





## Illegal Migration Routes to Europe

**Dialogue Forum for Development and Human Rights.**

**A non-partisan ngo registered with 6337 for 2005.**

**A non-profit organization. It is governed by Law No. 84 of 2002 on NGOs and private institutions.**

**Website: <https://www.fdhrd.org/>**



**All Rights Reserved - 2021 ©**

**FDHRD**





## **Introduction:**

Illegal immigration is a phenomenon associated with the drawing of state borders, and the enactment of laws that restrict movement and travel. Some tend to violate these laws because they face financial difficulties or because there is no time for it. Studies have shown that most illegal immigrants take the decision to migrate after a rational thought process, putting the pros and cons of immigration in front of them and finding that the pros outweigh the negatives (which may reach death). One of the most famous destinations for legal or illegal immigration is the European countries. This is linked to colonialism, as well as to the economic and social progress of European countries.

As a result of the increase and recurrence of illegal migration to Europe, a strong migration infrastructure has been established, and there are now common routes used by smugglers to transport refugees. There are six main routes: Central Mediterranean Route/ Eastern Mediterranean Route/ Western Mediterranean and West African Route/ Eastern European Route/ Western Balkan Route/ France-England Route.

The report focuses on the causes of illegal migration to Europe. It also examines the migration routes from Africa and Asia to Europe, the number of migrants who have taken each route this year, and how European countries dealt with them.

## **First: The causes of illegal immigration to Europe**

The illegal migration to Europe is associated with the end of World War II and the emergence of Europe as a strong entity in the international community. It is also linked with the creation of the European Union and the introduction of the Schengen Agreement, which guarantees freedom of movement and travel among member states. Europe consists of developed states with high economic growth, where migrants can find various work opportunities. It especially has many undeclared job opportunities that do not require identification which benefits illegal migrants. European countries also advocate for human rights and the need to protect them. They also have laws that allow illegal immigrants the opportunity to apply for asylum. Asylum seekers are usually required to be



physically present in the EU country they wish to seek asylum in, but there are not many official ways to reach Europe to do so.

Moreover, the cost of following the legal means to migrate is very high and increasing as it includes airline tickets, housing, etc. The legal procedures take a lot of time and money while the refugee cannot bear the cost or the wait, forcing him to take more dangerous routes to reach Europe.

To add to that, the existence of a strong smuggling infrastructure in major transit areas (assisting in transportation, accommodation, forged documents, etc.) contributes to the increase of migration to European states. Europe is relatively close to many crisis areas in the Middle East and North Africa, where large groups of potential migrants are located. Migration has also been associated with the end of colonialism in migrants-exporting countries. This is evident in primary migration patterns where people mostly migrated to their state's previous colonizer. Colonialism has also left states economically, politically and socially devastated, which has been an important element in pushing citizens to illegally migrate.

Furthermore, armed conflicts and the ensuing forced displacement also force citizens to illegally migrate and seek asylum. Most of the illegal immigrants are people trying to escape from the violence and repression in their countries. In 2015, Europe witnessed the largest migration crisis in its history when Syrians fled to it in order to escape the Syrian civil war.

Moreover, one of the biggest drivers of legal and illegal immigration to Europe is the presence of the diaspora in European states, as well as family reunification, according to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex). Another motive, according to the European Court of Auditors, is the inefficiency of the EU system of returning illegal immigrants to their countries of origin. This encourages people to migrate rather than prevent them. In fact, in 2021, only 19% of those ordered to leave the EU since 2008 were deported.



## **Second: Migration Routes**

### **1- Central Mediterranean Route:**

Migrants trying to reach the EU travel from Libya or Tunisia via the central Mediterranean, hoping to reach Italy (Lampedusa) or Malta. Libya, in particular, is one of the most important transit areas for migrants due to its wide beaches and desert land borders with six countries. It has also increased by a large percentage as a result of the security and political instability that has gripped the country since 2011, which made it easy for criminal organizations for human trafficking to settle in and use it as a place to transport immigrants.

This is the most commonly used route for illegal immigration. Frontex has monitored 56,057 cases of illegal immigration in 2021 only. More than 56% of cases involving citizens of Tunisian, Egyptian, Iranian and Bangladeshi nationalities, the most being Tunisians. It is also one of the deadliest routes as it witnessed a huge number of fatalities. 18,582 people have been recorded dead or missing since 2014, with more than 1,000 people estimated to have died trying to cross the central Mediterranean road in the first half of 2021, including 42 children. The fatalities have increased more than the double this year compared to the same period in 2020. They are still on the rise as 10 people were found, by the Doctors Without Borders team, dead in a wooden boat on this route in November 2021.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, criticized the policies adopted against migrants on this route, as it works to repel them, and overlooks rescuing them. Thus, she urged Libya and the European Union to work to protect and rescue migrants in the central Mediterranean. It is also necessary to note that, according to the representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Italy, most of the migrants now are families with many children, unlike the usual with solo men trying to migrate to Europe



## 2- Eastern Mediterranean Route

This route leads from Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey, and allows direct access to Cyprus, Greece, and then Bulgaria. The route saw the largest number of arrivals in 2015, when 885,386 migrants used it to reach the European Union via the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. This was a consequence of Syria's civil war, which prompted a large number of Syrians to flee Syria for Europe. The route became much less frequented in 2021. Since the beginning of 2021, more than 15,000 immigration cases have been monitored using this route, mostly Syrians and Turks.

According to France-Presse Agency, Cyprus has the highest number of asylum applications per capita among all EU member states, with more than 4% of the population seeking asylum. As of October 2021, 10,868 migrants crossed into Cyprus without permission or valid papers. Migrants are arriving in Cyprus by sea from Lebanon, or by land from the Turkish-controlled Northern Cyprus and then crossing the Green Line between the two countries on the island. More than 9,000 migrants arrived in Cyprus by crossing the Green Line.

The sharp drop in arrivals is also partly due to the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016. According to the agreement, illegal immigrants trying to enter Greece who have been rejected for asylum will be returned to Turkey, where Syrians receive temporary protection status. However, Greece accuses Turkey of using migrants to put pressure on the EU, and that it is facilitating the transit of migrants into Greece and Cyprus. The return process has been stalled since March 2020. Turkey has indicated that this is a result of the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Greek Minister of Immigration, Turkey refuses to cooperate despite the possibility of relying on the COVID-19 tests. This pause in returning process on the Turkish side could be attributed to Turkey's intention to return the Syrian immigrants residing inside its borders back to Syria. It is trying to get rid of the immigrants and not get more.

When migrants arrive at their destination, they find themselves sent back to Turkey or directly to their country, or placed in detention centers in Greece or Cyprus. In fact, Greece has opened the first of five new facilities to detain 3,000 asylum seekers and migrants on the island of Samos, near the border with



Turkey. Similar facilities are to be established in the Greek Islands of Leros, Kos and Jius.

On the other hand, the United Nations praised Turkey's handling of migration, and it provides assistance to Turkey to regulate migration in it so that it is beneficial for all.

- Calabria Road

This is a relatively new undiscovered road, combining the central and eastern Mediterranean routes. It transports migrants from Turkey to the southern Italian mainland, particularly Calabria region. It has been getting increasingly popular in recent years. This route has seen a nearly fourfold increase in arrivals in 2021 from the previous year. 16% of sea migrants to Italy this year passed from Calabria. As of November 2021, 9,687 cases have been spotted, compared to 2,507 last year.

Afghans are the ones who have been most frequently spotted using this particular maritime route to Europe, as have Iraqis, Iranians and Kurds. Investigations revealed that smugglers use sailboats that can be avoided by the authorities to transport migrants. The majority of smugglers are Ukrainian citizens, who drive the boats themselves. As they approach the coast of Italy, they abandon ship and flee on jet skis.

The Calabria route has also begun to attract smugglers transporting migrants from Libya, forcing Italian authorities as well as the European border agency Frontex to rethink how it controls the Mediterranean, where the number of migrants from Central Asia is expected to increase.

### **3- West Mediterranean and West African Route**

This route goes from Morocco, Algeria and West African countries to Spain. Migrants try to reach Spain by the Mediterranean Sea to the Spanish mainland or the Balearic Islands, or by the Atlantic Ocean to the Canary Islands. They even try to reach Spain by land or sea to Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish enclaves located in Morocco. Spain is considered one of the most famous and easy destinations for migration. This is due to the short distance from the African





continent across the Strait of Gibraltar, and the presence of Ceuta and Melilla within its borders. It also has a lot of islands that are relatively far from its mainland. Moreover, according to Frontex, smugglers are using better and faster boats that are capable of transporting many people in a short period of time to smuggle people across the Mediterranean.

Frontex has counted nearly 33,542 crossing attempts on these roads so far in 2021 (mostly Algerians, Moroccans and unidentified sub-Saharan Africans). 16,712 of these were using the western Mediterranean Sea. According to Spanish authorities, in just three days in September, more than 500 people were intercepted in the coastal areas of the Balearic Islands (Ibiza, Formentera, ...etc.), as well as areas of southern and southeastern Spain (Granada, Almeria, Murcia, ...etc.).

In Ceuta and Melilla, migrants try to bypass the border fences at sea, either swimming or walking alongside them during the wave receding period. There has been an increase in the number of migrants. In only two days in May 2021, some 8,000 migrants have entered Ceuta. Morocco has been accused of not trying to deter migrants to blackmail the EU over the European Court of Justice ruling on Western Sahara.

On the West African route, more than 16,830 cases have been detected of illegal immigrants from West Africa. They were crossing into the Canary Islands, which is an autonomous Spanish group of Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, located off the coast of north-west Africa. The Canary Islands have been suffering irregular migration since 1994, when two young Sahrawis sailed towards Fuerteventura Island using a small wooden boat. Migrating with this method to the Canary Islands went on without attracting much attention. However, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, departure points increased from being the Moroccan coast only, to include Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea and Sierra Leone. This became a preferred route for West Africans because the prices of smugglers on the Atlantic route were relatively cheaper than other routes. According to the United Nations International Organization for Migration, the numbers of deaths and disappearances of migrants at sea are increasing sharply along the West African coast, which raises the organization's concern.



#### **4- Eastern European Route**

This route transports migrants from Eastern European countries (Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia) into the Schengen area. 7,263 attempts to cross the EU border illegally from Eastern Europe have been monitored by Frontex. More than 60% of the cases were Iraqis, followed by Afghans and Syrians. Vietnamese citizens are mostly targeting the Latvian-Russian border, while Afghans also use the Hungarian-Ukrainian route.

There is an on-going crisis on this route as about 7,000 migrant and refugee (the majority being Iraqi and Afghans) are stuck on the border between Belarus and eastern EU member states, mainly Poland and Lithuania. Tensions are growing between the European Union and Belarus over the crisis, with Poland and Lithuania accusing the Belarusian president of using migrants to pressure and punish in response to EU sanctions against his state. It was found that Belarus relaxed its visa requirements and travel restrictions. It has also delegated the right to grant visas to some travel agencies in Baghdad, making it easier for migrants to reach Europe. Moreover, direct flights from Beirut, Amman and Damascus to Minsk, capital of Belarus, have increased in number. The Belarusian army is also organizing and directing the migrants to the Polish border.

In the midst of this crisis, migrants are suffering from cold and hunger in the forest on the Belarusian-Polish border. On the one hand, the Belarusian army is pushing them towards Poland. On the other hand, the Polish army is pushing them back into the borders of Belarus. They are also suffering from verbal and physical abuse from the two armies. Attempts by human rights organizations to assist the stranded refugees are being stopped.

#### **5- Western Balkans Route**

This route connects Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Croatia on the land borders with the countries of the Western Balkans region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia). There were about 47,900 illegal border crossings on the Western Balkans route. The route



saw 10,400 illegal crossings in September 2021 only, an increase of 112% compared to September 2020. The main nationalities of migrants discovered on this route are Syrians, Afghans and Moroccans.

There is a crisis between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Croatia is returning migrants and refusing to let them apply for asylum. Their army is abusing and assaulting migrants, violating international law and human rights. On October 2021, the EU executive called for an investigation into the allegations of Croatia's pushbacks of illegal immigrants. The investigation found that members of the Croatian Special Forces were concealing their identities during these violent operations, leading to disciplinary action against three policemen.

## **6- France- England Route**

This is a route for migrants after reaching the EU countries to reach England. They aim to reach England as they are more familiar with its language. They believe that the country is open, safe and tolerant. Moreover, there are no identity papers in England, and they can easily find unauthorized work. Others have had their asylum application rejected by EU member states, and were ordered to leave. Thus, England is their last chance.

This has led to a major conflict between France and England, and a crisis for the refugees stranded. Britain has clamped down on immigration routes, including train crossings and cargo trucks, prompting migrants to try to cross the Channel between France and England. About 26 thousand people have sailed from France to England this year. This is putting severe pressure on the UK government, which has pledged to curb immigration after Brexit. This route has seen many fatalities, especially with the drop in temperature. In 2021, 42 people were recorded dead or missing on this route.



The following table shows the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers across each route in 2021:

	Central Mediterranean	Eastern Mediterranean	Western Mediterranean and West Africa	Eastern Europe	Western Balkans	France v England
Victims	1,315	37	319	21	32	42
Cases monitored	56,057	15,799	33,542	7,263	47,900	26,000

**Figure (1)**

### Third: EU Immigration Policies

Since the migration crisis that afflicted Europe in 2015, the European Union has adopted many policies and established various agencies to protect its sovereignty and prevent migrants from entering Europe. Most of which were heavily criticized by human rights organizations. The European Union mainly pursued a policy of bilateral and multilateral agreements, and established the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and the Asylum Agency.

#### 1- European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex):

It is an agency of the European Union established in 2004 as to manage operational cooperation. However, in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis in Europe, its scope of work was expanded. It became tasked with controlling borders in the European Schengen area, in coordination with the border guards and coast guards in the member states of the Schengen area. Frontex has been accused of violating the law and infringing human rights, as it has been accused of pushing migrants outside the borders of the European Union. It has also been accused of deliberately letting migrants drown without providing them with assistance. The European Union's anti-fraud office is investigating the validity of these accusations.



## **2- EU Asylum Agency:**

The European Council adopted the Regulation for the establishment of the EU Asylum Agency in December 2021 by transforming the current European Asylum Support Office into a fully qualified agency.

It aims to improve the application of asylum policy within the European Union, by improving the functioning of the Common European Asylum System. It is also responsible for providing practical and technical assistance to Member States and contributing to a greater convergence in the assessment of international protection applications.

## **3- Bilateral agreements:**

The European Union follows a policy of signing agreements with countries exporting migration. The agreements allow the European Union to return migrants to these countries again. They also provide financial, technical and practical assistance to these countries in order to to cut the migration path to Europe.

Among the most famous deals concluded by the European Union is with Turkey in 2016. It provides for the return of illegal immigrants who try to enter Greece to Turkey. It also obligates Turkey to takes all necessary steps to prevent the opening of new migration routes. In return, the EU agreed to give Syrian refugees the opportunity to apply for asylum in the EU on an individual basis, reduce visa restrictions for Turkish citizens, pay 6 billion euros in aid to Turkey for Syrian migrant communities, modernize the customs union, and complete talks on Turkey's accession to the EU.

## **4- Multilateral Agreements:**

The European Union has also tried to work on the push factors of migrations. They signed the Barcelona Agreement in 1995. The objective of the agreement is to create a "zone of peace, stability and security in the Mediterranean", by promoting economic development, democracy and respect for human rights, and raising social and cultural awareness. It also stipulated the importance of



the role of the southern Mediterranean in reducing migration pressures, and that they have the responsibility to readmit their citizens who are in the European Union illegally, in addition to working to improve cooperation with police, judicial, customs, administrative and other authorities in order to combat illegal immigration.

## **Conclusion:**

European countries have been suffering from the illegal immigration crisis since its establishment for many reasons. Due to the frequency of this phenomenon, Main routes of migration to Europe has been established, via the Mediterranean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and by land from Eastern Europe. Just as the European Schengen countries suffer from a large number of asylum requests, their neighboring countries suffer as well as they become a transit area for migrants. In the Schengen states' attempt to reduce the phenomenon of migration, they place the full responsibility of dealing with the migrants on neighboring countries. This puts these countries in a dilemma, and leaves migrants stuck in the cold between them without food or water. It was also observed that the harsh policies that the European states adopt with to deter people from illegal immigration has only led to diverting illegal immigrants to remote crossing routes that are more dangerous.