're also providing support to third-country nationals. There were many, many people who went to Sudan over the years for education or employment opportunities to build businesses and have fled because of the conflict. It's not a perfect division of responsibility, there's overlap and we have to work together. But I do think it's important to maintain respect for and hold countries accountable for their obligations under refugee law, and make clear that that is UNHCR's role.

In this framework, both agencies continue to strengthen our work together to better address the growing global challenges that people are facing, whether internally or crossing international borders.

I know you have already spoken about people moving because of climate. At IOM, are you planning for a massive growth of climate-induced mobility?

First, we're already seeing that climate has displaced more people this last year than conflict. We also know that there are hundreds of millions of people who are living in extremely climate-vulnerable communities, many of whom are in the least developed countries or have very, very low resilience to climate impact. So, I believe we as an organisation are preparing to respond to what we believe will be a significant displacement of communities.

> **"Climate has displaced more people this last year than conflict. [...] There are hundreds of millions of people who are living in extremely climate-vulnerable communities, many of whom are in the least developed countries or have very, very low resilience to climate impact. [...] We, as an organisation, are preparing to respond to what we believe will be a significant displacement of communities."**

Now, many of those communities will be firstly displaced internally, based on what the evidence is showing, while some of those communities will be displaced across borders. I think where we can contribute is by increasingly using evidence to identify those communities who are going to be most at risk of displacement and then working to build resilience before the displacement happens, including by using regular migration pathways as one measure to help communities adapt. So, if you can no longer farm or fish,

let's look at what skills you might be able to develop and where you might have job opportunities in the future.

I am not suggesting that there are high numbers of people who are going to be coming up from the south to the north. To say that is dangerous and not necessarily accurate. What I think is more likely is that we'll see significant displacement into neighbouring countries that are already extremely vulnerable, and I think the risk of that is regional instability. I think it will put increased pressures on already vulnerable communities and so, as a result, it might spark increased conflicts between these communities, particularly as they may be competing over scarce resources.

My point of view is that it is critical that states recognise the scope of the challenge that is before us and they start to invest first in adaptation measures for those communities, but then build out better options for people who are going to have no choice but to move. Essentially, it is critical that we are prepared.

Irregular migration through the Darién Gap: Panama's new president cracks down on movement

In recent years, the salience of migration concern in Panama has risen rapidly, with numbers of migrants in the first half of 2024 looking similarly high as those of the same period in 2023.[1] A May 2024 UNICEF report stated that "based on the trends observed in the first four months and the regional context, it is estimated that 800,000 people, including 160,000 children and adolescents, could cross the jungle in 2024."[2] However, as of August 2024, over 240,000 people had crossed the Darién Gap, casting doubts that the higher estimate of UNICEF will be reached by the end of the year.[3]

The numbers are high enough as they are, though: in 2023, over 520,000 migrants and asylum seekers entered Panama through the Darién Gap, representing an 80-fold increase from the 6,500 recorded just three years earlier (2020).[4] In terms of those making the crossing in 2024, observers expected a huge spike in the number of children, based on figures from the first five months.[5]

The tropical forest of Darién extends across both sides of the border between Colombia and Panama. It lacks infrastructure and is heavily controlled by criminal groups, exposing those in transit to risks of death, abuse and diverse dangers, including rising incidents of sexual assault,[6] all of which have been well-documented.[7]

The movement of a large number of migrants through the vast and dangerous jungle crossing and up through Central America and Mexico creates challenges for governments in the region – not least in terms of their relations with the US, keen to pressure all transit countries to halt the movements northwards to their southern borders.

In an unexpected win this May, former Panama security minister José Raúl Mulino of the right-wing Realizing Goals party won the presidency, replacing outgoing President Laurentino Cortizo of the centre-left Democratic Revolutionary Party.

Although Panama had already taken a stricter position against transit migrants, Mulino, having campaigned on a promise to end irregular migration through the country, immediately vowed to take a tough securitised stance against migrant arrivals in Panama, promising to "close" the Darién Gap and "repatriate" those using it for transit.[8] Some months on, it appears that implementing such a policy is harder than he expected.

Since early 2023, through a trilateral agreement led by the United States (US, Panama and Colombia), Panamanian forces launched an initiative to combat transnational crime – including human smuggling and trafficking – in the Darién region.[9] Nonetheless, the numbers making the jungle crossing rose even higher during the year. Undeterred, following his election victory, Mulino lost no time signing a deportation-focused cooperation deal with the US commencing in early July.[10] Reportedly, the US has committed to helping Panama with $6 million for equipment, transportation and logistics to "remove foreign nationals who do not have a legal basis to remain in Panama".[11]

Mulino also met with his Colombian counterpart, Gustavo Petro, to discuss migration issues. A limited number of Colombian deportations from Panama had already been taking place prior to 2024, with Colombian authorities announcing the militarisation of the area around the

1 National Migration Service of Panama (n.d.) Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2024 and Migración—Irregulares en tránsito por Darién por país 2023.
2 UNICEF (2024) Child migration through the Darien Gap up 40 per cent so far this year.
3 Colombian Government (2024) Migration in the Darien Gap data. The Guardian (2024) Panama to shut down Darién Gap route in deal that will see US pay to repatriate migrants.
4 Hardy, E. (2024) The Role of Migration in a Year of Crucial Elections. Carnegie.
5 UNICEF (2024) Child migration through the Darien Gap up 40 per cent so far this year.
6 Cárdenas, J. D. (2023) Gaitanistas License Migrant Smuggling in Colombian Darién Gap: Report. InSight Crime.
7 Médecins Sans Frontières (2024) Lack of action sees sharp rise in sexual violence on people transiting Darien Gap; Human Rights Watch (2023) "This Hell Was My Only Option"- Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers Pushed to Cross the Darien Gap; International Crisis Group (2023) Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap.
8 Zamorano, J. (2024) Panama's New President José Raúl Mulino Vows To Stop Migration Through Darien Gap. HuffPost; Graham, T. (2024) Panama's presidential frontrunner vows to 'close' Darién Gap. The Guardian.
9 Ortega, M. (2024) Panama, Colombia, US, Allies Against Transnational Crime. Diálogo Americas.
10 US Department of State (2024) United States Signs Arrangement with Panama to Implement Removal Flight Program; Montoya-Galvez, C. (2024) U.S. agrees to help Panama deport migrants crossing Darién Gap. CBS News.
11 Buschschlüter, V. (2024) Panama starts returning migrants on US-funded flights. BBC.

Darién by land and sea, increasing the number of soldiers stationed there.[12]

Observers and critics have identified a wide range of constraints and limitations (e.g. geographical challenges, legal constraints, and logistical and capacity limitations of already-overwhelmed institutions and authorities) that will likely render the agreement at best ineffective and at worst having problematic repercussions. These could include closing the border with Colombia with barbed-wire, leading to a large number of migrants getting stuck in the under-resourced and fragile Urabá zone, on the Colombian side of the border – as already happened in 2021 and 2022, when other measures prevented movement.[13]

Another unwanted outcome could be the strengthening of criminal networks in the zone, as transit becomes even more lucrative and dangerous whilst these groups increase their monopoly. Similarly, vulnerable people will be less likely to seek assistance or protection from government representatives if the threat of deportation hangs over them.[14]

After Mulino's election win and his immediate statements, there has been less public promotion of the policy to end transit migration. Was this, then, another case of anti-migrant campaign rhetoric proving far harder, impractical or even illegal to implement once a party is in power? In addition to this, local communities in parts of Panama and Colombia have experienced a significant economic boost from the sudden rise in transit migration and are not against it.[15] By early September, under the deal where the US pays for the cost of migrant repatriation, only three deportation flights had taken place inside South America and one to India, with 130 Indian nationals aboard.[16] Some reports suggest that promised US funding has not fully materialised and, if Kamala Harris wins the November elections, there will be less chance of continued payments than if Donald Trump does.[17] As a result, this will presumably kill the deportation deal.

Even if funding agreements are honoured – with the high numbers of committed migrants and asylum seekers continuing to cross the Darién jungle and with Colombia (according to the latest analysis), still operating a tolerant attitude to legitimate and illegitimate operations around human smuggling – it's hard to see how a small chance of deportation, even if combined with other initiatives around legal pathways such as the Safe Mobility Offices, will ever affect migration decisions and significantly reduce the numbers crossing the Darién.[18]

12 Swisinfo (2024) Panama and the US agree to "cooperate" in the Darien migration crisis.
13 Carmona, M. F. (2024) Panama began to close its border with Colombia with barbed wire: communities warn of a possible dam of migrants in the Colombian Urabá. Infobae; Balbin, C. A. (2022) Humanitarian crisis in Urabá: Ombudsman warns of a 9,000-migrant blockade in Necoclí. El Colombiano.
14 Thematic Focus. (2024) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Latin America and the Caribbean (Q4). Mixed Migration Centre.
15 Yeung, P. (2024) How migration transformed an Indigenous town in Panama's Darien Gap. Al Jazeera.
16 Morena, E. (2024) Panama launches US-backed deportation flights aimed at discouraging migrants. Reuters; Kukreti, S. (2024) Panama deports 130 Indian migrants under repatriations deal with US. Hindustani Times.
17 Bensman, T. (2024) Progress Report: Has Panama Closed the Notorious 'Darien Gap' Mass Migration Route to the U.S. Border as Promised? Center for Immigration Studies.
18 Bensman, T. (2024) Op. cit.; Collins, J. (2024) From dodgy deterrence deals to drug cartels: Aid barriers in the Darién. The New Humanitarian.

Migration perceptions, opinion polls and voting outcomes: teasing out what people really want

Chris Horwood[1]

Migration and refugee issues have become increasingly significant on the global stage, shaping policies, politics and public discourse across diverse societies. Understanding the evolving perceptions and attitudes towards these issues is crucial for navigating the complexities of international relations and national politics. Evidence suggests that attitudes and perceptions towards migrants and refugees have evolved in recent years, influenced by various factors including geopolitical events, economic conditions, media portrayal and political rhetoric.

Overall, **while there are pockets of increasing acceptance and solidarity towards migrants and refugees, there has also been a simultaneous rise in xenophobia, nativism and restrictive immigration policies in many parts of the world.** Public opinion towards refugees and migration is a complex and evolving landscape that has exhibited several clear trends globally, some of which are discussed in this essay. The overarching trends reflect a world divided on the issue, with polarisation and antagonism growing in some regions while few others become more welcoming.

Public opinion on migration and refugees is shaped by a combination of factors, including media narratives, economic conditions, political leadership and individual exposure to multiculturalism. Importantly, though, there can be a difference between what people seem to express in public opinion polls and how they actually vote when it comes to migration issues. A discussion of these factors forms the main body of this essay and, hopefully, goes some way to explain the outcomes of some elections in 2024.[2]

Attitude formation

Public opinion on migration can vary dramatically across regions, influenced by historical context, (e.g., countries with a history of colonisation or migration), economic conditions (e.g., concerns over job competition), political context (e.g., policies and discourse on border control or asylum), and cultural and religious diversity in the society.

A critical underlying condition when we discuss opinions and perceptions, though beyond the scope of this essay, is the exploration and understanding of how people's attitudes are formed. The field of social psychology offers some theories in this respect, and has identified four elements that influence the formation of attitudes: direct experience, social learning, media influence and cultural factors.[3] Evidence suggests that attitudes develop as a result of psychological needs (motivational foundations), social interactions (social foundations) and genetics (biological foundations) – though this last idea is controversial, mainly on ethical grounds.[4] In one analysis, the authors describe attitudes in a way that is directly relevant to the migrant discourse and the cognitive dissonance of attitudes and voting behaviour that this essay will explore, by stating: "Attitudes are often passively acquired without deep introspection or deliberation: hence, attitudes may be based on beliefs that have no basis in reality. They may have an internal psycho-logic – an appearance of organisation – rather than being logical from an external perspective. Attitudes formed in youth often are maintained and generalised to numerous other entities across the life span."[5] Additionally, immediate drivers such as economic concerns, national identity or perceptions of security are underlying causes behind public opinions on migration, but can differ across regions. However, attitudes can change through experience and exposure. Within 'contact theory', the so-called 'exposure effect' is useful in showing that those with the highest contact with non-native communities are found, in polls, to be less opposed to migration. However, the effect ultimately depends on the type of contact and the local context.[6]

1 Chris Horwood is a migration specialist and the director of Ravenstone Consult.
2 See Election outcome chart, page 148.
3 Petty, R. E. (2019) Attitudes And Persuasion: Classic And Contemporary Approaches. Routledge; Aronson, E. (1972) The social animal.
4 Katz, D. (1960) The Functional Approach To The Study Of Attitudes. Public Opinion Quarterly.
5 Johnson, B., Martinez-Berman, L. & Curley, C. M. (2022, September 15). Formation of Attitudes: How People (Wittingly or Unwittingly) Develop Their Viewpoints. Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Psychology.
6 Dennison, J. & Dražanová, L. (2018) Public Attitudes to Migration: Rethinking How People Perceive Migration. ICMPD, Migration Policy Centre, OPAM; Facchini, G., Margalit, Y. & Nakata, H. (2022) Countering public opposition to immigration: The impact of information campaigns. European Economic Review.

Measuring public opinion

Public opinion and perception of migration are measured through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, which provide insights into how people feel about migrants, immigration policies and the broader impact of migration on society.

Typically, surveys and polls conducted by governments, universities or research organisations assess public sentiment on migration at a national level.[7] Cross-national surveys (global or bloc) offer a wider view and compare opinions across countries.[8] More regularly, public opinion 'barometer' surveys are conducted in some regions, such as the Eurobarometer in the European Union and the Afrobarometer in Africa. These cover a range of topics, including migration and emigration intentions.[9]

Beyond simple "yes/no" or "agree/disagree" questions that are typical of opinion surveys and barometers and have their own limitations, researchers also use focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to explore deeper attitudes about migration. These can be gauged from tangential or indirect sources; for example, indexes that measure policies in different countries and assess how welcoming and inclusive they are towards migrants indirectly offer analysis alongside these policy indicators.[10] Similarly, studies that use indicators to measure migration's impact on labour markets and social cohesion contextualise how public opinion evolves in response to economic trends.[11]

In parallel, social media analysis is gaining traction as a means to analyse public opinion and discourse about migration in real time, with researchers and institutions using big data from social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Reddit and more. Social listening tools and sentiment analysis algorithms help track how migration-related events (such as 'refugee crises' or new policies) are perceived. They may also track hashtags and keywords associated with migration, observing trends and sentiment over time.

In terms of media monitoring and media content analysis, news outlets, blogs and media platforms can provide a sense of how migration is framed in public discourse which, in turn, influences public perception.[12] Studies can look at the tone of content and discussions, how migrants and refugees are represented, the focus of the topics covered and the frequency of migration-related stories. Migration narratives and cultural symbols through artistic representation and cultural narratives can also provide indirect, more qualitative insights into societal perceptions of migration.

Of course, public attitudes on migration can also be inferred through political sentiment analysis, which looks at the popularity of political parties and candidates that campaign heavily on immigration-related issues. In many countries, far-right or populist parties use anti-immigration platforms and electoral results can be an indicator of public sentiment toward migrants. Specific events like Brexit in the UK and immigration-related referendums in countries like Switzerland offer direct measures of public opinion on migration.

Finally, universities and think tanks also carry out longitudinal research on migration attitudes, tracking how views evolve over time.[13] For instance, *Understanding Society* is a flagship longitudinal household panel study of the UK population run by the University of Essex, which tracks public opinion on migration and other social issues and enjoys significant public governance and funding.[14]

Analyses of findings and methodological biases

The business of collecting and interpreting public opinion on migration is problematic for various reasons. Data may not be representative or comparative because of methodological deficiencies. Different respondents may understand or interpret the same questions differently and, critically, data do not always show *why* the public holds certain views on migration. Furthermore, the

7 Brenan, M. (2024) Immigration Named Top U.S. Problem for Third Straight Month. Gallup; European Union (n.d.) Public opinion in the EU regions; Pew Research Centre (2024) Cultural Issues and the 2024 Election; European Social Survey (2021) The Human Values Scale Findings from the European Social Survey; Ipsos Global Trends (2023) A new world disorder? Navigating a polycrisis; King's College London (2023) UK attitudes to immigration among most positive internationally; Wall Street Journal (2024) Immigration Tops the Economy as Top Voter Concern, WSJ Poll Finds; AP-NORC (2024) 2024: The Public's priorities and expectations; Migration Policy Centre (n.d.) Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM). National Centre for Social Research (n.d.) Our flagship projects. All these offer survey data at different levels of frequency and detail on immigration perceptions.

8 Organisations like Gallup's World Poll or the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Gallup Migrant Acceptance Index.

9 The Eurobarometer and the Special Eurobarometer Survey are conducted by the European Commission, while the Afrobarometer is managed by a non-profit research network.

10 For example, the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX).

11 For example, specific OECD (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and ILO (International Labour Organisation) reports.

12 McCann, K., Sienkiewicz, M. & Zard, M. (2023) The role of media narratives in shaping public opinion toward refugees: A comparative analysis. Migration Research Series. International Organization for Migration.

13 Davidov, E., Seddig, D., Gorodzeisky, A., Raijman, R., Schmidt, P. & Semyonov, M. (2019) Direct and indirect predictors of opposition to immigration in Europe: individual values, cultural values, and symbolic threat. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.

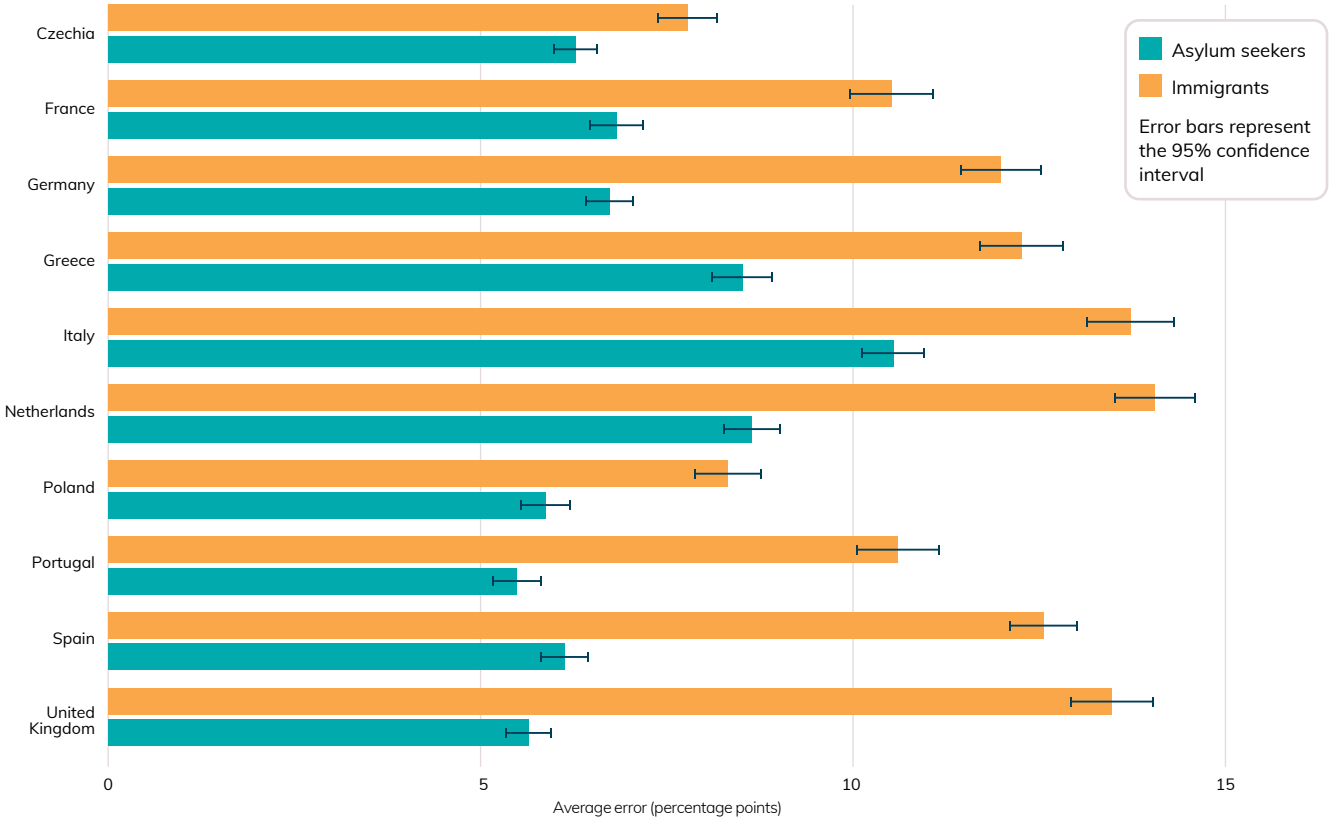
14 Borkowska, M. & Laurence, J. (2024) The role of ethnic diversity and residential segregation in shaping anti-immigrant sentiment and support for Brexit. Understanding Society.

questions or scenarios selected for a survey can have inherent bias, lead to particular conclusions or be used by interested parties to support political ends. For example, ahead of the elections to the European Parliament, a March 2024 Euronews/Ipsos poll of almost 26,000 respondents across 18 member states indicated that 51 percent had a negative assessment of the EU's efforts to control its borders.[15] Nonetheless, concerns about border policies are not necessarily the same as not wanting the EU or countries to welcome migrants and refugees, and should not be interpreted as such.

A Danish-led study concluded that Europeans in 2024 feared migration more than climate change. Germany – the EU state that has been most open to refugees in the last decade – scored higher than other EU countries in this regard.[16] In this survey, within the three questions about ranking urgent societal problems, the category 'migrant' was the only option used to cover all immigration concerns. However, the word 'migrant' may have meant different things to different people. Some may think 'migrant' means 'asylum seeker', while others consider migrants to be labour migrants or irregular migrants being smuggled or trafficked.

It is also worth considering the types of questions used in surveys to conclude if trends are positive or negative. Often, the questions relating to immigration are few in number and can vary from very specific and personal questions about how people feel about migrants living in their communities, becoming neighbours, friends and marrying into their families – i.e. degrees of personal proximity (e.g., Gallup World Poll and Eurobarometer) – to more general ones about whether respondents think immigrants make their country a "worse place to live" (e.g., Pew Research Centre) to potentially controversial and negatively framed questions around "immigration increasing crime rates" (e.g., International Social Survey Program). A typical question is: "Do you agree with the following statement: 'There are too many immigrants in my country'?" (Ipsos Global Trends), but this is also one which delivers either a positive or a negative response without taking into account people's biases, including their incorrect sense of the proportion of migrants in their countries.[17]

Figure 1. Average error in the estimation of immigrants and asylum seekers (extreme outliers excluded), by country.



Source (adapted) and credit: Cambridge Core, Paranoid styles and innumeracy: implications of a conspiracy mindset on Europeans' misperceptions about immigrants.

15 Liboreiro, J. & Genovese, V. (2024) Half of Europeans disapprove of EU migration policy and demand stronger border controls, poll shows. Euronews.
16 Connor, R. (2024) Study says Europeans fear migration more than climate change. DW.
17 Public opinion on migration (2023) Migration Data Portal.

Indeed, other surveys reveal that **on average, survey respondents consistently overestimate the share of immigrants in their country** (see Figure 1). This 'immigration innumeracy' is important because it offers an explanation for the prevalence of anti-immigrant sentiment and the success of right-wing populism; people feel threatened because they perceive the outgroup of foreigners in their society as larger than it actually is, which skews conversation around migration policy.[18] The UK is a particularly relevant example in this case – according to a 2024 Ipsos/British Future survey, Britons, on average, think asylum-seekers make up 37 percent of migrants to the UK, more than five times the actual figure of 7 percent. One in five people think asylum makes up more than half of total UK immigration, with a higher proportion among supporters of the right-wing Reform UK and Conservative parties.[19] In another example, in 2017, Italian respondents, on average, estimated the proportion of non-European Union (EU) immigrants in Italy at 24.6 percent, whereas the actual figure was 7 percent – the highest error rate in Europe.[20]

However, not all studies infer trending changes from the repeated use of a small handful of migration-related questions. A very detailed 2024 Ipsos survey of attitudes in the UK, for example, sampled 3,000 people with questions diving deep into specific immigration policies and political events.[21] This was the latest of a series of annual Ipsos surveys on the same subject using the same methodology and, arguably, is a more reliable reflection of the multilayered perceptions people have around this polemical and complex social issue.

Factors influencing, and reflected in, public opinion

In 2018, the European Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM) published a multi-country analysis of European opinion polls that aimed to explain why attitudes to migration "are what they are". The authors argued that the strongest and most stable predictors of attitudes to immigration were deeply held values and "moral foundations", as well as education, lifestyle and political attitudes. A range of other "weak and unstable" effects included contact with other ethnic groups, neighbourhood crime, media influence and perceived economic competition.[22]

Public opinion on migrants and refugees has a global dimension insofar as contemporary factors such as the rising cost of living affect evolving opinion around the world. Although it is possible to identify several elements, like in the summary list below, it is crucial to bear in mind that these are salient in different countries to different degrees, and that they are too various to be covered with examples in this overview essay. The extent of these factors influencing public opinion are the findings of a multitude of surveys and polls conducted globally.[23]

Economic factors: during the tough economic times and so-called 'cost of living crises' affecting most countries, people's concerns about costs associated with refugees and fears around labour market dynamics of large numbers of migrants joining the workforce are heightened.

Concerns about immigration levels: even if countries have been previously welcoming of refugees and migrants, the attitude towards them in recent years has markedly soured, and support for immigration restrictions is becoming widespread from South Africa to Malaysia, Finland to Chile, Australia to Panama, Lebanon to Tunisia and many others. Amongst other aspects, the level of migration is a main concern – both in terms of the perception of the proportion of migrants in society and the strain on resources and cultural impact.

Dissatisfaction with government policy handling: accompanying these concerns is an explicit dissatisfaction with existing governments' handling of immigration policy that allows high levels of refugees or migrants and, in particular, where the perception is that national borders are too porous and uncontrolled as large numbers of irregular migrants enter territories. In recent years, political parties offering more radical solutions to fix the perceived immigration problem have been gaining more support than ever.[24]

Increased political polarisation: as a result of the salience of immigration and issues in the political and public spheres, public opinion is more polarised. Positions are more entrenched as immigration becomes more controversial than ever, contributing to the rise of populist and authoritarian-style governments that promise more robust (previously 'extreme') responses to a range of public concerns including immigration. As a result, the political centre ground is increasingly being hollowed out, particularly on the issue of immigration.

18 European Commission (2022) Integration of Immigrants in the European Union.
19 White, L. (2024) Public Overestimates Asylum-Seeker Numbers in UK, Survey Shows. Bloomberg UK.
20 Holloway, K., Faures, D. & Kumar, C. (2021) Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants Italy country profile. ODI Country study.
21 Ipsos (2024) Attitudes towards immigration Survey conducted in collaboration with British Future
22 James Dennison, J. & Dražanová, L. (2018) Op. Cit.
23 To offer examples from different polls on each of these factors is beyond the scope of this essay, but different aspects of these factors are discussed throughout this MMR.
24 See Election outcome chart, page 148.

Political and cultural divides: polls increasingly show that there is a new contemporary political alignment around the issue of immigration, with those with right-leaning attitudes favouring more immigration restrictions, while those with left-leaning attitudes favour the opposite – although some left-wing politicians are also promoting tough immigration positions. This division between the right and the left was not always the case in the past, but is a fairly strong characteristic of the current situation. Surveys indicate that there are educational differences, too, with higher-educated voters feeling more positive about migration and asylum. Additionally, generational differences also play an important part, with older people favouring more restrictive approaches, while younger voters generally accept and celebrate multicultural diversity. Nevertheless, a recent countervailing phenomenon has emerged and sees younger voters increasingly attracted by populist parties with far-right immigration agendas (such as in the cases of India, France, Italy, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Hungary and others).[25]

Concerns over integration and cultural and security threats: poll respondents in many countries cite concerns that migrants and refugees may not integrate well into society or may pose a cultural threat. Pew Research surveys consistently show that a majority of Europeans are worried about the integration of Muslim immigrants, with concerns about cultural differences and the potential impact on national identity. In more extreme examples, such as those from Poland and Hungary, large numbers of people expressed the view that refugees could pose a terrorism risk.

Policy changes and government messaging: changes in migration policies and government messaging also affect public attitudes. Strict border controls, deportation policies and rhetoric emphasising security concerns can reinforce negative stereotypes and perceptions. Additionally, if the government already legitimises more 'extreme' anti-migrant policies, it creates a more permissive environment for people to express similar views or vote for them.

Media influence and misinformation: the factors associated with media and misinformation are discussed in more detail below but represent a significant influencing element in public opinion. While the conventional media (newsprint and television) plays a major role in shaping opinions, the role of social media and online platforms (messaging apps and social media networks such as Facebook, YouTube, Reddit and so on) is a powerful new phenomenon which is being increasingly harnessed – mostly negatively – by interested parties. The full impact on opinions and voting patterns is still being assessed but is expected to be significant.

Sympathy for refugees as opposed to economic migrants: perception differences towards refugees versus so-called economic migrants have been marked in many polls' findings and continue to be represented in polls globally. Far greater sympathy is afforded to refugees, while economic migrants are often viewed with some suspicion, less sympathy and sometimes outright antagonism.

Impact of refugee crises: major refugee crises, such as those stemming from conflicts or conditions in Syria, Myanmar, Ukraine and Venezuela, have influenced public perceptions globally. However, initial waves of empathy and support have sometimes given way to fatigue and concerns (at times, increasingly hostile) over the scale of humanitarian aid and integration challenges – particularly amongst host countries. Surveys, polls and the voting booth can illustrate these changes for some sections of the population over time, charting sympathy changing to concern and antagonism.

The special influence of social media

The relatively new and powerful role of social media in influencing perceptions deserves special mention, as these channels display an unprecedented amplification capacity through individuals and groups sharing personal stories, news articles and opinions rapidly and on a global scale. Additionally, **the algorithm-based model of many social media platforms is one where the frequency of 'views' and the level of engagement are rewarded, resulting in ever more sensational and potentially inflammatory news or opinions being those most-circulated, reducing reasonable and measured debate.** This capacity, which can either humanise migrants and refugees or reinforce negative stereotypes, has not been missed by both protagonists and antagonists in the increasingly polarised context that characterises the mixed migration space. Indeed, social media is now being used to spread misinformation and disinformation through false stories, exaggerated claims and manipulated images that fuel fear and distrust towards migrants, contributing to negative perceptions in the public sphere among different demographic groups.

Social media platforms enable a potential small group of anti-migrant activists to have a disproportionate level of dissemination of their views, although the same capacity is also available for those of an opposite view. The effect is to further polarise discussion, entrench existing attitudes and discourage nuanced dialogue or understanding. For example, social media activity following a terrorist attack in Germany in late August 2024 and three killings in July

25 Henley, J. & Sauer, P. (2023) Why are younger voters flocking to the far right in parts of Europe? The Guardian. Despite being less xenophobic, the youth vote for populist parties appears to be driven by a combination of economic frustration and job insecurity, distrust in traditional political structures and globalisation, cultural and identity politics, and widespread use of social media.

in the UK arguably contributed to dramatic consequences politically in Germany and violent street protests/riots in the UK.[26] In both cases, manipulated misinformation was spread in a context of existing and subsequent anti-Muslim and anti-migrant rhetoric.[27] Other examples can be found elsewhere in 2024; in India, for instance, Islamophobia is being spread through social media, while in Latin America anti-migrant hate rhetoric is using the same means.[28]

However, conversely, social media platforms provide space for advocacy groups, humanitarian organisations, and individuals to raise awareness about the challenges faced by migrants and refugees.[29] Campaigns, personal stories and calls to action can mobilise support and foster empathy. Younger generations, who are heavy users of social media, often engage more actively with issues related to migrants and refugees online. This demographic's attitudes towards migration are particularly influenced by the content they encounter on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and X. Studies have explored how algorithms, 'echo chambers', and viral content shape public perception and policy debates. In 2019, the Oxford Internet Institute reported on what they dubbed "the global disinformation order" and the "the tools, capacities, strategies and resources employed by global 'cyber troops', typically government agencies and political parties, to influence public opinion in 70 countries".[30] In 2024, with the accelerating pace of technology, "cyber troops" and the phenomenal power of AI, the impact of manipulation through social media is far higher.[31]

Populist parties have been highly effective in using social media platforms to reach younger voters. **Negative framing by populist and right-wing parties tends to correlate with increased anti-immigrant sentiment in polls.** Importantly, relatively unregulated social media allows for direct communication with voters, bypassing traditional media outlets and offering unfiltered messaging which avoids wider scrutiny or public accountability. For example, associating migration with crime or terrorism with an absence of fact-checking tends to see greater public hostility toward migrants.

Populist leaders, such as Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Matteo Salvini in Italy, have adeptly used platforms like WhatsApp, X, Telegram, Facebook and YouTube to spread their messages, often in an engaging, meme-driven style that resonates with younger audiences.[32] An anti-establishment rhetoric, combined with savvy digital strategies, helps populists secure a significant following among young voters.

As to the extent of young people's reliance on social media, a 2023 Pew Research Centre study found that 95 percent of teens in the US used YouTube, while two-thirds of teens reported using TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. Smaller shares of teens say they have ever used X (23%), Twitch (20%), WhatsApp (17%), Reddit (14%) and Tumblr (5%).[33] The majority of teens surveyed said they use YouTube and TikTok every day, and some report using these sites almost constantly. Whilst these findings were from the US, and despite regional differences relating to the extent of one platform being used more than another, teen reliance on social media for news and opinion is widespread across the world.

Understanding the dynamics of social media's influence on attitudes towards migrants and refugees is crucial for policymakers, advocacy groups and media practitioners aiming to foster informed and empathetic public discourse on these complex issues.

Unpacking trends

It is generally regarded that public opinion on migration and refugees is shaped by a combination of economic concerns, cultural identity, security fears and political alignment. A raft of additional factors drives public opinion on immigration as expressed in polls, including the size, origin, religion and skill level of immigrants, the economy of the receiving country, as well as a number of individual characteristics of the survey respondents such as age, education and employment status.

26 Both events are covered in separate *Thematic snapshots* in this review, see page 179 and page 165, with various references.
27 Institute of Strategic Dialogue (2024) Evidencing a rise in anti-Muslim and anti-migrant online hate following the Southport attack.
28 Ramírez Plascencia, D. (2024) Unwelcomed Neighbors: Media Coverage And The Spread Of Hate Towards Migrants In Latin America. CSEM; Mujtaba, S. A. (2024) How social media is spreading hate against Muslims in India. Muslim Mirror.
29 Prescott, J. (2018) Changing the narratives about migration: media and social transformations. UNESCO.
30 Oxford Internet Institute (2019) Use of social media to manipulate public opinion now a global problem, says new report.
31 Barrett, P. M., Cecely Richard-Carvajal, C. & Hendrix, J. (2024) Digital Risks to the 2024 Elections: Safeguarding Democracy in the Era of Disinformation. NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights.
32 Rijmpa, J. (2019) 'True populist Matteo Salvini makes clever use of social media'. Universiteit Leiden.
33 Anderson, M., Faverio, M., & Gottfried, J. (2023) Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023. Pew Research Centre.

While there is general sympathy for refugees, especially those fleeing war, broader concerns about immigration's economic and cultural impact have driven support for more restrictive policies in many countries. Globally, public opinion is divided on the question of whether to increase, decrease or maintain present immigration levels. For example, in 2015, on average, 34 percent of people wanted to see immigration decreased, 21 percent increased, and 22 percent kept at the same level.[34]

At the same time, surveys and voting habits suggest that attitudes toward migration are becoming more polarised, especially along political lines. It is impossible to try to sum up the global trends in more detail in this short essay, or even chart changing attitudes over time for specific regions or countries, because broad-brush summaries would not give justice to the considerable variation, detail, nuance and time-bound changes that polls and surveys measure and which would be necessary for a correct analysis. Nevertheless, the following sub-sections will attempt to draw from some survey findings for specific countries or regions to give an indication of particular trends with special reference to recent events in this year of major elections. They also offer some illustration of the capacity of polls to describe and quantify public opinion over time.

European attitudes through the polls

The Democracy Perception Index 2023 surveyed almost 54,000 people in 53 countries and found that just 19 percent of respondents in Europe favoured curbing migration, while only 12 percent worldwide ranked reducing migration among the top three issues their government should focus more on. The highest scores of all 53 countries surveyed were European: Austria (34%), Germany (31%), the Netherlands (30%), France (28%) and Sweden (27%).[35] Interestingly, the 2023 and 2024 election outcomes in Europe in those particular countries broadly suggested that what people expressed through that poll was also reflected in their voting behaviour. In all five countries, some locations have shown a significant swing of voters to the right – and even far-right – on migration issues.

For example, this was the case in Germany. According to the latest numbers from a 2023 *Deutschlandtrend* survey (polling institute Infratest dimap), migration is – besides the economy – one of the top concerns for Germans. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they think immigration causes problems, while only just over a quarter said it brings benefits.[36] Meanwhile, though economists say the German labour market needs 400,000 skilled migrant workers annually, only 27 percent of respondents said overall immigration was likely to benefit Germany. Two-thirds of respondents were in favour of limiting refugee numbers.[37]

A study documenting the changes in the European perception of migrants and attitudes towards migration between 2002 and 2018, using the European Social Survey (ESS) data, found that **most Europeans are either ambivalent or relatively positive about migration.**[38] **Perhaps surprisingly, the data indicates that European attitudes on migration are not outspokenly negative, with only about 25 percent of respondents against migration, feeling that migration threatens their country's way of life, culture and economy**. Most Europeans think that migration comes with both costs and benefits. In most European countries, attitudes toward migration (e.g., the extent to which it is a threat to one's country) have remained remarkably stable in the last two decades, despite the headlines and political rhetoric around the issue.

However, the findings show that there are significant differences across the EU. Central and Eastern European countries, for instance, are especially negative about migration, and they have also grown more adverse in the wake of the 2015-2016 so-called 'refugee crisis'. Meanwhile, Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries (i.e., northern and western European states) hold more positive views. **Surveys indicate that, in most European countries, people have become more supportive of tolerant immigration policies, although outright open-border policies have minimal support.**

34 International Organization for Migration (2015) How the World Views Migration.
35 TRTWorld (2024) Numbers in migration: Where the world stands in 2023.
36 Kinkartz, S. (2023) Germany: Growing dissatisfaction with migration policy. DW.
37 Ibid
38 Goubin, S., Ruelens, A. & Nicaise, I. (2022). Trends in attitudes towards migration in Europe. A comparative analysis. HIVA – Research Institute for Work and Society.

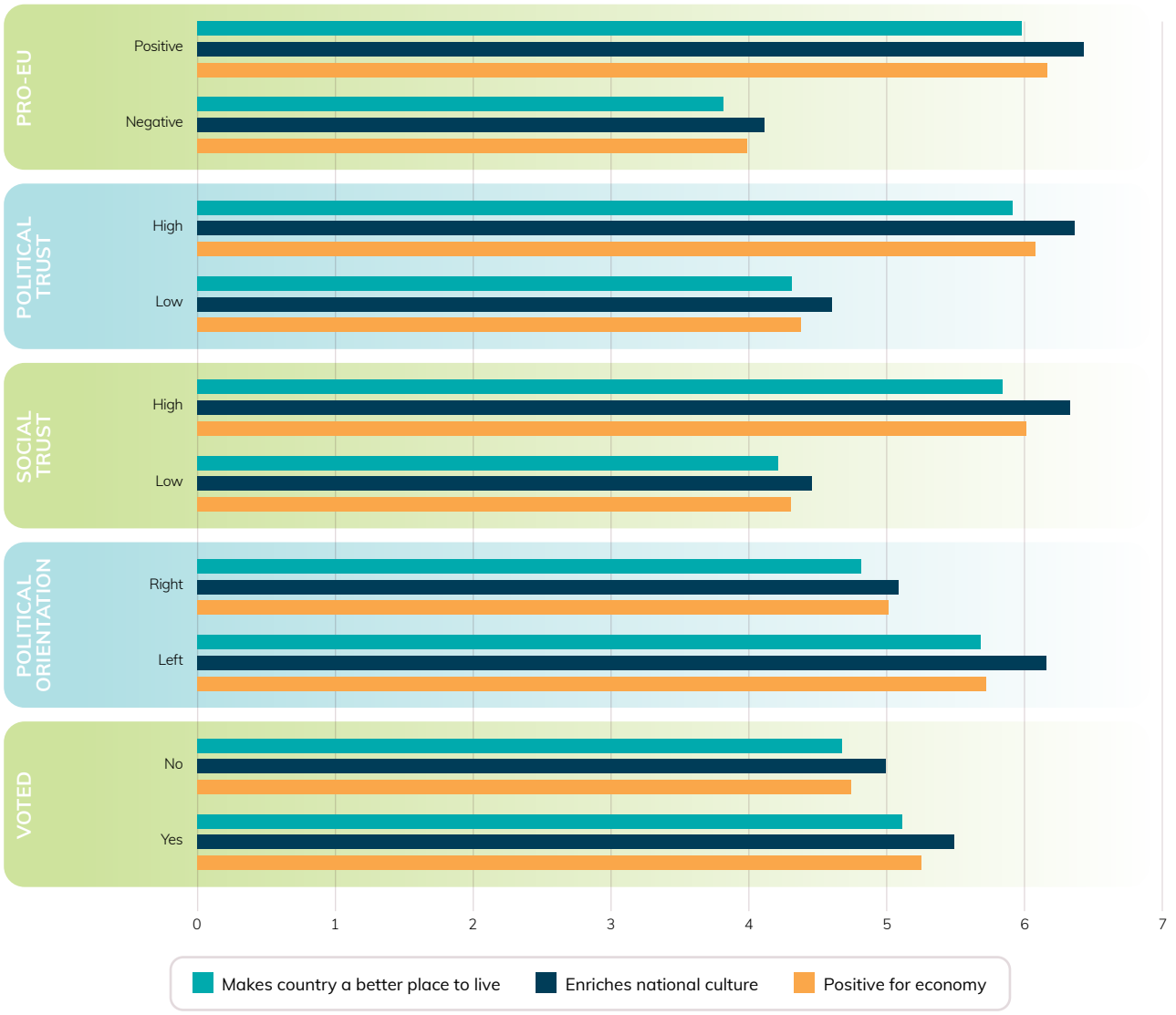
Sociodemographic differences are also apparent: citizens with lower levels of income and education, right-leaning political attitudes, low levels of trust and the elderly are on average more negative about migrants and open-border policies. Figure 2 illustrates some of these differences and shows that, of the various contrasting groups, the biggest difference in opinion is between the better-off and the poorer communities, and those educated as opposed to those with poorer education attainment.

Figure 2. Sociodemographic differences in general attitudes about migration (average values on a scale of 0-10 reported)

Note: weighted data reported (dweight). The questions were asked on a 0-10 point scale, where 0 indicates that immigration makes the country a worse place to live/cultural life is undermined/is bad for the economy, and 10 indicates that immigration makes the country a better place to live/cultural life is enriched/is positive for the economy. Source (adapted) and credit: Opportunities, Trends in attitudes towards migration in Europe. A comparative analysis. Original source: European Social Survey, 2018.

The degree to which political allegiances and perceptions of migration are linked is striking. Figure 3 shows migration attitudes against a range of complementary views including positive attitudes to the EU, political and social trust, political orientation and whether the respondents had previously participated in elections (voted).

Figure 3. Political differences in general attitudes about migration (average values on 0-10 scale reported)



Note: weighted data reported (dweight). Source (adapted) and credit: Opportunities, Trends in attitudes towards migration in Europe. A comparative analysis. Original source: European Social Survey, 2018.

Despite the fact that the differences between these groups are not so vast and that, over time, the ESS data points to an overall stable pattern in public attitudes, there is **evidence of increasing polarisation within societies**. Particularly striking is the fact that the data shows that an increased proportion of Europeans felt that no migrants should be allowed to come from poorer countries outside Europe while, at the same time, there was an increase in the proportion who felt that many such migrants should be allowed entry.[39] This kind of political cleavage in migration preferences has been borne out in election campaigning and outcomes in elections across the EU in 2022 (e.g., Italy, Sweden) and 2023 (The Netherlands, Slovakia) and, most strongly, in those from 2024 (e.g., France and German state elections, and Austria, Belgium, Finland, Czech and Hungary regional elections), including the results of the European Parliament elections in June 2024.[40]

39 Ibid
40 See Election outcome chart, page 148 as well as essay, 2024: *global elections and the politicisation of migration* page 152.

Again, despite the overall average stability, some contradictory trends in attitudes towards specific groups of migrants are apparent. For example, Europeans are now slightly more favourable towards migrants from the same racial or ethnic group as the majority, but they have become far less positive about migrants from poorer countries outside Europe. This kind of double standard or discrimination is most starkly seen in Europe's highly receptive attitude to receiving war-displaced Ukrainians as opposed to war-displaced people from non-European countries.[41]

Looking at the ESS data across the years (2002-2018) **it is clear there are more countries showing an upward trend in positive attitudes towards migration (i.e., Belgium, Finland, Germany, United Kingdom, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal, Spain and Sweden), than countries with a clear downward trend (Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Italy).** Yet, paradoxically, because of the polarisation around migration *and* additional important issues in society in all of these countries and beyond, right-wing, populist and anti-migration parties have been winning over a larger share of the vote. Also, the regional variations and divisions are striking: for example, not only were Central and Eastern Europeans already more sceptical about open migration policies but, over the last two decades, they have become ever more cynical. These divisions suggest that, at the national and European level, decision-making on migration will remain challenging and divisive, as attitudes diverge widely.

Interestingly, the data shows that **the 2015-2016 large-scale arrival of refugees in Europe had a relatively limited impact on citizens' general attitudes towards migration.** Despite the very high profile in politics and the media and the airing of negative narratives, that period did not lead to an immediately discernible decline in positive attitudes towards migrants. Instead, people did become more concerned about its *management*, wanting it to take place in an orderly manner and not allowing irregular access leading to borders being 'out of control'. Most Europeans still prefer controlled levels of migration, suggesting that what might at first appear as contradictions and paradoxes are, in fact, an indication of a strong degree of nuance in people's attitudes.

Attitudes in the USA through the polls

Historically, the US is, above all, a country of immigration. Currently, around 14 percent (45.4 million) of the population are foreign-born and a much larger group are part of immigrant communities.[42]

According to multiple annual and biannual poll surveys by Gallup, **in recent decades, the number of US citizens favouring decreased immigration has increased**. Between 1965 and 2024, the percentage of people wanting decreased immigration fluctuated between the lowest of 33 percent (1965) and the all-time high of 65 percent from 1993 to 1995. However, there have been periods of significant fluctuation in between, including the present time – since 2020, for example, a sharp uptick in the number of people wanting decreased migration has been well documented.[43] In the same poll, when asked "Do you think immigration is a good thing or a bad thing for this country today?" the proportion stating immigration is "good" in 2024 (64%) is almost the same as the one from 2001 (62%).

Stepping back to view attitudes over a longer period, a recent analysis using AI suggests that **the overall trend quickly became more sympathetic to immigrants following World War II and has remained favourable, on average, until today. At the same time, however, attitudes have become increasingly polarised along party lines.** Since the 1960s, Democratic rhetoric has been consistently sympathetic toward immigrants, and especially pro-immigration in the past decade, while that of Republicans has become increasingly hostile since the 1990s and more likely to characterise immigrants with subtle (or not) de-humanising language. As discussed above, this level of stability and polarisation is also found in Europe.[44]

The 2024 opinion polls in the US are significant because of the speed of the change of opinion and its implications for the November 2024 presidential elections. Today, more US adults than a year ago (55% versus 41%) would like to see immigration to the country decreased. Every administration struggles with immigration, but the side offering the most anti-migrant rhetoric and promises is the Republican. The recent shifts in attitudes have come after monthly encounters at the US southern border that reached record levels late last year, with some estimates suggesting there were over two million encounters – slightly lower than the record number in 2022.[45] Figures

41 Venturi, E. & Vallianatou, A. I. (2022) Ukraine exposes Europe's double standards for refugees. Chatham House.
42 Camarota, S. A. & Zeigler, K. (2021) Monthly Census Bureau Data Shows Big Increase in Foreign-Born. Centre for Immigration Studies. However, more recent figures indicate the level is now 16% of the population: (Jones, J. M. (2024) Sharply More Americans Want to Curb Immigration to U.S. Gallup.
43 Gallup (n.d.) Immigration data.
44 Andrews, E. L. (2022) How Have Attitudes Towards U.S. Immigration Changed? Stanford University.
45 Statista (2024) Apprehensions and expulsions registered by the United States Border Patrol from the 1990 fiscal year to the 2023 fiscal year.

have dropped significantly since then, but remain above most monthly pre-pandemic totals. This year, Gallup's monthly measure of the most important problem facing the country finds immigration consistently ranking among the top issues. Also, in the latest survey, 77 percent describe the situation at the US border with Mexico as either a "crisis" (32%) or a "major problem" (35%).[46]

According to Pew Research polls, 57 percent of Americans say dealing with immigration should be a top policy goal for the president and Congress in 2024 – a share that has increased 18 points (from 39%) since the start of Biden's term.[47] Meanwhile, the same poll found that 80 percent of Americans say the federal government is doing a "bad job" dealing with the large number of migrants at the US-Mexico border, including 45 percent who say it's doing a "very bad job". Furthermore, 52 percent of those polled wanted "increased deportations of people who are in the country illegally" – something Republican candidate Donald Trump is promising the electorate, but manifestly unlikely to deliver.[48] In light of Donald Trump's victory in the 5 November US presidential elections, the polls appear to have accurately reflected the public mood and preferences. Unlike his opponent Kamala Harris, throughout his campaign, Trump called immigration a crisis and promised to move swiftly to implement a series of controversial policies to clamp down on illegal immigration and curb new arrivals. Immediately after being declared the winner of the US presidential election president-elect Trump vowed to launch the nation's largest mass deportation operation of undocumented immigrants on his first day in office.

Deteriorating attitudes in Latin America

Generally, public opinion on migration in Latin America and the Caribbean has been mixed, with some positive views, some negative views and some neutral views. In recent years, nonetheless, this has changed. Data from the Inter-American Development Bank Laboratory (IDB Lab) strongly suggest there is a generalised tendency in the region to reject migration and migrants. The neutral sentiment dropped from 65.2 percent in 2017 to 41.3 percent in 2022.[49] In Chile, it has deteriorated much more: the neutral perception plummeted by an alarming 40 percentage points, from 57 percent to 17 percent.[50] Meanwhile, xenophobic attitudes towards migrants have seen a huge spike, with xenophobic sentiment increasing from 4.2 percent in 2017 to 23.3 percent in 2022.[51]

The subregions that show a more marked tendency to reject migration are those that have received large numbers of migrants in a short period of time (in this case, Venezuelans accepted by Andean countries). Whether borne out by the facts or not, two-thirds of the population in the region agree or strongly agree that migration leads to higher crime, and more than half of people believe that immigration increases unemployment or labour market competition.[52]

The Australian case

Polling for public opinion on immigration in Australia is an illustration of how different surveys can reveal different aspects and how the diversity of findings does not imply contradictions but, rather, nuance. For example, in the Mapping Social Cohesion survey from 2018, 80 percent believed immigrants are "generally good for Australia's economy" and 82 percent of Australians saw immigration as beneficial to "bringing new ideas and cultures".[53] Nevertheless, a high number also supported curbing immigration, "at least until key infrastructure has caught up".

Again, in 2024, in a Lowy Institute poll, migration was found to be one of the more contentious issues, with about half the population stating that the total number of migrants coming to Australia is "too high" (48%), while the other half said it is either "about right" (40%) or "too low" (10%). However, when asked about Australia's cultural diversity – a product of decades of immigration – Australians were overwhelmingly positive (90%).[54]

When considering the pros and cons of immigration, a majority of Australians remain positive, but the balance of attitudes appeared to be shifting in a downward direction in recent years. In 2019, a majority of Australians agreed that "immigration has a positive impact on the economy of Australia" (67%) and that "accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger" (62%). But a new Ipsos survey from 2023 found a third (34%) of the country still thinks the nation would be "stronger if we stopped immigration."[55]

46 Jones, J. M. (2024) Op. Cit.
47 Jackson, A. (2024) State of the Union 2024: Where Americans stand on the economy, immigration and other key issues. Pew Research.
48 Ibid
49 Araya, N. (2023) How is migration perceived in Latin America? Hola America.
50 Ibid
51 Ibid
52 UNDP (2023) Crossing Borders: The Unprecedented Growth of Migration within Latin America and the Caribbean.
53 The Migration Agency (2019) Australians have a love-hate relationship with immigration.
54 Neelam, R. (2024) Lowy Institute Poll: The world according to Australians. The Interpreter.
55 Ipsos (2024) Half of Australians believe 'society is broken', 'country in decline'.

The organisation Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) links population growth to immigration and lists various survey findings over several years, including:[56]

- 69.6 percent of Australians do not support further population growth (ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods January 2019)
- 58 percent think immigration should be lower than pre-pandemic levels and that the current level of migrant intake is too high (Resolve Strategic survey November 2021 and 2023)
- 70 percent do not want a return to pre-pandemic immigration levels and 65 percent do not support more population growth (The Australian Population Research Institute survey February 2023)
- 60 percent support capping of immigrant numbers until we have sufficient affordable housing (Essential Poll 29 May 2023).

Rather than reading these, more negative, conclusions as contradictions when comparing them against the positive statements about immigrants' contribution to the culture and the economy, it should be inferred that these attitudes reflect the complexity of issues such as migration as well as the intricacies of measuring people's attitudes, which straddle their interests, values and identity.

Poll findings versus voting behaviour

So, to what extent do voting behaviour and outcomes confirm or contradict perception surveys and polls? Voting behaviour often results in different outcomes to what surveys suggest in relation to immigration – or, at least, the outcome suggests a greater political cleavage than the polls showcase. For example, anti-migrant parties or populist parties with hostile immigration policies do well in elections, while surveys seem to imply that people's attitudes towards migrants are increasingly positive. The outcomes of elections all across the world in 2024 (and preceding years), as well as those of the 2024 European Parliament elections, have been – in many cases – steering towards populist, more authoritarian parties with less tolerance of migrants and refugees. Some are explicitly anti-migrant and campaigned on that agenda, so there can be no mistake that their policies towards migrants are a sideshow to another main agenda that was attracting people. Nevertheless, due to the range of issues facing people in 2024, and discussed above, in some cases, populist and nationalist parties gain voters' support for a range of reasons including, but not explicitly because of, their anti-migrant agenda. Equally, however, there can be wider discontent about a broader range of societal and economic issues, and some parties are very skilful in blaming immigration for it – even if, in general, people's attitudes on migration are more balanced.

Studies suggest that it is socioeconomic factors over xenophobia that determine the switch to the right.[57] An extensive and revealing meta-study reviewing 23 articles and 37 independent samples in the top 30 political science journals published between 2009 and 2019 reveals surprising and myth-challenging factors that matter the most for general attitudes to immigration globally.[58] It identifies the micro- as well as macro-level factors that are consistently linked to attitudes towards immigration. Additionally, the role of social media is a new phenomenon which carries a disproportionate weight in people's perceptions and potential voting behaviour, as discussed above.

What is apparent in 2024 is that, in some countries, polling indicated strong concern about immigration which was reflected in voting behaviour but, in others, (despite opinion polls suggesting high concern) it was less reflected in voting behaviour because bigger issues were at play. The outcome of the UK's elections in June was an example of this: polls suggested migration was a major concern for many Britons but the Labour Party (conventionally less restrictive on immigration than the Conservatives) gained a landslide majority because of a range of other issues trending in UK politics. Despite the fact that the issue of the 'small boats', the 'Rwanda policy' and record annual migration figures had been front page news for years, the party characterised as softer on migration and asylum easily won. However, part of the discontent with the Conservatives may also have been precisely that they failed to restrict migration despite all their bluster and rhetoric.

Throughout this essay, the issue of nuance has been mentioned as a way of explaining seemingly contradictory polling outcomes: people say they are open to members of their family marrying a migrant, yet feel strongly that too many migrants are arriving in their country. In fact, the two positions are not necessarily contradictory but nuanced and the result of a reflective approach to society, the economy, social cohesion as well as personal preferences.

56 Sustainable Population Australia (2023) Resolve survey strongly confirms that majority of Australians think immigration too high. References to each individual poll cited are found in this SPA reference.
57 Cagé, J. & Piketty, T. (2023) Europe's rightward drift is not set in stone: our new research should give hope to the left. The Guardian.
58 Dražanová, L. (2022) Sometimes it is the little things : a meta-analysis of individual and contextual determinants of attitudes toward immigration (2009–2019). European University Institute.

However, there may also be limitations to the efficacy of polls. There is, often, a difference between what people express in public opinion polls and how they actually vote when it comes to migration issues. This discrepancy, referred to as the 'social desirability bias', means that people may give more socially acceptable answers to pollsters while privately holding different opinions that are reflected in their (private) voting behaviour. This is especially true in situations where the public narrative is damning of people who hold particular views, which are nevertheless popularly held and may even be the majority. This, though, may also be shifting, as people make public announcements or propose policies about migration and migrants that some years ago may have been seen as 'extreme'.[59] Despite the prevalence of the social desirability bias to explain the difference between poll findings and voter outcomes, in Australia, when pollsters shifted to using self-completion methods for their survey, the contrary was found: a decline in the proportion of respondents who thought immigration was 'too high'. [60] However, if this dominant public narrative was that migration was 'too high', then the social desirability bias would still pertain.

In conclusion, it may be said that polls of sound methodology are, in fact, a reliable weather vane of public opinion and, if their range of questions is sufficient and detailed, they capture well the breadth of people's often complex views on immigration. How the findings are used and interpreted may be where the distortions occur, particularly if they are de-contextualised and amplified through social media, or manipulated by parties to serve their interests or, instead, presented by honest brokers who just want to tease out of polls what people really want.

59 See *Normalising the extreme*, page 264.
60 Van Kooy, J. (2022) Social Cohesion Insights 05: Support for immigration. Scanlon Foundation Research Institute.

Interview

Migration between salience, populism and cognitive dissonance

Despite people's more open and favorable attitudes towards migration, the rise of far-right and populist parties criminalising migration and putting it high on their agendas is undeniable. This could be more an issue of salience as opposed to public opinion, as **Andrew Geddes** explains.

Andrew Geddes is Professor of Migration Studies at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, in Fiesole, Italy. Since 2017, he has also been the director of the Migration Policy Centre. His current work and research focus on the politics of global migration, mobility and asylum.

You've been researching and writing about politics and the politics of immigration and race for the last 30 years. Do you have a sense that the same issues, the same dynamics and dilemmas have been continually played out and that just the contexts have changed?

Yes, the debates do recur. The parameters of the debate, the framing of the debate, they all remain fairly consistent. But I think there's something else happening as well, which is that the traditional kind of mooring points of European political systems don't have the strength and force that they once used to have. The points of reference on the left and on the right have changed and become weaker. Voters have changed their behaviour. Issues like migration, which have been controversial for quite long periods of time, have become more polarizing and at times very highly salient. They have been salient in the past too, but I think what we're seeing now are dimensions of politicisation, which are linked to changes in European political systems more generally, in the way that people behave politically, which is destabilising some of the previous mooring points,

Migration has become an issue, which perhaps symbolises some of these changes and even may characterise a new dividing line. In the past, typical political dividing lines were perhaps class, rural and urban divides, or religion. These have become weaker as dividing lines around issues like migration, while European integration has become stronger. I think that is something that is quite distinctive and maybe also corrosive because polarisation makes it more difficult to find solutions or compromises. Politics then becomes more difficult. I think that you can see the recurring migration tropes, the scapegoating, basically everything that Nigel Farage does on a daily basis! I think what he symbolises and illustrates is that some of the traditional mooring points of British politics have changed. You can see that across Europe too, and probably also in the United States.

In your 2017 publication, you treated the Arab Spring as a watershed moment that altered EU migration governance. Can you explain briefly how this was manifest, and is it still relevant today?

This was a joint authored article with my colleague Leila Hadj-Abdou, and it was about changes in the EU migration governance 'path' as a response to the Arab Spring. You have two linked things. First of all, a greater emphasis on attempts to find a common EU pathway. Linked to that, you have the huge difficulty for the EU to develop solidarity mechanisms amongst themselves to share the responsibility. Meanwhile, there was a long-standing concern about the potential for large scale and uncontrollable migration. So there was a perceived need to cooperate, but also a struggle to establish an effective base for that cooperation. There was the agreement that something needed to be done. EU member states couldn't agree on internal mechanisms among themselves, such as sharing the responsibility. What they did as a group has effectively been a lowest common denominator or default response of 'externalising', which involves deals with neighbouring states to try and hold people up, with all the consequences that we then see in terms of the grotesque human rights abuses that have been occurring outside of the EU. So, the path changed.

The number of people who have died in the Mediterranean is absolutely staggering. We probably don't even know the full death toll and we don't even count those who would die in the desert or in neighbouring countries. I think that that is, in a way, a consequence of the European Union's decisions made as a result of the Arab Spring. intensified then by the large-scale Syrian displacement.

> **"The Maastricht Treaty was essentially a response to the end of the Cold War and a large-scale displacement from the former Soviet Union. This meant that European cooperation on migration has been driven by a fear or concern about potential large-scale migration."**

What do you think is driving immigration policies in Europe at the moment? Is it simply a fear of being culturally or demographically overwhelmed by large numbers of migrants?

One of the driving forces and origins of EU migration policy after the end of the Cold War and its subsequent development has been the fear of large-scale and uncontrollable migration. Migration has not typically occurred on anywhere near the scale it was envisaged, but that was the fear. *The Maastricht Treaty* was essentially a response to the end of the Cold War and a large-scale displacement from the former Soviet Union. This meant that European cooperation on migration has been driven by a fear or concern about potential large-scale migration.

Do you think there's a big disconnect in, or even a kind of cognitive dissonance between what countries say and legislate about immigration control and what they actually allow or do, particularly in the EU?

Cognitive dissonance is certainly one way of thinking about it. The Swedish sociologist Nils Brunsson wrote a book called *The Organization of Hypocrisy*. He argued that all organisations are hypocritical because they have to say and do different things. Organisations have to operate in complex environments where they are trying to deal with competing and at times contradictory interests. I think migration policy is like that. Governments say one thing and do other things, but then most organisations do that, and Brunsson refers to it as the "organisation of hypocrisy". On the one hand, governments want migration for the purpose of business and the economy but, on the other hand, their voters and constituents often want to see restrictions on migration. Governments are trying to balance these issues so the contradictions don't become so apparent to the public. I suppose the UK is a good example of how it all blows up, because the government decided a net migration target was a good idea. And so, every three or four months, you get beaten up for your complete failure to reach an arbitrary target you were never likely to achieve in the first place. Essentially, that's showing that you are trying to do a number of different things at the same time in relation to your economy, family roots, education and providing protection, most of which are beyond your control. In that kind of context, hypocrisy is almost an inherent condition of organisations. So it's not a kind of moral condemnation of organisations. It's saying, essentially, that migration is a highly complex issue where you're trying to appease at times contradictory interests.

What would you say, then, to those who suggest that the issue of migration is minor and also not problematic?

I would say they may be in a state of denial and neglecting the evidence. European societies, for example, have been, currently are, and will continue to be shaped by migration. It's an important contemporary political issue. To deny that reality is to deny one of the key policy challenges and ethical challenges that will confront European countries. Looking across Europe, at the moment, you can see a split-level response: on the one hand, there is a need for and reliance on migrants in key sectors of our economies, but at the same time there is the political discourse which is becoming more hostile to migration and migrants. Take Italy as an example, it's led by a far-right government, which was effectively proposing to seal the borders through military means

> **European societies [...] have been, currently are, and will continue to be shaped by migration. It's an important contemporary political issue.**

only a couple of years ago. Now, it's pursuing a policy where, on one side, it does deals with authoritarian states to try to stop people coming by boat, but at the same time it allows businesses to recruit large numbers of migrant workers – more than 450,000 migrant workers between 2023 and 2025.

The EU immediately and unhesitatingly accepted six million Ukrainian refugees in a matter of months. How do you think that appeared from the perspective of Asians and Africans?

Rather negatively. The Ukrainians are conforming to the logic of most refugee displacement: they're fleeing because of the full-scale Russian invasion, and they're moving to neighbouring countries. The key element of it was that, at world-record speed, the EU put in place generous provisions to ensure that Ukrainians were given full access to housing, education, health and employment, but no similar provisions have been made for smaller numbers of people moving from Africa or Asia. In fact, the EU seems to be doing everything it can to deter them.

> **At world-record speed, the EU put in place generous provisions to ensure that Ukrainians were given full access to housing, education, health and employment, but no similar provisions have been made for smaller numbers of people moving from Africa or Asia. In fact, the EU seems to be doing everything it can to deter them.**

The US/Mexican border is famously porous, but President Trump promised he would build a wall. He's promising that again in his current election campaign. What are your views on this?

Yes, Trump said he'd build the wall. But he didn't build the wall because the wall was already there. The US border was, and is, highly militarised. The investment in border security began to increase in the 1980s and continued under both Democratic and Republican administrations. But with over two million apprehensions last year alone, the question of the border's effectiveness is apparent. What we've seen over time is that border walls can have a deterrence effect, but they can also mean that the routes that migrants take become more difficult, more dangerous, and more deadly. So, the fortification of the US border and the attempts at enforcement have also corresponded with fairly significant levels of death at the border and high levels of violence associated with the border. We see border walls in Europe as well, with increasing attempts of fortification, fencing, and deployment of technology. Of course, another perverse outcome of intensified controls is the continued existence and proliferation of people smuggling.

> **The media plays a very important role in explaining to people what the migration issue is. It has created a very distorted image of people arriving in Europe by boat or crossing into the UK by boat, when the reality is that small numbers of people arrive either in Europe or the UK by small boats.**

When looking at the politicisation of migration issues, generally but especially in this year of elections, who is putting migration on the agenda so much?

I would say two things. First of all, the media plays a very important role in explaining to people what the migration issue is. It has created a very distorted image of people arriving in Europe by boat or crossing into the UK by boat, when the reality is that small numbers of people arrive either in Europe or the UK by small boats. They create a very distorted impression of what is happening. But those images and representations trigger people's responses and reactions at a more profound level. People's worldviews and political opinions are formed early in life, and particularly influenced by early life factors, such as their experiences of education. It's not that people are making and remaking their opinions about migration on a daily basis in accordance with what they see in the newspapers or on social media. Instead, already existing dispositions are being triggered. There are some sections of the population who, when they see the images of what might appear to be chaotic, disorderly, dangerous crossings are concerned about it and activated by that. Most people probably already know what they think about these issues. The media can strongly influence the way in which issues become salient. Migration has been highly salient at times. People have been activated and mobilised on specific issues, and migration issues were highly salient in 2015 and 2016, and have become more salient now as well.

Do you have any comments on the role of the pollsters and social media in particular?

Social media is interesting because it is ubiquitous and is also probably a very good example of channeling peoples' existing views. This is because we tend to

exist in social media environments, or bubbles, where we communicate with people with similar dispositions to our own. And if you operate on social media, you can go down your own particular rabbit hole, often directed by the embedded algorithms, and find yourself with content that reinforces your perspective. So, you might begin by being concerned about migration, and that concern is then algorithmised, let's say, to produce more and more content, which can exacerbate the concerns that you have about these issues. And this could potentially radicalise some people because of the information that they find as a consequence of the effect of social media algorithms.

> **"[On social media] you might begin by being concerned about migration, and that concern is then algorithmised [...] to produce more and more content, which can exacerbate the concerns that you have about these issues. And this could potentially radicalise some people because of the information that they find as a consequence of [...] social media algorithms."**

As for pollsters, I'm not sure of their impact. I use opinion data from polls all the time in my research. Many polling organisations are asking the same kind of questions over long periods of time. If it's push polling, meaning asking questions which are quite leading, then it would create a distorted snapshot of opinions at a particular point in time that could be misused to influence or reinforce political agendas. Generally, though, the survey evidence from a lot of the social survey data can offer a fairly good indication of long-term trends in public attitudes and public opinion. One of the surprising things is that attitudes to migration are relatively stable. If anything, over the last 20 to 25 years, across Europe, they have become more favorable. People find that a bit hard to get their heads round, but it's true.

This is because there's a difference between attitudes and salience. I would say the evidence is quite strong that attitudes to migration are relatively stable because those attitudes are formed relatively early in life, and once formed are difficult to shift. So you'd expect them to be relatively stable, and you'd also expect education to have a positive effect on attitudes to migration. And there's been an expansion of education. Why, then, do we see a rise of radical right-wing parties? Well, the issue here is migration's salience, because a radical right-wing party might have been attracting four or five percent of the vote. Now it's attracting 15 or 20 percent. In coalitional political systems that can be transformative.
And so, all of a sudden, what you're seeing is quite significant sections of the population, but not necessarily majorities, whose mobilisation becomes sometimes quite intense and has important political effects. So I think two things can be true at the same time: attitudes can become more favorable and there's not a tidal wave of negativity, but anti-immigration sentiment is also being mobilised among sections of the population because of the issue of salience among those sections of the population that already have a disposition to be concerned about migration.

So how would you define salience?

It's the level of public attention to an issue. For immigration, the level of salience has gone up and down. In 2015 and 2016, the level of public attention was extremely high, then it obviously dropped off during the pandemic, and now it's again one of the top two issues in many countries across the EU. The level of public attention to the issue – its salience – is different to attitudes to migration more generally.

Do you feel we are moving into a new era of migration and responses to migratory pressures?

There's a sense that we are moving towards a 'new normal', at least from the perspective of high-income destination countries. This new normal is fear or concern about the potential for large-scale migration, particularly by people from Africa and the Middle East. So there is a racialised element to this. At the same time, there is and will be a need in high-income countries for migrant labour. In Europe, there seems to be an idea that the whole of Africa is sitting on its suitcases waiting to move to Europe, which is a completely distorted view of African migration. But, to some extent, it has some resonance when people just look at the demographic projections in Africa and assume everyone in Africa would want to move to Europe. It's obviously untrue, but it creates fear and alarm, including among some political leaders and policy makers. As I said earlier, you end up in a situation like the one in Italy, with a far-right government and a very large-scale expansion of legal recruitment of labour migrants.

There's a wide range of opinions about what kind of impact climate change and environmental degradation will have on immigration globally. What's your view?

I like to think that I'm a realist rather than an alarmist. We know that climate change has already had effects on migration, but it's often very difficult to disentangle those effects from economic and political changes more broadly. That's one of the most significant issues. The key drivers of migration are economic and political. Climate interacts with underlying economic and political drivers. Detecting specific climate signals, then, can be more difficult, particularly in the context of slow-onset change. For disasters, there's a more immediate shock

> **"The key drivers of migration are economic and political. Climate interacts with underlying economic and political drivers. Detecting specific climate signals, then, can be more difficult, particularly in the context of slow-onset change."**

or trigger mechanism, but most migration linked to climate change can be more difficult to detect because of its intersection with political and economic changes.

We also know that most people affected by the onset of climate change will move internally within states. Those who move internally, move typically to cities, so this is rural-to-urban migration. Most who move internationally will move to neighbouring countries, so it'll be relatively short-distance international migration. Long-distance international migration will be relatively rare. I think that's a realistic understanding of the dynamics. It means that the effects seem likely to be focused on parts of Africa and parts of Asia, and they are already happening. Some of that will generate displacement, which might make its way towards Europe. One of the significant issues, I think, is that in the context of climate change, people may well be less able to migrate. You may end up with people who are effectively trapped as a consequence of climate change and are involuntarily immobile. But in this and similar contexts, it's important to see migration as part of the solution. Fixating on the numbers of potential migrants is dangerous. Apocalyptic predictions are inaccurate and can be deeply damaging because they distort the debate about migration and climate change. It's very difficult to put a number on the people who might move. Clearly, we should be concerned about this issue, but there also seem to be things that could be done now to offset the risk of a more catastrophic breakdown in the future. The risk is that the whole debate about migration and climate change is dominated and distorted by short-term concerns. If our migration policies are typically short-term frameworks, then this can make it more difficult to think in the longer term. More localised responses focused on livelihood strategies can potentially offer quite effective remedies, which don't fundamentally resolve the underlying issues of the climate crisis, but can provide some kind of framework where people are able to adapt to the situation in which they find themselves. Migration is necessarily part of this.

This year's a big one for elections around the world.

> **"In the context of climate change, people may well be less able to migrate. You may end up with people who are effectively trapped as a consequence of climate change and are involuntarily immobile."**

Do you see a growing rise in populism around the world, not just in Europe? And if yes, what are the implications for the future of migration and asylum?

Populism takes different forms. I don't think we would ever be able to identify populist international groups that are coherent in their organisational identity– there's a lot of diversity. Even in Europe, we say that populism has become a very distinctive political force, but actually there are a lot of variances between and also within these organisations. Some of them really don't get on with each other. So, there are some splits within it, but it's certainly a rising force. In Europe, South America and Asia, populism can have very, very different dynamics. In the US, Trump has clear populist tendencies in his anti-elite posturing. The European elections in June 2024 did see a stronger performance by populists and we now have to see the impact on the approach of the new EU Commission and its direction of travel in relation to migration. This actually seems likely to confirm what we're already seeing in terms of deterrence, externalisation, human rights abuses and deaths in the Mediterranean. I fear that this won't change because that's the direction of travel that's firmly established and that will be reinforced by the mainstreaming of populist politics.

> **"Populists have gone from the margins to the mainstream. They are now governing across Europe, have become normalised, and their opinions are now seen in mainstream parties on the centre-left and centre-right that adopt populist language and rhetoric."**

Populists have gone from the margins to the mainstream. They are now governing across Europe, have become normalised, and their opinions are now seen in mainstream parties on the centre-left and centre-right that adopt populist language and rhetoric.

We may also see a populist transformation of the United States if Trump is elected. Actually, if he really did just half of what he's proposing to do in terms of roundups and deportations, it would go beyond populism and become really brutal authoritarianism. In other parts of the world, we just see populism take a different form. In Mexico and South America, populist politics could take a different form. But in the major high-income destination countries, they have become very mainstream.

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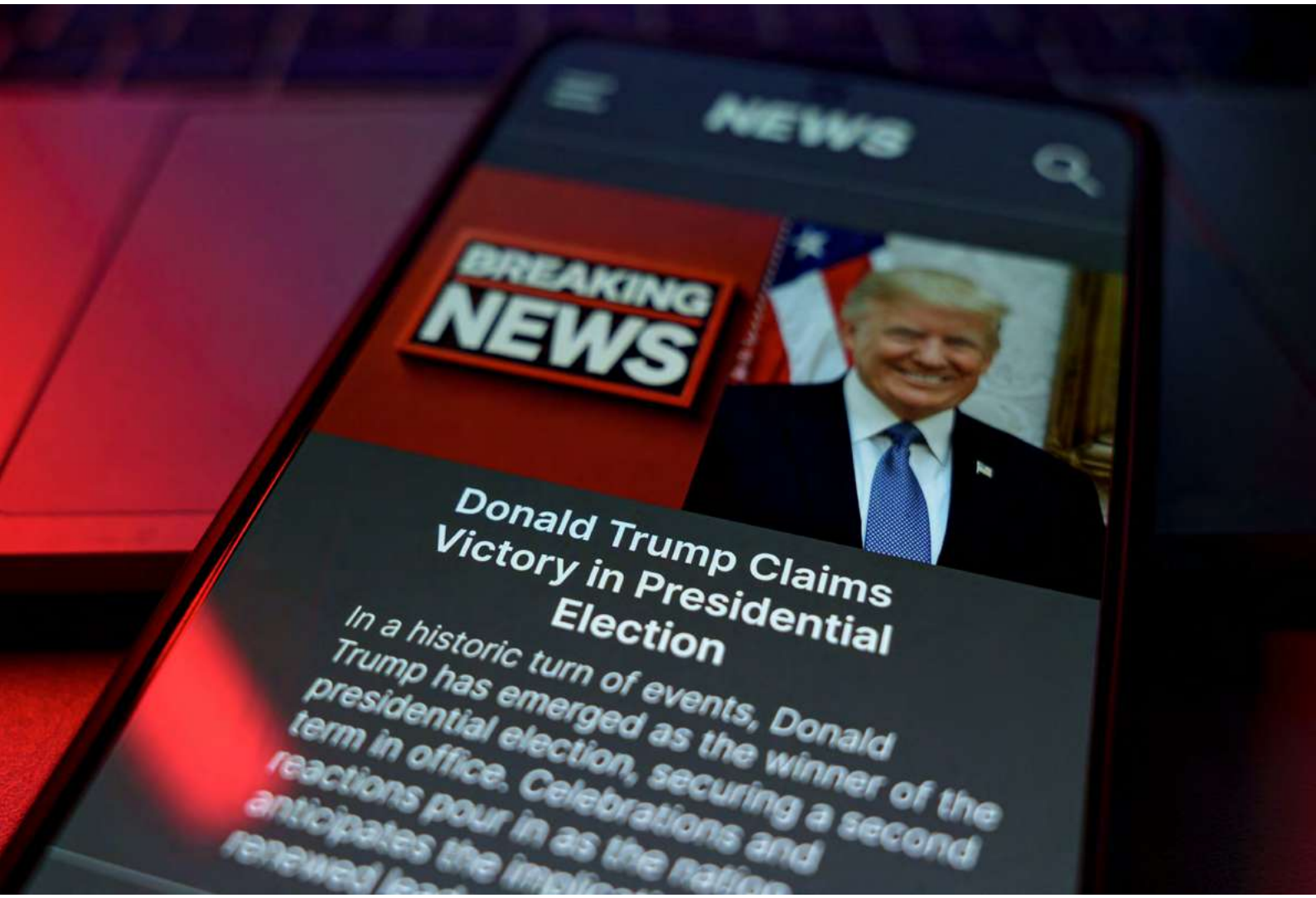
USA: "We are going to fix our borders," President-elect Donald Trump announced in his victory speech in Florida on 6 November 2024 – immediately after being declared the winner of the US presidential election. He vowed to bring what he calls "unprecedented order" to the US's southern border and launch the nation's largest mass deportation operation of undocumented immigrants on his first day in office. [See *Keeping track in The Americas*, page 62; *Normalising the extreme*, page 264 and the *Thematic snapshot* on page 192].



Section 4

Resisting or normalising the extreme?

As every year, this Mixed Migration Review features these two complementary reports: *Normalising the extreme* and *Resisting the extreme* chart the negative and positive state-led interventions and policies that directly impact refugees and migrants on the move. Regrettably, as the number of 'extreme' anti-migrant or anti-asylum seeker actions and policies mount each year, *Normalising the extreme* is a report that is easily filled. Meanwhile, *Resisting the extreme*, showcasing examples of positive pro-migrant actions or policies, is far harder to populate with concrete, state-led examples that run against the dominant negative trends, especially in this year of mass elections, when anti-migrant sentiment has been so prominent all around the world.

Normalising the extreme

Over successive volumes of the Mixed Migration Review, a depressing pattern has emerged: a migration-related action or policy that inspires outrage or condemnation today may, in the space of just a year or two, become accepted practice. This phenomenon of "normalising the extreme" means that some of the most egregious acts and policies documented this year, far from being disturbing anomalies, may instead serve as a tideline for what may soon be regarded as unremarkable or mainstream. Bearing that in mind, the incidents documented in this section – while reprehensible in themselves – also offer a wider warning of worse to come.

Peter Grant

1. The politicisation of migration

With an unprecedented number of people going to the polls this year, it is not surprising that anti-migrant rhetoric reached a new low in 2024. Perhaps, the most egregious instance of this occurred in the **United States** (US), with former president Donald Trump and other senior members of his campaign team spreading false claims that Haitian immigrants in the town of Springfield, Ohio, had eaten people's pets. This misinformation only served to exacerbate communal tensions and, reportedly, left many Haitians in the town fearful to leave their homes out of fear of attack.[1] Trump has also weaponised other accusations to frame migrants as a security threat, describing them in the presidential debate with the Democrat candidate Kamala Harris as "millions of people pouring into our country from prisons and jails, from mental institutions and insane asylums."[2]

The politicisation of immigration for electoral advantage is hardly unique to the US, however. In Europe, ahead of the European Union (EU) elections, the resurgent far-right in countries such as France and Germany achieved sweeping gains on the back of anti-migrant campaigns. But, while xenophobic sentiments have been leveraged by parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD) for years, there was a marked shift in the willingness of centrist parties to mobilise similar language themselves. In **Germany**, back in October 2023, chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that "we must finally deport on a large scale those who have no right to stay in Germany"[3] – a position that has further hardened following a number of widely publicised attacks by foreigners in the country, including the killing of a policeman by an Afghan national in June 2024 and the deadly stabbing of several people in August by a Syrian asylum seeker. The increasing hostility towards immigration was not only reflected in the AfD's record gains in the European elections, but also in calls from established parties – such as the centre-right Christian Democratic Union of Germany – for asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Syria to be denied entry to the country.[4]

In **France**, Emmanuel Macron sought to position himself as a sensible moderate between the "extremes" of the left and right-wing: with this in mind, he attacked the progressive-leaning Nouveau Front Populaire (NFP) as "totally immigrationist", a term previously used by the far-right to denigrate Macron's policies. The attack was used on the basis of the NFP's proposals to expand rights and protections for asylum seekers.[5] Studies have demonstrated, however, that efforts by mainstream parties to woo voters by mimicking anti-immigration positions are more likely to entrench support for the far-right.[6]

In **India**, Prime Minister Narendra Modi – whose Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has long targeted the country's Muslim minority with language presenting them as immigrants or outsiders – appeared to escalate his attacks ahead of national elections, describing them variously as "infiltrators" and accusing the opposition of committing "vote jihad" by mobilising "a certain community" against him. What was notable was that, while this rhetoric previously tended to emanate from his associates, this time it came directly from Modi himself.[7]

1 Rohrlich, J. (2024) Racial tensions in Springfield have simmered for months. Trump's rhetoric now has Haitians there in a full-blown 'panic'. The Independent.
2 Hoffman, R. (2024) Harris-Trump presidential debate transcript. ABC News.
3 AP (2023) Scholz says that Germany needs to expand deportations of rejected asylum-seekers.
4 Nöstlinger, N. (2024) Migration smashes into German elections after deadly knife attack. Politico.
5 Millar, P. (2024) How France's far right changed the debate on immigration. France 24.
6 May, A. & Czymara, C. (2024) Mainstream parties adopting far-right rhetoric simply increases votes for far-right parties. The Loop.
7 Mogul, R. (2024) India's election campaign turns negative as Modi and ruling party embrace Islamophobic rhetoric. CNN.

Strikingly, though the BJP won the election, Modi lost the majority he had held before – though this loss of support was likely driven by the country's economic woes.[8]

A particular flashpoint in India's deepening communal divisions is the controversial *Citizenship Amendment Act* (CAA), passed in 2019 but only formally implemented just before the elections took place. The CAA provides for an accelerated pathway to citizenship for migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, provided they are either Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Parsi or Jain. Muslims, on the other hand, are not included. The legislation, besides potentially violating the country's constitutional guarantee of religious equality, poses a further complicating factor in the entanglement of India's communal domestic politics and its asylum and migration policy.[9] While the CAA has been justified in humanitarian terms, it is in marked contrast to India's summary detention and deportation of the predominantly Muslim Rohingya population seeking refuge in the country.[10]

Rohingya also found themselves scapegoated in **Indonesia** ahead of national elections there. The number of Rohingya travelling from Bangladesh or Myanmar, though still relatively modest, has increased since November 2023. While originally welcomed in the Muslim-majority country, given their persecution in Myanmar, public opinion has become increasingly hostile, with reported pushbacks by coastguards and mass protests in Aceh.[11] This animosity has in large part been sustained by a coordinated online hate campaign targeting Rohingya. While disagreement had occasionally flared up in previous years, these were usually easily managed, but the recent spread of misinformation had escalated tensions to unprecedented levels in the build-up to national elections in February 2024.[12] Analysts feared that the failure of the Indonesian government to effectively challenge these toxic narratives could result in the presence of Rohingya becoming a "ticking time bomb" in future.[13]

In **South Africa**, meanwhile, where the issue of immigration has become increasingly divisive in recent years amidst growing hostility to Zimbabweans and others living in the country, the build-up to national elections was characterised by the deployment of anti-migrant rhetoric from across the political spectrum.[14] This arguably reflects the troubling emergence of an anti-migrant consensus, with no major party appearing to champion their rights. Well before the election season began, in November 2023, the government announced that it would be withdrawing from the *1951 Refugee Convention* and the *1967 Protocol* while it undertook a sweeping reform of its immigration system, including the repatriation of refugees to countries it deems safe. While South Africa has made clear its intention to rejoin the conventions once this process is completed, it will likely opt out of certain clauses so it can restrict the right of refugees to employment, education and citizenship.[15]

Citizenship under threat

In February 2024, in response to the rise in irregular migration from Comoros and Madagascar to the French territory of Mayotte, the French government announced its plan to amend the so-called *droit du sol*. This birth citizenship has long been an inalienable right, automatically granting citizenship to anyone born on French soil; however, the amendment will exempt the children of foreigners born in Mayotte, in an apparent effort to reduce the lure of Mayotte as a destination for migrants from Comoros or Madagascar.[16] Despite assurances from the Macron government that it would only be applied in Mayotte, left-leaning critics have warned that it could be a "Pandora's box" that could see citizenship rights eroded for the children of foreigners elsewhere in mainland France – a concern that appeared to be confirmed by calls from the far-right for it to be extended to the whole of the country.[17] In **Sweden**, meanwhile, the government announced its plan to introduce a programme to pay "foreign-born" Swedish passport holders to emigrate as an approach to reduce its net migration figures: it already has a similar initiative in place to encourage refugees to return to their country of origin voluntarily.[18]

These developments are especially troubling given the increasing traction that the concept of "remigration" has gained. In Germany, leaked reports at the beginning of the 2024 of AfD representatives discussing a "master plan" to deport millions of asylum seekers and migrants from the

8 Ellis-Petersen, H. (2024) Modi loses parliamentary majority in Indian election. The Guardian.
9 Hardy, E. (2024) The role of migration in a year of crucial elections. Carnegie Endowment.
10 OCHR (2024) India must end racial discrimination against Rohingya, cease forced deportation and arbitrary detention, urges UN Committee.
11 Ratcliffe, R. & Syakriah, A. (2024) The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees. The Guardian; Human Rights Watch (2024) Indonesia: Protect newly arrived Rohingya refugees.
12 Ratcliffe, R. & Syakriah, A. (2024) The online hate campaign turning Indonesians against Rohingya refugees. The Guardian.
13 Nugroho, J. (2024) Rohingya crisis in Indonesia a 'ticking time bomb' if political indifference, misinformation continue: analysts. South China Morning Post.
14 Human Rights Watch (2024) South Africa: Toxic rhetoric endangers migrants.
15 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Quarterly mixed migration update: Eastern and Southern Africa / Egypt and Yemen: Quarter 4 2023.
16 Fabricius, P. (2024) France plans to terminate Mayotte's 'droit du sol'. Institute for Security Studies.
17 Willsher, K. (2024) 'It's non-negotiable': French MPs angry at move to restrict citizenship on Mayotte. The Guardian.
18 First Post (2024) Sweden plans to pay "foreign-born" passport holders to leave the country in an effort to cut migration.

country were met with condemnation from many mainstream politicians.[19] Yet, since then, far-right parties in Austria and Germany have campaigned explicitly on the concept of "remigration" (a phrase that some believe has served to soften the harsh reality of deportations). Ahead of regional elections in east Germany in September 2024, the AfD campaigned with posters showing a plane in a blue sky with the slogan "Summer, sun, remigration".[20] Though its spread has been noticeable in a number of European countries, the term was deployed in the US by Donald Trump in September when he pledged to "stop all migrant flights", "suspend refugee resettlement" and "return Kamala's [Harris, his opponent in the November 2024 elections] illegal migrants to their home countries [also known as remigration]".[21] Critics have expressed concerns that this could signal his intent to extend deportations beyond the undocumented migrant population, particularly following comments by his advisor Stephen Miller promising a "turbocharged" denaturalisation programme.[22]

2. Border violence and pushbacks

Border violence has long served as the blunt end of migration management, often carried out covertly or with a measure of deniability (for example, through the use of masked or plainclothed vigilantes rather than uniformed security forces). A shocking feature in recent years, however, is the increasing silence that abuses, including pushbacks, appear to inspire from countries and organisations that were once far more vocal in their condemnation. This is certainly the case in the European Union, where reported abuses by border forces in certain countries led, in the past, to official expressions of concern and calls for these practices to end. Now, however, the offending countries are able to carry out these acts with little in the way of consequences, even when major abuses have been exposed. While surveillance has only increased in many respects, protection monitoring of those travelling towards and through the region remains opaque. Many of those who die along the route are buried in unmarked graves; recent research by *The Guardian* found that, in the last decade, at least 1,015 people who had died along the EU's borders had been buried without ever being formally identified. The absence of a formal system to support relatives seeking to determine their loved ones' fate means that many families of migrants are never able to find out what happened to them.[23]

For instance, though **Greece** has been accused of carrying out illicit pushbacks for more than two decades,[24] the practice has evolved in a number of ways in recent years. Besides increasing in scale – the number of suspected incidents taking place is far greater now, with the organisation Aegean Boat Report claiming that almost 26,000 people were pushed back by the Greek coastguard in 2023[25] – it has also reportedly extended to include not only new arrivals intercepted close to the land border or at sea, but also migrants apprehended further inland who have been transferred and then pushed back towards Türkiye.[26] Perhaps most fundamental, however, is the increasing impunity with which Greek security forces and armed proxies are now able to operate. The significant condemnation that emerged from the EU from 2015 onwards in response to various reports of gross and systematic human rights abuses being carried out at the border – from theft and humiliation to beatings and abandonment of migrants in the ocean[27] – has become notably more muted. While reputable research and media outlets have repeatedly documented the deaths of dozens of migrants who drowned after being thrown into the sea by security forces or masked individuals,[28] Greek authorities continue to deny that these abuses are taking place in the face of mounting evidence. In August 2024, a vessel carrying migrants that reportedly failed to stop in response to orders from the Greek coastguard was shot at, with one migrant on board killed by a bullet.[29]

In this context, it is not surprising that other countries have also been implicated in violence and mistreatment of migrants at their borders, including in the Balkans, since the region became a popular place of transit. **Croatia**, for example, has been accused of egregious abuses at its border for some years, but neighbouring countries appear to be adopting similar tactics as policies of containment have spread eastwards. While **Hungary** has pushed back tens of thousands of migrants into Serbia,[30] for instance, **Serbia** has itself been guilty of pushing back migrants into Bosnia Herzegovina and, more recently, into North Macedonia. In February 2024, video footage emerged of dozens of men who had been stripped down to their underwear in near-freezing temperatures and

19 Connolly, K. & Kassam, A. (2024) Germans take to streets after AfD meeting on mass deportation plan. The Guardian.
20 Kassam, A. (2024) How remigration became a buzzword for global far right. The Guardian.
21 First Post (2024) Trump vows to end migrant "invasion" of US, suspend refugee resettlement programme.
22 Dias, I. (2024) Trump just introduced a new, dangerous immigration proposal. Mother Jones.
23 The Guardian (2024) More than 1,000 unmarked graves discovered along EU migration routes.
24 ECCHR (2022) Analyzing Greek pushbacks: Over 20 years of concealed state policy without accountability.
25 Aegean Boat Report (2023) Annual report 2023.
26 Human Rights Watch (2020) Greece: Investigate pushbacks, collective expulsions.
27 Amnesty International (2021) Greece: Pushbacks and violence against refugees and migrants are de facto border policy.
28 Smith, L. & Steele, B. (2024) Greek coastguard threw migrants overboard to their deaths, witnesses say. BBC.
29 Euractiv (2024) Greek coastguard fires on migrant boat, one dead.
30 Kovačević, N. (2024) Overview of the main changes since the previous report update: Serbia. AIDA and ECRE.

forced back across the border. The Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights condemned the footage and identified it as "indicative of a wider, worrying trend"[31] – but despite this, in June the EU signed a formal agreement with Serbia on migration management.[32]

Cyprus has also been accused of pushbacks, primarily of Syrians departing by boat from Lebanon. Cypriot authorities have been accused of intercepting vessels and forcing back hundreds of migrants towards Lebanon, often without food, water or fuel and, in some cases, allegedly at gunpoint – charges that government officials denied.[33] In June, authorities also refused to allow in dozens of migrants stranded in the buffer zone between its territory and Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus, arguing that it could become another avenue for irregular migration.[34] Cyprus has also been accused of collaborating with **Lebanon**'s coastguards, with the latter reportedly engaging in "pullbacks" of migrant vessels and subsequently deporting Syrians on board across the border from Lebanon into Syria.[35] Notwithstanding these abuses, in May 2024 Lebanon received a €1 billion package of financial assistance from the EU. Some of it was allocated to basic service provision towards refugees, IDPs and other vulnerable groups, but the package also included funding to support border and migration management.[36]

The use of pullbacks is also symptomatic of the increasingly pervasive outsourcing of migration management by the EU to partner countries in North Africa who, in return for various financial and political concessions, intercept migrants departing from their shores towards Europe and forcibly return them to their own territories (in most cases, either to be detained in brutal conditions or violently expelled). This is especially the case with Italy, whose much-vaunted reduction in migrant arrivals during 2024 has been attributed to the EU's agreements with **Libya** and **Tunisia**. Both deals have resulted in an extraordinary uptick in the number of migrants en route to Italy apprehended in the Central Mediterranean.

Border violence is often enabled by a raft of technologies, such as drones and thermal cameras, as well as the hard infrastructure of walls and fences. The latter, in particular, serve symbolic as well as practical functions as a signal of tightened immigration policies. In the **US**, the most extreme expression of anti-migrant policy is being played out on the southern border between the state of Texas and Mexico. Texas governor Greg Abbott, who over a number of years has overseen the militarisation of the border and the introduction of a variety of harsh preventative measures such as serrated metal buoys, announced that he would be tripling the length of the state's concertina wire fence – including, controversially, at the border with the neighbouring state of New Mexico.[37] Coming at a cost of billions of dollars, the extreme violence of Abbott's Operation Lone Star has resulted in the reported injury of hundreds of migrants. Human rights groups have reported, from mid-2023 onwards, a disturbing pattern of "less-than-lethal" violence being carried out against migrants without any provocation. Various reports have documented accounts of US border security firing rubber bullets, gas balls and pepper spray through the wire at groups of migrants, including children, and engaging in verbal and physical mistreatment of apprehended migrants.[38]

Perhaps the most blatant use of violence, though, continues to take place at the border of **Saudi Arabia**. The government's systematic expulsion of undocumented migrants in the country, carried out over an extended period, is well documented: since 2017, at least 21 million migrants have been deported from the country, including around half a million Ethiopians.[39] However, organisations including the Mixed Migration Centre, Human Rights Watch and Mwatana for Human Rights have documented a more recent, even more disturbing pattern of violence at the border. Dating back to August 2022, evidence suggests that more than 10,000 migrants may have been killed as a result of these actions, ranging from large-scale and indiscriminate mortar attacks on groups to point-blank shootings and violence.[40] While attracting significant attention in the international media, these reports appeared to do little in the way of halting the abuse, with a follow-up report published by the Mixed Migration Centre in June 2024 documenting further intentional killings and maiming of migrants by border guards, in some cases involving the use of heavy weaponry.[41] A key factor in this may have been the somewhat circumspect response of the US and the EU, limited in public to calls for an investigation into the allegations, while the UN's response has been

31 Fallon, K. & Tondo, L. (2024) Videos show migrants stripped of clothing in freezing temperatures at Serbian border. The Guardian.
32 European Commission (2024) EU signs agreement with Serbia to strengthen collaboration in migration and border management.
33 InfoMigrants (2024) Syrian migrants describe ordeal between Lebanon and Cyprus.
34 InfoMigrants (2024) Cyprus: Migrants stranded in UN buffer zone; Wallis, E. (2024) UN urges Cyprus to start asylum process for migrants in buffer zone. InfoMigrants.
35 Human Rights Watch (2024) Lebanon/Cyprus: Refugees pulled back, expelled, then forced back to Syria.
36 European Commission (2024) President von der Leyen reaffirms EU's strong support for Lebanon and its people and announces a €1 billion package of EU funding.
37 Rissman, K. (2024) Which Mexico are you? New Mexico furious after Texas installs razor wire along its border. The Independent.
38 Isacson, A. & Verduzco, A. L. (2024) Soldiers confronting migrants: Texas's dangerous precedent. WOLA.
39 Adugna, G. (2022) Half a million Ethiopian migrants have been deported from Saudi Arabia in 5 years—what they go through. The Conversation.
40 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Indifference and impunity: 10 months on, Saudi border killings of migrants continue.
41 Ibid.

limited to isolated expressions of concern rather than a concerted push for justice. It has been suggested that the muted response to these widespread, egregious abuses may be rooted in 'cynical realpolitik', with Saudi Arabia simply too important geopolitically to be meaningfully held to account.[42]

The human cost of the EU's border closures

Border closures have increasingly been justified as a proportionate response to the 'weaponisation' of migration, as recently enshrined in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (discussed further below). One of the most contentious elements in this new legislation is the permission of states to "apply derogations from the common procedure" where mass migration appears to have been "instrumentalised for political purposes".[43] The provision appears to condone situations such as the continued closure of the Poland-Belarus border, where thousands of migrants have been stranded in deteriorating and life-threatening conditions between the two countries, with **Poland** refusing to grant entry despite their clear humanitarian need. The humanitarian crisis there, beginning in the summer of 2021, has resulted in dozens of deaths and many more disappearances of migrants after being trapped without adequate food, shelter, medical care or clothing in freezing conditions for months.[44]

Despite the ousting of the right-wing Law and Justice party in the October 2023 elections by the more centrist Civic Coalition, headed by Donald Tusk, thousands more pushbacks by Polish border guards have been reported since then.[45] While Tusk has called attention to the continued crisis at the border in security terms, blaming **Russia** for the so-called "hybrid warfare", he has made little mention of the humanitarian plight faced by the many migrants still caught in the buffer zone.[46] In July 2024, the Polish government passed legal amendments exempting security personnel from criminal liability when using firearms to repel "a direct and unlawful attack" – a move condemned by human rights groups as "a licence to kill".[47]

Despite being in clear violation of international law, the failure of the European Commission to meaningfully condemn the situation at the Polish border suggests the use of pushbacks is becoming increasingly accepted in Poland and in many other countries across the EU where the practice is also carried out, with varying degrees of visibility.[48] Poland's actions at the border with **Belarus** appear to have provided **Finland** with a template. Here, faced with a similar uptick in migration that authorities have blamed on Russia, the government passed the 'pushback law' (the *Act on Temporary Measures to Combat Instrumentalised Migration*) in July 2024. The legislation permits border forces to summarily return migrants who enter Finnish territory from Russia without offering them the opportunity to claim asylum first.[49] Latvia made similar legal amendments the year before to effectively sanction pushbacks of migrants into Russia.[50]

3. Detention and forced returns

The dynamics of deportations and forced returns are often rooted in a range of factors, from deep-seated issues such as geopolitical rivalries or historical discrimination to recent shifts in policy or public opinion. In some cases, a crackdown may represent the continuation of a long-held approach towards the migrant population or a radical departure from previous policies, triggered by a particular set of events. As with other components of a country's migration policy, the function can be highly performative – for example, if authorities wish to signal the beginning of a "hostile environment" or deter other potential migrants. Irregular migration has also been used to justify increasingly draconian policies, including the rollback of protections for minors intercepted in the EU. The passage of the *EU Pact on Migration and Asylum* prompted the UN to call for member states to ensure that the rights of children were not undermined, given the apparent weakening of safeguards preventing the detention of underage migrants.[51] Leaked internal documents ahead of the passage of the dact suggest that some countries, led by France, were lobbying for its provisions to explicitly allow child detention, even from birth.[52]

Libya has been notorious for years for the systematic use of violence, torture, sexual assault and extortion in its

42 Ibid.
43 González Enríquez, C. (2024) The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum: Context, challenges and limitations. Real Instituto Elcano.
44 Holt, E. (2024) Conditions worsen for Belarus migrants stuck in 'death zone' on EU border. IPS News; Human Constantia (2024) [Illegal pushbacks and rights violations have become a widespread tool for managing migration to EU countries].
45 Holt, E. (2024) Op. Cit.
46 Gera, V. (2024) Polish activists criticize Tusk's government for tough border policies and migrant pushbacks. AP.
47 Ciobanu, C. (2024) Poland passes law granting soldiers immunity when using firearms at Belarus border. Balkan Insight.
48 Grześkowiak, M. (2024) Pushbacks from Europe's borders enter the mainstream. Verfassungsblog.
49 ECRE (2024) Finland adopts controversial "pushback law".
50 Amnesty International (2023) Latvia 2023.
51 OCHR (2024) Child immigration detention must be prohibited following adoption of EU migration and asylum pact, UN experts say.
52 Miñano, L., Maggiore, M. & Hansens, P. (2024) France led lobbying to detain children in EU migration pact.

various detention centres by security forces, militias and smugglers. Many of those being held in these facilities are migrants who have been intercepted at sea by the coastguard and returned to land. Besides providing continued financial assistance to Libya to support these activities, the EU and various member states collaborate directly with the country through surveillance and coordination to ensure migrant vessels are apprehended: according to a report by Lighthouse Reports published at the beginning of 2024, the EU migration agency Frontex had communicated the location of boats on no fewer than 2,000 separate occasions over the previous three years.[53] Extraordinarily, it has even been accused of sharing coordinates with a notorious militia, Tareq Bin Zayed, to enable pullbacks to Libya, despite the fact that the group is widely accused of egregious human rights abuses. Interception by its vessels, in the words of one expert, is "more of a kidnapping than a rescue".[54]

However, while Libya has long been an outlier in the degree of abuse suffered by migrants in the country, this appears to be changing as migrants in **Tunisia** have also been exposed to a dramatic escalation in violence. As in Libya, the EU has been accused of being complicit in these abuses due to the considerable amounts of money it has channelled into funding 'migration management' in the country. Particularly disturbing were the recent reports of systematic torture and sexual assault being carried out against migrants in Tunisia's detention facilities by members of its national guard, who receive funding directly from the EU.[55] The scale and systematic nature of these abuses have prompted Tunisian opposition groups to file a case against the government with the International Criminal Court, while the EU faces growing pressure to launch a formal investigation into these alleged abuses.[56]

Since the crackdown first began in 2023, hundreds of migrants in Tunisia have also been abandoned at the border with Morocco or Libya, including dozens who have died or disappeared in the process.[57] While Tunisia is not alone in carrying out these "desert dumps" – **Algeria**, for instance, has carried out expulsions to Niger for years, with thousands of migrants abandoned during the year at 'Point Zero', resulting in a number of deaths and disappearances[58] – its adoption points to a troubling normalisation of this practice in North Africa and beyond, with countries such as **Morocco** and **Mauritania** (all recipients of EU assistance to support migration management) also recently implicated in similar abuse.[59] Meanwhile, **Egypt**, though hosting an estimated 500,000 people who crossed the border from Sudan following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, has also been accused of launching a crackdown against Sudanese in the country.[60] According to a report by the *New Humanitarian*, authorities have established a covert network of detention facilities where Sudanese are being held before being expelled back into Sudan.[61]

Violent expulsions, arbitrary detention and other abuses towards migrants are often motivated and enabled by structural racism. In the case of the **Dominican Republic**, the history of the mistreatment of migrants from neighbouring **Haiti** goes back decades, but has raised further questions since the latter's descent into civil disorder and gang-orchestrated fighting. Despite the clear dangers in the country, the number of confirmed deportations picked up pace in 2024, with almost 100,000 Haitians (including 5,000 children and adolescents) deported in the first eight months alone. The expulsions, which have frequently been accompanied by degrading treatment, beatings and detention in squalid conditions, appear to have escalated as a result of the government's announcement, in October 2023, that all visas for Haitian nationals would be suspended, closing off a key pathway for regular migration.[62] The Dominican president, Luis Abinader, vowed ahead of national elections in May 2024 to build a wall at the border with Haiti and impose checkpoints to prevent an "avalanche" of Haitians from entering the country.[63]

Both **Pakistan** and **Iran** have offered sanctuary to millions of registered refugees, residency card holders and undocumented migrants from **Afghanistan** for decades, even if deportations have taken place repeatedly throughout this period and have periodically threatened the imposition of tighter restrictions. However, both countries appear to have entered a new phase in their treatment of their Afghan populations. Pakistan, in particular, with the launch of its *Illegal Foreigners' Repatriation Plan* in October 2023, has signalled a substantive policy shift towards what could eventually lead to the return of the large majority of Afghans in the country.[64] The plan is scheduled to be rolled out in several phases, beginning with the deportation of undocumented Afghans by 1 November 2023 and the introduction

53 Lighthouse Reports (2024) 2,200 Frontex emails to Libya.
54 Marsi, F. et al. (2023) European powers allow shadowy Libyan group to return refugees. Al Jazeera.
55 The Guardian (2024) The brutal truth behind Italy's migrant reduction: beatings and rape by EU-funded forces in Tunisia.
56 The Guardian (2024) Europe has questions to answer over migrant abuse in Tunisia, say MEPs and activists.
57 Lewis, D. (2024) Exclusive: Migrant expulsions from Tunisia to Libya fuel extortion, abuse, UN says. Reuters.
58 Boitiaux, C. (2024) Expulsions in Algeria: 11 migrants died of thirst in desert, Alarm Phone Sahara says. InfoMigrants.
59 Lighthouse Reports (2024) Desert dumps.
60 Amnesty International (2024) Egypt: Authorities must end campaign of mass arrests and forced returns of Sudanese refugees.
61 Creta, S. & Khalil, N. (2024) Inside Egypt's secret scheme to detain and deport thousands of Sudanese refugees. The New Humanitarian.
62 Amnesty International (2024) President Luis Abinader's second mandate must prioritize respect for human rights and put an end to racist migration policies.
63 Veras, E. (2024) Haitians looking to escape violence and chaos face hostility in neighbouring Dominican Republic. The Conversation.
64 Bahiss, I. (2023) Pakistan's mass deportation of Afghans poses risks to regional stability. Crisis Group.

of penalties for anyone who offered employment or housing to this group.[65] By May 2024, at least 600,000 Afghans had left Pakistan and the estimated one million others in this category still in the country face severely circumscribed conditions.[66] Despite official claims that most returns were voluntary, evidence suggests that the majority were coerced to varying degrees, with Human Rights Watch reporting "widespread abuses" including mass arrests, dispossession and destruction of documents.[67] In many cases, returnees were forced to divert their assets, leaving them with little to bring back to Afghanistan.[68] A second and third phase, targeting first the 800,000 holders of government-issued Afghan Citizen Cards (ACCs)[69] and then the estimated 1.3 million holders of UNHCR-issued Proof of Registration (PoR),[70] have been delayed but are still expected to take place, according to officials.[71]

For several years, and against a backdrop of increasing hostility towards Afghans, the Iranian government has conducted systematic expulsions across the border, reaching a total of 651,000, in 2022. Of these, close to half were carried out in the last three months of 2023, in the wake of official warnings of an imminent crackdown.[72] This was accompanied by the imposition, from December 2023, of a work, travel and residency ban for Afghans in 16 of Iran's 31 provinces.[73] In this regard, Iran's migration policy appears to be following a similar pattern to Pakistan's.[74] The situation of the Afghan population became even more politicised in the build-up to the presidential elections in July 2024, when immigration and border management were key issues.[75]

In the context of a repressive environment towards migrants, the application of concessions or exceptions may be as telling a reflection of a government's official hostility as its crackdowns. In this regard, an example is **Israel**'s reported recruitment of African asylum seekers – repeatedly described in recent years by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as "infiltrators" – to fight in Gaza in return for permanent residency. Despite being a signatory to the *1951 Refugee Convention*, the country has granted refugee status to very few people over the years, with less than one percent of asylum claims from Eritrean and Sudanese refugees approved. In this context, the recruitment raises an array of ethical and human rights concerns around the possible exploitation of asylum seekers who are desperate to regularise their status, particularly as it is not known whether any of those who have been recruited have yet received what they had been promised.[76]

Containment and forced immobility can also serve as an insidious alternative to deportation in contexts where authorities are unable to expel migrants due to legal constraints. In **Mexico**, following an apparent entente with the US to prevent migrants from reaching the border between the two countries, security forces have launched a crackdown on migrants transiting through its territory. However, since authorities are now prevented by law from detaining them indefinitely or deporting them en masse, officials are instead opting to move them away from the border by forcibly relocating them to the interior or down towards its southern border with Guatemala. As a result, hundreds of thousands of migrants are effectively trapped in limbo, unable to move on or return.[77] Besides the threat of depredations from criminal gangs, migrants have been repeatedly exposed to violence and extortion from police officials and, in some cases, abandoned in the desert.[78]

Syria: Forced returns and 'safe zones'

More than 13 years after the outbreak of civil conflict, **Syria** remains one of the largest displacement crisis in the world, with more than 12 million Syrians either living as long-term IDPs or as refugees in the region – predominantly in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and other nearby states – [79] and another one million based in Europe.[80] While the validity of the protection needs of Syrians fleeing the country was widely recognised at first, there appears now to be increasing momentum around the narrative of establishing 'safe zones' in Syria, despite the ongoing civil conflict and the well-documented abuses of the government there. For its part, the UN has consistently stated that conditions in Syria are not conducive for a safe and dignified return –

65 Ibid.
66 Butt, R. & Jawad, A. (2024) Millions of Afghans made Pakistan home to escape war. Now many are hiding to escape deportation. The Diplomat.
67 Human Rights Watch (2023) Pakistan: Widespread abuses force Afghans to leave.
68 Bahiss, I. (2023) Op. Cit.
69 Al Jazeera (2024) Pakistan to start second phase of Afghan deportations.
70 Amnesty International (2024) Pakistan: Government must stop ignoring global calls to halt unlawful deportation of Afghan refugees.
71 Ahmed, M. (2024) Deportation of Afghan migrants to continue, Pakistan government says. The Diplomat.
72 Gul, A. (2023) Taliban: Iran deports almost 350,000 Afghans within 3 months. Voice of America; DRC (2024) Afghans increasingly forced to return from Iran, an overlooked population in dire need of protection.
73 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (2023) Afghans banned from 16 provinces In Iran As forced exodus continues.
74 D'Souza, S. M. (2023) An Iranian reversal on Afghan refugees. The Diplomat.
75 Ziabari, K. (2024) Afghan asylum seekers face hostility in Iran. Foreign Policy; Motamedi, M. (2024) Iran presidency still up for grabs as conservatives negotiate pre-election. Al Jazeera.
76 Jonah, A. (2024) Israeli military recruits African asylum-seekers for war in Gaza. France24.
77 Isacson, A. (2024) Why Is migration declining at the U.S.-Mexico border in early 2024? WOLA.
78 Isacson, A. (2024) Weekly U.S.-Mexico border update: Mexico blocks migration, U.S. legislation, migrant removals, nationalities (26 April 2024). WOLA.
79 UNHCR (2024) Syria situation.
80 UNHCR (2021) Syria refugee crisis—globally, in Europe and in Cyprus.

a position it continues to hold in the face of those countries that are seeking to undermine this stance.

While ad hoc deportations of Syrians from neighbouring countries have been carried out for years, they have recently become more open and visible, suggesting that returns could soon become more systematic. **Lebanon**, for instance, has ramped up deportations of Syrian migrants in its territory as part of a wider raft of hostile measures announced in May 2024 that targeted the large undocumented population with further restrictions on access to housing and employment.[81] The same is true in **Türkiye**, where the presence of millions of Syrians has become increasingly politicised; in 2023, during the build-up to national elections, the opposition parties campaigned on a pledge to return all of the refugee population to Syria. While, ultimately, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan managed to hold onto power by a narrow margin, tens of thousands of Syrians have still been deported since his re-election.[82]

Authorities in **Cyprus**, the country in the EU with the largest per capita figures of refugees and asylum seekers, have similarly ramped up deportations and openly publicised this uptick as a success story – in particular, the fact that the pace of removals and returns is now outstripping the number of new arrivals.[83] However, in April 2024, the government also took the extraordinary step of suspending applications from Syrian asylum seekers.[84] Cyprus, like a number of other countries including Denmark, has also called for the establishment of "safe zones" in Syria to facilitate the return of refugees and asylum seekers there.[85]

In many ways, of course, the proposal of safe zones is not new: Türkiye, for instance, has already carved out such an area near its border to provide a degree of legitimacy to its forced returns and pushbacks of Syrian nationals. Yet the fact that the Turkish-designated safe zone is one of the most insecure areas in the country points to the absurdity of pretending that any part of Syria can be a place of sanctuary for returnees. Despite this, the idea continues to gain traction, with reports emerging that the Czech Republic was planning a fact-finding mission to establish whether a safe zone could be established in Damascus or Tartous (both government-held areas) to facilitate returns from the EU.[86]

Deportations from Türkiye to Syria were also documented in a new investigation by Lighthouse Reports in collaboration with other investigative journalists' who expose the deportation system that they allege EU knowingly helped to create and sustain. Not only sending Syrians back to Syria but also Afghans back from Europe to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, via Türkiye as a 'buffer' country.[87]

4. Policy and legislative developments

Four years in the making, the *EU Pact on Migration and Asylum* was finally passed in April 2024 by a narrow majority of 300 to 270 in the European Parliament. Among other provisions, it contains a controversial measure permitting member states to "apply derogations from the common procedure" (that is, suspend its usual asylum functions) in the context of overwhelming "mass arrivals", particularly in contexts where migration has been weaponised by another state actor; this appears to legitimise the forced returns and containment evident at the Poland-Belarus and Finland-Russia borders, as discussed above. The pact contains various elements that have been 'pandering' to the far right,[88] including provisions permitting migrants in certain conditions to be detained for up to six months.

Migrant advocacy groups have condemned the pact for undermining fundamental protections, with Human Rights Watch labelling it "a disaster for migrants and asylum seekers", while the European Council on Exiles and Refugees described the new provisions as "Byzantine in their complexity and Orbán-esque in their cruelty".[89] However, Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, continues to advocate against the pact, specifically its provisions around mandatory resettlement quotas for asylum seekers. These tensions were highlighted further following the European Court of Justice's imposition of a €200 million fine on Hungary for its protracted refusal to accept asylum seekers, deemed to be a serious violation of EU law. In response, in September 2024, officials in Orbán's administration threatened to bus migrants from the Hungary-Serbia border to Brussels.[90]

81 Human Rights Watch (2024) Lebanon: Stepped-up repression of Syrians.
82 Human Rights Watch (2024) Syrians face dire conditions in Turkish-occupied 'safe zone'.
83 InfoMigrants (2023) Cyprus turns tide on migrant arrival trend.
84 DW (2024) Cyprus suspends Syrian asylum applications.
85 InfoMigrants (2024) Cyprus and seven other EU states call for more returns of Syrian refugees.
86 Frelick, B. (2024) The delusion, once again, of a 'safe zone' in Syria. Human Rights Watch.
87 Lighthouse Reports (2024) Turkey's EU-funded deportation machine
88 Barigazzi, J. (2024) EU backs tough new migration rules, shifting right. Politico.
89 Sunderland, J. (2023) EU's migration pact is a disaster for migrants and asylum seekers. Human Rights Watch.
90 Liboreiro, J. (2024) EU Commission will use 'all powers' to stop Hungary from bussing migrants to Brussels. Euronews.

More generally, the EU's prioritisation of security and containment over protection and safeguarding was demonstrated by the continued criminalisation of journalists, activists, NGOs, doctors, rescue teams and others who are accused of facilitating irregular migration by providing essential, potentially life-saving assistance to migrants. During 2023, more than 100 people were prosecuted for aiding and abetting irregular migration in this way, including dozens who engaged in rescues of migrant boats in distress and others who provided food, clothing and shelter. Planned reforms to the *EU's Facilitation Directive*, the criminal legislation that has enabled many of these cases to be brought forward, may make the situation of human rights defenders and humanitarians even more precarious in future.[91]

In September 2024, **Germany** announced that it would be imposing security checks at all its land borders to prevent migrants from entering its territory from neighbouring countries. The move, besides raising concerns about racial profiling and other types of discrimination, has also been condemned for undermining the founding principle of freedom of movement within the EU's Schengen Area. There are concerns that other countries could follow suit, leveraging migration-related fears to justify increased border controls.[92]

In the meantime, a resurgent far-right has not only made significant electoral gains in the European elections in June 2024, but has also secured the largest vote share of any party in **the Netherlands** (in November 2023) and **Austria** (in September 2024). Both open up the possibility of national governments attempting to circumvent their responsibilities under European law. In the Netherlands, the coalition government which includes the anti-migrant Freedom Party has announced its intention to declare an "asylum crisis" – a measure that it hopes will enable it to suspend asylum applications; critics, however, question the legality of a move that is normally only justified in the context of war, major disasters or other genuine emergencies.[93] Austria's Freedom Party, meanwhile, campaigned on a raft of anti-migrant pledges including pushbacks at the border and the suspension of asylum claims, making any approved asylum temporary and preventing refugees from accessing a pathway to citizenship over time.[94] Though extreme, in some respects these positions exist on a continuum that also encompasses countries like France, where, in December 2023, the centrist government passed legislation that significantly reduced protections for migrants and asylum seekers.[95]

Sweden is preparing to make law a controversial proposal that public sector workers including doctors, social workers, teachers and librarians would be legally required to report undocumented people to authorities. The proposal – which has been dubbed the "snitch law" by some – was among the many measures included in a 2022 deal struck between four right-wing parties in the country. The agreement paved the way for a coalition government involving three centre-right parties with parliamentary support from the far-right anti-immigration Sweden Democrats (SD).[96]

In July 2024, in the US, the government took the extraordinary step of suspending the right to asylum, meaning that the large majority of those apprehended at the border (with the exception of unaccompanied children and trafficking victims) will be summarily deported to their home country or expelled to Mexico whenever the total number of daily encounters at the border reaches 2,500. Only when the total falls below 1,500 will the asylum system be opened again.[97] Following the announcement, unprecedented numbers of people were deported or returned to their country of origin.[98] While US President Biden's administration has sought to balance these restrictions with limited options for regular migration pathways (for example, through the creation of Safe Mobility Offices, discussed further in *Resisting the extreme*, on page 274 of this publication), the move prompted widespread condemnation from UNHCR and other organisations as a violation of the right to asylum.[99]

The US has also initiated a new partnership with **Panama**, following the May 2024 election of new president José Raúl Mulino, who ran on a strong anti-migration ticket.[100] Record-breaking numbers of migrants have been travelling from Colombia through Panama's infamous Darién Gap en route to the US, a situation that, in 2023, had already prompted the latter to engage both countries in cooperation to curb irregular migration through the region. Whether the agreement will deliver any substantive impacts, however, is uncertain given that any barriers will likely only push migrants to attempt alternative, and potentially more dangerous, routes north instead or leave them stranded indefinitely in Colombia.[101]

91 MacGregor, M. (2024) Criminal charges against migrant rights defenders rising, NGO finds. InfoMigrants.
92 Stierl, M. (2024) Germany's border clampdown threatens the entire European project. The Guardian.
93 Cokelaere, H. (2024) Dutch government announces "strictest asylum policy ever". Politico; University of Leiden (2024) The Dutch government wants to declare an asylum crisis, but what does that mean?
94 Reuters (2024) Austria election: An overview of political parties' immigration policies.
95 Cossé, E. (2023) French lawmakers adopt regressive immigration bill. Human Rights Watch.
96 Kassam, A. (2024) Sweden's 'snitch law' immigration plan prompts alarm across society. The Guardian
97 Hesson, T. & Rosenberg, M. (2024) Biden imposes sweeping asylum ban at US-Mexico border. Reuters.
98 Gooding, D. (2024) U.S. Immigration officials deport record number of illegal migrants. Newsweek.
99 UNHCR (2024) UNHCR expresses concern over new asylum restrictions in the United States.
100 Zamorano, J. (2024) José Raúl Mulino sworn in as Panama's new president, promises to stop migration through Darien Gap. AP.
101 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean—Quarter 2 2024.

Australia, meanwhile, after seemingly releasing the last asylum seekers detained in its controversial offshore facilities in Nauru in June 2023, resumed transfers there in September 2023 and is now holding more than 100 people again on the island.[102] In November 2023, in the wake of a high court ruling that determined that indefinite detention was illegal,[103] the Australian government announced the *Migration Amendment (Removal and Other Measures) Bill 2024*. This retrogressive legislation would authorise the incarceration, for up to five years, of former refugees stripped of their status and failed asylum seekers who resisted deportation – a move that could criminalise people even for minor administrative misdemeanours. If implemented, the law could be in violation of international law. Troublingly, the legislation also expands the ability of the government to strip refugee status even to "lawful non-citizens" to expedite their removal. These and other provisions would expose refugees and asylum seekers to significant dangers.[104]

Offshore processing: from fringe position to mainstream approach

In the **UK**, the controversial "Rwanda plan", originally announced in April 2022, was designed to deter prospective migrants from attempting to travel across the English Channel from France, envisioning that migrants entering the UK irregularly would be flown out to Rwanda to process their claim there. Even if their claim was recognised, they would not be able to go back to the UK but would instead be offered asylum in Rwanda. The proposal, in particular its framing of Rwanda as a safe third country despite its poor human rights track record, led to repeated legal challenges from opponents of the policy.[105] To circumvent these, the government passed the *Safety of Rwanda (Immigration and Asylum) Bill* in December 2023, formally designating Rwanda as a safe country, meaning that asylum seekers would need to prove a specific protection concern in order not to be deported there.[106] However, the controversial proposal was almost immediately abandoned by the new UK government following the victory of the Labour Party in national elections in July 2024.[107]

Italy also generated controversy when, in November 2023, reports first emerged of a planned agreement with Albania, whereby thousands of migrants intercepted in Italian waters would be taken to detention facilities in Albania while their claims were processed. While Italy would not be outsourcing its asylum responsibilities entirely under the agreement, given that the asylum applications would still fall under Italy's jurisdiction – unlike the original provisions in the UK's Rwanda scheme[108] – it has, nevertheless, been criticised as a "costly, cruel farce"[109] for weakening established rights and reducing the rigour of the review process, potentially exposing those with valid protection concerns to the risk of being wrongly denied asylum.[110] The decision was subsequently ratified in February 2024; at the time of writing, the centres were scheduled to open in the autumn of 2024, with a holding capacity of 3,000 people at any given time and an annual quota of up to 36,000 asylum claims.[111] There are concerns that other countries could seek to emulate this approach in time. Even the prime minister of the UK, Keir Starmer, responsible for dismantling the Rwanda agreement, has reportedly expressed interest in the arrangement.[112] **Germany** is also reportedly considering options for third-country processing in its own asylum system.[113] In May 2024, a total of 15 EU member states, led by Denmark, called for a comprehensive use of outsourcing to help manage the region's "unsustainable" levels of asylum claims and irregular migration, suggesting that support for these approaches may be widespread.[114]

102 Doherty, B. & Karp, P. (2024) Number of asylum seekers on Nauru jumps as Australia transfers 37 people who arrived by boat. The Guardian; Karp, P. (2023) Asylum seekers sent to Nauru by Australian government only months after last detainees were removed. The Guardian.
103 Hennessy, A. (2023) Landmark Australian ruling rejects indefinite immigration detention. Human Rights Watch.
104 Human Rights Watch (2024) Australia: Withdraw punitive migration bill.
105 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) Mixed Migration Review.
106 Walsh, P. W. (2024) Q&A: The UK's policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. The Migration Observatory.
107 Al Jazeera (2024) Keir Starmer says scrapping UK's Rwanda migrant deportation plan.
108 Ngendakumana, P. E. (2023) Italy-Albania migrant deal distinct from UK-Rwanda scheme, Italy's FM says. Politico.
109 Sunderland, J. (2024) Italy migration deal with Albania is a costly, cruel farce. Human Rights Watch.
110 Amnesty International (2024) The Italy-Albania agreement on migration: Pushing boundaries, threatening rights.
111 International Rescue Committee (2024) What is the Italy-Albania asylum deal?
112 Seddon, P. (2024) Starmer looks to Italy on how to stop migrant boats. BBC.
113 DW (2024) Germany to examine asylum processing in third countries.
114 Liboreiro, J. (2024) 15 EU countries call for the outsourcing of migration and asylum policy. Euronews.

Resisting the extreme

While so much of international migration policy appears to be characterised by the normalisation of increasingly abusive practices, it is, nevertheless, also true that an array of activists, humanitarian workers, journalists, lawyers, politicians and local residents continue to offer positive examples of inclusion, protection and support towards people on the move. These actions offer a powerful rejoinder to the narratives espoused all too often around migration and demonstrate that a different way is possible – and that, contrary to widespread perceptions, there is an appetite among host communities as well as policymakers for sustainable and humane solutions.

Peter Grant

This section remains a challenge to research and write, not least because some of the countries that offer good examples of 'resisting the extreme' are simultaneously featured in the *Normalising the extreme* section of this review. Additionally, some seemingly positive actions may be motivated by and be part of a broader immigration strategy that is less benign in its intentions. Positive examples from countries in this section, therefore, do not mean that the country has an overall positive assessment of its migration policies.

Enhanced protection and integration actions

While, across Europe, borders are tightening, with some countries increasingly intent on rolling back their asylum responsibilities, the solidarity demonstrated to the millions of refugees from **Ukraine** who have fled the country since the launch of Russia's offensive in February 2022 is impressive. The introduction of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) within a week of the invasion offered Ukrainians immediate protection and access to services. More than two years later, in June 2024, the TPD was extended until March 2026.[1] While this generous provision is the exception rather than the rule in Europe's increasingly restrictive environment, it offers an important reminder that an alternative response to displacement is possible and can deliver far more beneficial outcomes than containment and pushbacks.

Even while countries across Europe impose harsher measures at their border, the persistence of some pathways for refugees and asylum seekers to access protection offers an important reminder of the humanitarian and legal responsibilities that governments can commit to. This is especially true in the case of receiving countries that are generally better known for their anti-immigration policies. For instance, **Italy** has, for a number of years, operated a Humanitarian Corridors programme that has facilitated the resettlement of thousands of refugees, including 49 Syrians who were flown from Beirut to Rome in June 2024.[2]

In many cases, the most innovative and inspiring approaches to integrating migrant populations are manifested at the local rather than the national level. The small town of Monterroso in **Spain** attracted headlines for the proactive and positive welcome it offered to 120 young refugees, mostly from Mali, who were transferred from the Canary Islands to be resettled in the town. Despite misgivings from some quarters around their arrival, the local communities rallied around to support their integration through sporting and cultural events, enabling them to interact with residents and challenge the stigma that some felt towards them. Though this was among the most publicised cases, it was by no means unique, with other towns attempting to emulate the success of this approach.[3]

At a time when asylum claims are increasingly either being expedited through accelerated processes or left to languish indefinitely in legal limbo, in June 2024, **Costa Rica**'s reform to harmonise its refugee legislation more closely with international law offers an inspiring counterpoint. Though introducing fast-tracked procedures for claims that are judged to be unfounded, the legislation offers a range of improvements for asylum seekers, including a more flexible timeline to file claims, the ability to work while asylum claims are under consideration and additional procedural amendments to allow for appeals. Furthermore, asylum applications are not undermined by consideration of whether the previous countries' asylum seekers had travelled through should be deemed safe.[4]

1 European Council (2024) Ukrainian refugees: Council extends temporary protection until March 2026.
2 ANSA (2024) Syrian refugees from Lebanon arrive in Italy with Humanitarian Corridors. InfoMigrants.
3 Kassam, A. (2024) "They're setting an example for us": the small Spanish town welcoming refugees. The Guardian.
4 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean – Quarter 2 2024.

A recurring challenge in many countries is the backlog of unprocessed or rejected asylum cases that can leave applicants in limbo for years. **Uruguay** took steps to streamline its system through a new law that could benefit up to 20,000 primarily Cuban and Dominican migrants who had applied for asylum but had not yet been approved. The provision will enable these individuals to withdraw their applications and apply for legal residency instead.[5]

While many aspects of **US** immigration policy have hardened in the name of border security, including the temporary suspension of asylum claims announced in June 2024, the expansion of the Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) has been a notable exception. First launched in April 2023 and now operating in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Guatemala, the system has enabled the expedited resettlement of tens of thousands of refugees.[6] Though this represents just a very small fraction of those seeking to enter the US, SMOs nevertheless show that a safe and regular migration pathway to the US is possible, in stark contrast to the dangers those travelling to the border face.

Notwithstanding the increasing difficulties many face in their host countries, it is nevertheless the case that millions of people from **Venezuela** continue to live and work across Latin America. Though a significant proportion still face challenges around accessing official documentation and legal residency, the regularisation efforts of many countries in the region have helped alleviate some of the worst impacts of this large-scale, protracted displacement crisis. In **Brazil**, the ongoing collaboration between the government and UN agencies known as Operation Horizon (*Operação Horizonte*) has provided assistance, orientation and residency permits to Venezuelans and other nationals, including those from countries outside the region. In August 2024, the 11th phase of the initiative was rolled out in São Paulo to support at-risk migrants in the city in regularising their status.[7] **Colombia**, too, with the largest Venezuelan population in the region, has continued to expand its regularisation efforts, including the announcement, in June 2024, that up to 540,000 Venezuelans who are guardians to children in the country could benefit from legal residency.[8] Similarly, in April 2024, **Ecuador** completed a regularisation round that provided close to 300,000 undocumented Venezuelans in the country with either residency permits or visas.[9] This was followed, in September, by a presidential decree that extended regularisation for a further 100,000 Venezuelans currently lacking legal status in the country.[10] Even in **Peru**, where official policies towards Venezuelan migrants have become more restrictive, authorities published new legislation, in April 2024, offering special residency for Venezuelans whose documentation had expired or who had previously entered irregularly and been in the country for at least six months. Though some of the provisions could prove difficult for the most vulnerable migrants, such as the requirement of a valid Venezuelan passport,[11] the continued possibility of pathways to residency is a positive development in a context that has generally become less welcoming for Venezuelans there.

Climate mobility and security drive bilateral agreement between Australia and Tuvalu

Though the correlation between climate change and international migration is an evolving and still contested research area, it has long been a pressing concern in the Pacific, where various Small Island Developing States face the prospect of losing much of their territory to rising sea levels in the coming years. In this context, the ratification of the *Falepili Union* treaty between **Australia** and **Tuvalu**, in May 2024, represents an important milestone as the first agreement between two countries dealing with the issue of climate mobility.

A key provision is the facilitation of 280 permanent visas annually for Tuvaluan nationals exposed to the threat of climate change – a significant figure, given that it represents around 2.5 percent of the total population (11,000) every year. While the agreement appears to have been inspired by geopolitical as well as humanitarian concerns – the treaty contains various security concessions from Tuvalu's side to partner solely with Australia – it nevertheless offers a solution of sorts to the difficult predicament facing Tuvalu and other countries in the region that are highly vulnerable to climate change. In this regard, when migration is increasingly being conceived as a necessary adaptation strategy, the treaty demonstrates a viable model for safe and regular migration to be pursued between the Pacific and developed countries such as Australia.[12]

5 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Ibid.
6 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) The influence of Safe Mobility Offices on mixed migration in Latin America.
7 Government of Brazil (2024) PF em São Paulo iniciará 11ª Fase da Operação Horizonte; Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Latin America and the Caribbean: Quarter 1 2024.
8 Reuters (2024) Colombia to give legal status to up to 540,000 Venezuelan migrants.
9 UNHCR (2024) Tendencias nacionales de desplazamiento forzado en Ecuador 2024.
10 UNHCR (2024) IOM, UNHCR commend Ecuador's efforts to regularize Venezuelan refugees and migrants.
11 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Op. Cit.
12 Vallentine, J., Frous, B. & Forin, R. (2024) Power dynamics, arm twisting and migrant rights: the many (ugly) faces of migration diplomacy. Mixed Migration Centre.

Legal regularisation

Millions of migrants are already living and working abroad without formal recognition, having either entered irregularly or had their rights to legal residency withdrawn. This can leave them vulnerable to exploitation, exclusion from basic services and deportation. Consequently, regularisation is a central means to strengthen the security and long-term wellbeing of migrants, ending their invisibility and facilitating their full economic and social participation as legal residents in the country. In this regard, even when framed in terms of work permits rather than the recognition of an asylum claim, the regularisation of undocumented migrant workers can be potentially life-saving. **Thailand**, for instance, is not a formal signatory to the *1951 Refugee Convention*, but nevertheless hosts a large population of migrants who would qualify for protection under its provisions. However, in early June, the Thai Labour Ministry announced details of an amnesty plan to provide undocumented migrants from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam in Thailand with temporary work and residency permits. This should benefit, in particular, many Myanmar nationals who have been forced to leave their country due to the ongoing security situation there.[13]

In December 2023, **Greece** passed a resolution regularising the status of 30,000 undocumented migrants. Despite right-wing opposition, it was passed with a large majority in the parliament, thanks to a cross-party consensus between the centre-right ruling party and the left-wing opposition. The move was justified as a necessary step to meet the country's labour gap in key sectors such as agriculture and tourism, though the pathway was only offered to migrants who had been in the country for at least three years and already had a job offer in place.[14]

Spain offers a rebuke to far-right narratives around migration

While previously fringe anti-migration positions have become increasingly mainstream across Europe, driving a surge in support for far-right groups and efforts from mainstream parties to attract support by echoing these talking points themselves, the prime minister of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, offered his country a powerful alternative vision in a speech in October 2024.

Warning of the dangers of xenophobia and the profound economic cost that closed migration policies would bring, he challenged the framing of migration as "a battle between Spaniards and foreigners, or Christians and Muslims, or saints and criminals", as promoted by "the interests of a few who see fear and hatred of foreigners as their only path to power". While calling on the moral duty to welcome migration – as "children of emigrants", he said, "we are not going to be the parents of xenophobia" – he also drew attention to the fact that the overwhelming majority of migrants who entered the country did so legally and were engaged in productive work that benefitted the entire country in a context of widespread depopulation.[15]

Expanding legal migration pathways

The provision of regular pathways for migrants to travel legally to destination countries is one way to reduce irregular migration. Though, at present, these options are nowhere near enough to meet demand, some governments have rolled out recruitment programmes that demonstrate the mutual benefits of more open migration policies for sending and receiving countries alike. In some cases, the governments that are implementing these policies are doing so despite being widely associated with restrictive asylum and migration policies. Italy, for instance, formalised a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MoU) with Tunisia in October 2023, allowing a yearly quota of 4,000 Tunisian workers to work in Italy.[16] Spain's minister for inclusion, social security and migration, Elma Saiz continued to reinforce circular migration programmes between Spain and Mauritania, which benefitted companies and 17,200 workers in 2023. Spain intends to create a similar circular migration MoU with The Gambia.[17] Similarly, in September 2024, **Germany** and **Kenya** reached an agreement to facilitate the movement of skilled and semi-skilled workers.[18]

It is often the case that regularised migration packages are developed conditionally, with sending countries obliged to accept the return of undocumented nationals from the host country in exchange for the allocation of work visas and placements. Germany and **Morocco**, for instance, have been working together on the development of a pilot pre-integration programme, whereby skilled workers in Morocco receive German language classes and awareness courses to facilitate labour migration between the two countries. The collaboration, however, also hinges on Morocco working with Germany on

13 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Asia and the Pacific – Quarter 2 2024.
14 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Quarter 4 2023: Europe.
15 Kassam, A. & Jones, S. (2024) Pedro Sánchez unveils plans to help migrants settle in Spain. The Guardian.
16 Reuters (2024) Italy signs deal to take in migrant workers from Tunisia.
17 La Moncloa (2024) Elma Saiz travels to Mauritania to reinforce circular migration programmes, which benefited companies and 17,200 workers in 2023.
18 Muia, W. (2024) Germany to welcome Kenyans in labour deal. BBC.

the reduction of irregular migration.[19] The agreement was finalised in late January 2024, with the aim of supporting legal migration and integration between the two countries as an alternative to irregular migration; at the same time, however, Germany reportedly wants all undocumented Moroccan nationals to be returned to their home country.[20]

While ensuring migrants are able to live safely and legally abroad is, in part, the responsibility of the host country, it is also the case that sending countries have an important role to play in ensuring the wellbeing and security of their citizens. In this regard, **Indonesia**'s efforts to expand regular migration pathways for its nationals to Malaysia and other destination countries including Austria, Japan and Saudi Arabia are important, given the significant numbers of Indonesians who migrate (in some cases irregularly) in search of work abroad.[21] For instance, in February 2024, Indonesia signed a bilateral agreement with **Spain** to provide accreditation for Indonesian fishing vessel workers to enable them to work officially as deckhands; this will help prevent incidents of trafficking and modern slavery in a sector that has become notorious for these practices.[22]

Social activism

Social activism plays a vital role in countering the mobilisation of negative narratives around migration. This was evident in Germany when, in January 2024, following reports that members of the far-right AfD had met with neo-Nazis to discuss mass deportations, more than 100,000 people gathered in cities across the country to protest.[23] Migrants themselves also played a key role in countering toxic narratives and hate crime: in the city of Naples, Italy, for instance, foreign residents took to the streets in September 2024 to protest after a spate of violent attacks against migrants there.[24]

In the **United Kingdom**, similarly, the tragic stabbing to death of three young girls in Stockport at the end of July 2024 triggered a wave of misinformation and rumours falsely suggesting that the killer was a Muslim asylum seeker. The subsequent riots that spread across various towns and cities specifically targeted asylum seekers and mosques. Yet, amidst these dispiriting scenes, thousands of anti-racism protestors gathered in solidarity and support.[25] In the city of Bristol, for instance, activists stood outside a hotel housing asylum seekers to prevent a large group of violent far-right demonstrators from entering. A fundraiser was launched shortly after to purchase toys and sweets for the terrorised children being accommodated there who had witnessed the scenes from their windows.[26]

Besides resisting hate speech and racist violence, social activism can also offer positive, innovative solutions to migration-related challenges. In Italy, the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic advocacy organisation, has long played a role in driving more progressive policies towards refugees, even as much of the country's immigration agenda has hardened; for instance, the group was instrumental in the establishment of the Humanitarian Corridors programme described above. Similarly, in April 2024, in a move that arguably bridges a middle ground between conventional labour migration and humanitarian protection, details emerged of a new pilot Work Corridors programme brokered by the Community of Sant'Egidio with the Italian government. While stopping short of offering formal refugee status, the programme will admit 300 migrant workers from Lebanon, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia to work in the country.[27]

The power of online campaigns in driving positive change

While social media is all too often in the spotlight for its misuse or exploitation by anti-migrant groups, it can also be an effective platform for mobilising solidarity and social change. In **Spain**, for instance, a collective of hundreds of rights organisations, *#RegularizacionYa*, mobilised more than 600,000 signatures in support of a proposal to offer a regularisation pathway to the large undocumented migrant population in the country. In April 2024, the Spanish parliament debated the proposal and approved it as a draft bill by a large majority, with only the far-right organisation Vox opposing it. Once implemented, the proposal will extend residency rights, legal assistance and public services to between 300,000 and 500,000 undocumented migrants in the country.[28] While, initially, the impetus was primarily humanitarian, the proposal was also able to attract support on the basis that it would help resolve Spain's current labour shortages in key sectors and expand its tax base, both issues that will only become more acute as the

19 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Quarter 1 2024: North Africa.
20 Restelica, B. (2024) Germany and Morocco agree to increase controlled labour migration and facilitate returns. Schengen News; Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (2024) Germany and Morocco strengthen cooperation to promote regular labour migration and integration from the outset.
21 Mixed Migration Centre (2024) Quarterly mixed migration update: Quarter 2 2024: Asia.
22 Gokkon, B. (2024) Indonesia and Spain sign agreement to protect migrant fishing workers. Mongabay.
23 The Guardian (2024) More than 100,000 protest across Germany over far-right AfD's mass deportation meetings.
24 ANSA (2024) Italy: Migrants protest in Naples after racist attack. InfoMigrants.
25 Sky News (2024) UK riots latest: Thousands take part in anti-racism protests; petrol bomb thrown at mosque in 'racially motivated' incident.
26 Madan, L. & Turnnidge, L. (2024) Community buys toys for asylum seeker children. BBC.
27 Reuters (2024) Italy to recruit migrant workers in Lebanon, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia.
28 Carreño, B. (2024) Spain's parliament to draft amnesty bill for undocumented migrants. Reuters.

population ages.[29] This innovative and progressive approach to the reality of undocumented migration is now being drafted into law, offering significant benefits to migrants and the Spanish economy. In future, it could serve as a valuable precedent for other countries to follow, with the right political will in place.[30]

A similar initiative has been launched in Italy, calling for the country's current citizenship rule to be relaxed. Unchanged since 1992, the law stipulates that foreign nationals have to reside in the country for at least 10 years before they can apply for citizenship. Children born in the country to foreign parents are also unable to apply for citizenship until they reach the age of 18. An online campaign was launched to garner signatures for a change in the legislation, securing over half a million votes by September 2024. This is sufficient for a referendum to be called to allow Italians to vote on whether the pathway for naturalisation should be halved to five years and citizenship conferred automatically on the children of foreign nationals when they are granted Italian citizenship. If passed, the revised provisions could benefit up to 2.5 million people who would be eligible.[31]

Physical displays of solidarity continue to play a uniquely important role, too. In August 2024, in the northern Italian city of Trieste, for instance, dozens of activists spent a night sleeping in the city's squares to protest the lack of adequate shelter for migrants.[32] The previous month, beginning in Spain and continuing across Italy into the Balkans, the Abriendo Fronteras (Opening Borders) march brought together hundreds of participants who took part to draw attention to promote migrant hosting.[33]

Human rights reporting and journalism

While the scale of documented abuses against migrants points to the impunity governments, criminal organisations and other groups continue to enjoy, it also points to the persistence of a powerful area of resistance to these forces – the willingness and ability of journalists, human rights organisations and activists to document and publish these abuses in the hope of holding those responsible to account. Of particular note, in this regard, is the work of Lighthouse Reports, in partnership with leading media outlets such as *Le Monde*, *Der Spiegel* and the *Washington Post* amongst others. The organisation has published a series of extraordinary revelations on the shortcomings, failures and negative consequences of hostile policies and practices on migrants. During 2024 alone, it published major exposés on the infamous "desert dumps" of migrants in North Africa, the violent interceptions of boats in the English Channel by the French coastguard, the suffocation of dozens of migrants in a detention centre in Ciudad Juárez in Mexico, Türkiye's EU-funded deportation machine and the systematic collaboration of Frontex with the Libyan coastguard to facilitate interceptions.[34] Though abuses and official denials can still occur in the face of indisputable evidence, these reports are helping to move the dial in important ways; published in December 2023, investigations by Lighthouse Reports documenting Frontex's collaborations with a notorious militia prompted the EU Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs to send a formal letter to the agency's executive director about these accusations.[35]

Other organisations working on uncovering hidden abuses include Forensic Architecture, a group that uses an array of data and visualisations to reconstruct human rights violations, ranging from historic incidents of genocide to contemporary police shootings. Within this broad remit, the organisation has focused on a number of investigations relating to migrant and displaced populations, including an investigation into the 2020 fire at Moria refugee camp in Greece and the deadly 2023 Pylos shipwreck, in which hundreds of migrants drowned. More recently, it has documented the repeated attacks and human rights violations that Palestinian IDPs in Gaza have suffered at the hands of Israeli military forces, including the use of "humanitarian violence" to uproot and contain the civilian population.[36]

Other notable contributions include the winner of the European Press Prize's annual Migration Journalism Award, a piece published by *In These Times* on the EU's externalisation of migration management to African countries.[37] Meanwhile, in terms of uncovering the true human cost of securitised border policies, the NGO Ca-Minando Fronteras deserves special mention for its dogged enumeration of deaths and disappearances

29 Keeley, G. (2024) Spain approves new rights for undocumented migrants – should the UK do the same? The i.
30 Carrera, B. (2024) In Spain, regularising undocumented migrants could counter looming labour shortages. VoxEurop.
31 Di Donfrancesco, M. (2024) Italy opens way for referendum on easing citizenship rules. Reuters; Wallis, E. (2024) Italy: Campaigners gather enough signatures for citizenship referendum. InfoMigrants.
32 ANSA (2024) Italians sleep in Trieste's streets "for immigrants". InfoMigrants.
33 ANSA (2024) Pro-migrant march departs from Spain to reach Balkans via Italy. InfoMigrants.
34 Lighthouse Reports (2024) Desert dumps; Lighthouse Reports (2024) Sink the boats; Lighthouse Reports (2024) Smoke and lies; Lighthouse Reports (2024) 2,200 Frontex emails to Libya; Lighthouse Reports (2024) Turkey's EU-funded deportation machine.
35 Lighthouse Reports (2024) 2,200 Frontex emails to Libya.
36 Forensic Architecture (2023) Fire in Moria refugee camp; Forensic Architecture (2023) The Pylos shipwreck; Forensic Architecture (2024) Humanitarian violence in Gaza.
37 Popuviciu, A. (2023) How Europe outsourced border enforcement to Africa. In These Times.

along the various routes linking Africa with Spain, in particular the Western Africa-Atlantic route to the Canary Islands. Its work has demonstrated that the likely number of fatalities is far higher than official enumerations would suggest, with thousands reported in the first months of 2024 alone.[38]

Progressive policies and judicial decisions

The scrapping of the UK's so-called "Rwanda deal", whereby migrants who attempted to enter the country irregularly would be transferred to Rwanda to have their asylum claims processed there, was cancelled by the new government following elections in July 2024. Though the move was justified by Prime Minister Keir Starmer primarily on its apparent lack of effectiveness, rather than its dubious ethical or legal grounds, it nevertheless offered some hope that the UK might step back from some of its more extreme policies towards migration.

In Spain, in January 2024, the Supreme Court issued a ruling that deportations of unaccompanied minors carried out by Spanish authorities in 2021 were illegal. While Spain is legally obliged to care for child migrants until they turn 18 or their parents can be located, the government argued that the terms of its 2007 agreement with Morocco allowed for assisted returns once their cases had been considered – an argument that the court rejected as a violation of Spanish and European human rights law.[39] In October, meanwhile, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of two Syrian asylum seekers who had attempted to reach **Cyprus**, only to be left at sea for two days and then returned to Lebanon. The court concluded that their rights had been violated.[40] The same month, the European Court of Justice ruled in favour of two Afghan women who had been denied asylum by **Austria** in 2015 and 2020. According to their judgement, gender and nationality in this instance are sufficient grounds for countries to offer asylum, given the severity of the discriminatory policies imposed by the Taliban.[41]

All too often, in recent years, the law has been weaponised against humanitarian activists, with sea rescuers prosecuted as aiding and abetting irregular migration. Nonetheless, a number of recent cases have led to acquittals. This included, after seven years of legal proceedings and evidence of serious procedural irregularities by investigators in Italy, the April 2024 dismissal of the case against crew members of the *Iuventa* at the prosecution's request.[42] In June, meanwhile, an Italian court ruled that the confiscation of a rescue vessel, *Sea-Eye 4*, earlier in the year was "illegitimate and invalid".[43] In Greece, in a similar case to the situation of the *Iuventa*'s crew, 16 aid workers who had faced protracted proceedings on charges of espionage, belonging to a criminal organisation, people-smuggling and money laundering were finally acquitted in January 2024, after six years. Eight other foreign nationals who had been prosecuted on the same charges had been acquitted the year before.[44] In a separate ruling in May, 35 international aid workers accused in 2020 of spying and facilitating irregular entry were acquitted due to a lack of evidence against them.[45]

While these rulings were welcome, they also pointed to the significant toll that extended prosecutions can have on those accused and how criminal charges can be deployed to deter humanitarian and life-saving activities. In this regard, the decision by prosecutors to request a six-year sentence for Italy's deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini, for his decision to block more than 100 migrants from reaching Italian soil in 2019 stands out. He faces charges of kidnapping for leaving a rescue vessel stranded at sea for 19 days as a result.[46] While, at the time of writing, the outcome of the ruling remains uncertain and Salvini continues to enjoy the unqualified support of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, the trial is an encouraging counterpoint to the systematic legal harassment that activists have faced for years – in no small part, the result of Salvini and his push to criminalise sea rescues.

38 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2024) Right to life monitoring: First five months 2024.
39 AP (2024) Spain's top court says the government broke the law when it sent child migrants back to Morocco.
40 Wallis, E. (2024) Cyprus: European court says rights of migrants breached. InfoMigrants.
41 Al Jazeera (2024) Gender, nationality "sufficient" to grant Afghan women asylum: Top EU court.
42 Tondo, L. (2024) Crew of migrant rescue boat acquitted in Italy after seven-year ordeal. The Guardian.
43 Wallis, E. (2024) Migrant rescue organization wins court case in Italy. InfoMigrants.
44 AP (2024) Greek court acquits aid workers who helped rescue migrants crossing in small boats; Reuters (2023) Greek court rejects charges against aid workers.
45 Reuters (2024) Greek court drops criminal charges against 35 international aid workers.
46 Zampano, G. (2024) Italy's deputy premier Matteo Salvini faces a potential 6-year prison sentence in migration trial. AP.

Photo credits: Toda Images / Shutterstock

USA: Perhaps the election most anticipated in 2024 was that of the US presidential race between Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Kamala Harris. Also, the outcome of the election promised to have huge implications for literally millions of migrants and asylum-seekers inside the US as well as those intending to go to the US. On 6 November 2024 Donald Trump's victory was confirmed presaging a dramatic era in US migration policies if he follows through on campaigning claims. [See *Keeping track in The Americas*, page 62; *Normalising the extreme*, page 264 and the *Thematic snapshot* on page 192].

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UK: 'Stop the far-right' anti-racist rally outside the offices of Reform UK party offices in London, protesting against 29 separate July/August riots and protests that erupted in multiple cities across the UK purportedly against migrants and asylum seekers. The protests were originally triggered by social media misinformation about a Southport stabbing incident in which three children were killed and ten other people injured. [See *Keeping track in Europe*, page 87; *Normalising the extreme*, page 264 and the *Thematic snapshot* on page 165].

Back cover photo credit:
Alessio Tricani / Shutterstock

Italy: Young migrants and asylum seekers rescued in the Mediterranean wait at the port of Pozzallo, Sicily. With no formal naval rescue mission in the Mediterranean, it is left to NGO rescue ships to assist and rescue thousands of sea-borne migrants. As of the end of September 2024, an estimated 1,006 people died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

While presenting a wide-ranging global review that keeps track of mixed migration events and policy developments over the year, the Mixed Migration Review 2024 will offer a deep dive into politics of mixed migration and the salience of migration issues in politics.

In this extraordinary year of elections almost half the world's population in more than 80 countries headed to the polls in 2024, including some of the richest and most powerful, the most populous, the most authoritarian and the most devastated and fragile countries. The scale is unprecedented, but so is the salience of migration politics in the mix in many of these countries. This year's Mixed Migration Review explores the interwoven relationship involving politics and migration through interviews with critical global and regional thinkers and practitioners in the sector, expert essays and *Thematic snapshots* spotlighting specific issues and through in-depth and personal *Migrant stories*.

This year's essays will look at how the migration question is often a convenient 'crisis' for some - advancing their political agenda through the instrumentalisation of migration in both domestic and international politics, often with far-reaching consequences for migrants. In particular, we look at the dependency of rising populism globally on maintaining the migration 'threat', and also explore the role of the modern media systems in creating and maintaining migration narratives which in turn directly impact public opinion and voting behaviour. Another essay explores the fact that while political structures are deployed and increasingly dedicated to restricting asylum space and reducing migration, the growing necessity for countries to meet rising labour shortages with migrants is unavoidable. Five shorter essays from young writers participating in this year's essay competition offer unique regional perspectives on migration and politics. MMC's 4Mi data featured in this year's report bring compelling evidence to challenge some myths and misconceptions that continue to persist in public and political debate and narratives on migration.

As always, the Mixed Migration Review 2024 will also document the best and worst behaviour by authorities in relation to mixed migration in the annual *Resisting* and *Normalising the extreme* features.

For a full electronic copy of the Mixed Migration Review 2024, visit our website at:
www.mixedmigration.org

Mixed Migration Centre

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