ICMPD
International Centre for
Migration Policy Development

ICMPD Migration Outlook 2022

Twelve migration issues to look out for in 2022

Origins, key events and priorities for Europe

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Twelve migration issues to look out for in 2022

2022 will be another challenging year for EU migration policy. Below is a non-exhaustive list of trends and developments that will be high on the agenda of decision-makers and analysts alike.

1. The rise in irregular migration to the EU

Almost 200,000 illegal crossings were recorded at the external borders of the EU in 2021. This corresponds to an increase of 57% in comparison to 2020 and of 38% in comparison to 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Driven by growing instability in major countries of origin and aggravated by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, this trend is likely to continue in 2022.

2. Shifting pressures on the main migration routes

In reaction to increasing migration pressures, Greece closed its external borders and temporarily suspended the admission of asylum applications in early 2020. In 2021, it introduced additional measures such as closed and controlled reception structures, a wider use of administrative detention or the extension of physical border control facilities and surveillance. Apparently the strict Greek asylum policy prompted irregular migrants and asylum seekers to switch to alternate routes. This trend is likely to continue in 2022, exacerbating the pressure on reception and migration management capacities in the Western Balkans and along the Central Mediterranean Route.

3. The migration effects of the Taliban takeover

The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the rapidly growing humanitarian crisis in the country are likely to lead to additional displacement and outbound flows of refugees and migrants. According to initial assessments, another 500,000 Afghan refugees are expected to flee the country. The countries in the region have closed their borders, limited access to passport and visa holders, and cut support for newly arriving Afghans. These measures are likely to control the size of movements. In the medium to long term, it will be difficult to fully control the vast borders in the region and the activities of the well-established smuggling networks. The increasing numbers of asylum applications lodged by Afghan nationals in the second half of 2021 suggest that the EU will see arrivals increase in 2022 as well.

4. Growing tensions in Libya

The continued presence of foreign armed forces and tensions over the presidential elections endanger the fragile state of stability in the country. Ongoing disputes about fundamental rules governing elections and uncertainty about when they will be held will also impact migration from and through Libya and Libyan partners' capacity to cooperate with the EU and the international community on solving migration issues. Coupled with growing instability in sub-Saharan Africa and the political and economic challenges faced by neighbouring Tunisia, these developments in Libya make it very likely that the scale of irregular migration along the Central Mediterranean Route will remain high or even increase in 2022.

5. The flaring up of the Syrian conflict

Violence has continued throughout 2021 and hostilities have re-intensified for the first time since the ceasefire agreement of March 2020. The humanitarian situation has significantly worsened. Along with the economic downturn in Turkey, which is the major host of Syrian refugees globally, 2022 is likely to see increased primary and secondary movements of Syrians towards the EU. Already last year, the number of asylum applications lodged by Syrian nationals in an EU Member State was 71% higher than in 2020 and 46% higher than in 2019.

6. The reorientation of migration flows from Latin America

In recent years, asylum seekers from Latin American countries, especially Colombia and Venezuela, ranked high in European Union apprehension statistics. In 2020, their number declined. At the time, this change was thought to be the result of the extensive restrictions on air travel from third countries to the EU during the first phase of the pandemic. The gradual lifting of restrictions in 2021, however, did not lead to a resurgence of Latin American asylum migration to the EU. The drop in applications is believed to be the result of fewer flight connections to Europe and increased movement towards the United States. Envisaged policy changes announced by the new US administration appear to have sparked hopes for a more liberal stance towards migrants and refugees and prompted a reorientation of related flows from European destinations to the US.

7. The continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration

The pandemic has increased economic pressures on large parts of the overall population in low-income countries but also on the migrant and refugee populations residing within their territories. The resilience of migrant remittances might cushion some of these pressures but surely not all of them. Uneven economic recovery is likely to fuel irregular migration also in 2022. This assumption is supported by developments observed in 2021, such as the increase of irregular flows from North

African countries, secondary movements of Syrian and Afghan nationals from Turkey and Iran, or the sharp increase of irregular arrivals from Latin America at the southern border of the United States. Bangladesh observed a slowing of remittances via official channels in the second half of 2021, as migration ramped up again and informal funds transfer systems gained in importance again.

8. The EU response to the instrumentalisation of irregular migrants

The instrumentalisation of migration is not a new phenomenon. Countries in the neighbourhood have pressured the EU before to make political or financial concessions in return for cooperation on migration control. The deliberate creation of a migration crisis at the EU's external borders, however, instigated and controlled by Belarussian authorities, added a dimension different from previous instances. The EU's swift, unified and robust response in cooperation with non-European partners halted this scheme. But the situation will remain volatile in 2022 and thousands of migrants are left in a state of limbo, and immediate threat to their lives and well-being.

9. The presidential elections in France and the French Presidency of the EU

2022 is a big election year in Europe, all of them important for European migration policy making. The greatest attention will be paid to the presidential elections in France. Euroscepticism is widespread among the French electorate and the majority of candidates and is linked to a tougher stance on immigration and the wish to repatriate power from the EU to the Member States. The elections will also influence the implementation of the French Presidency programme as it pertains to migration. The programme focusses on reforming the Schengen Area and continuing the work on asylum and migration. It emphasises the need to better address the instrumentalisation of migration and to prevent irregular migratory flows within the Schengen Area.

10. New accents in Germany's migration policy

The new government's coalition agreement contains an extensive chapter on migration. It calls for a restart of Germany's migration and integration policy to reflect the stance of a modern immigration country. Amongst other things, the coalition agreement calls for a strengthening reinforcement of functioning partnership agreements with non-EU countries following a holistic approach and including economic cooperation, visa facilitation, skills transfers, job platforms and cooperation on the reintegration of rejected asylum seekers. Moreover, the coalition agreement is committed to reforming the European asylum system and ensuring a fair sharing of responsibility and solidarity. Thus, Germany seeks to forge a coalition of Member States that are receptive to admission.

11. Renewed attempts to address secondary movements

The issue of secondary movements of asylum seekers among Member States has been high on the European agenda for years. In Germany, one priority identified in the coalition agreement of the new government is to prevent the misuse of visa-free travel for secondary movements within the EU. The French Presidency aims at a reform of the Schengen acquis that helps to prevent irregular migratory flows within the Schengen Area. Internal border controls were a much-debated issue in the EU before, with the European Commission and several Member States insisting that such controls must remain the exception. It can be assumed that this debate will continue throughout 2022.

12. Labour shortages and the discussion on legal migration channels

The European Union has entered a period of demographic ageing. By 2050, the share of the EU population of working age will shrink by 37 million. Already now, many vacancies cannot be filled with domestic applicants and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it all the clearer how much the European economies depend on essential workers. Last year, an apparent shortage of lorry drivers in the UK and other European countries made the headlines, spurring fears of interrupted supply chains and missing deliveries of food, fuel and other essential goods. Current labour shortages might be less severe than portrayed in the media and much can be done through upskilling, higher wages and better working conditions. But European labour markets will remain tight in 2022 and beyond, intensifying the debate on ways to fill immediate shortages and to cope with long-term labour market demands. This might give renewed impetus to the further development of instruments such as the EU's Talent Partnerships and to overall cooperation with non-EU countries on labour migration issues.

Introduction

ICMPD's Migration Outlook presents a **brief analysis of migration and policy trends** and provides an outlook on developments and events to watch out for in 2022. Thus, the outlook does not claim to foretell the future or to cover all relevant trends. It wants to use past experience and highlight what might happen and is important to consider.

The size and direction of international migration flows depend on the **impact of a number of main drivers**. They are war, civil war and conflict; the globalisation of economies, values and aspirations; changing technologies and means of communication; shifting demographics; socio-economic development; as well as environmental factors and climate change. Together they shape the global and long-term migration climate in which regional and short-term developments are embedded. Available statistics confirm the increasing impact of these drivers. The latest estimates speak about **281 million international migrants** in 2021, representing 3.6% of the world's population and an **increase of 3.3%** in comparison to the last estimate in 2019. The number of international migrants has grown faster than the world's population. Mainly responsible for this growth is the global increase in conflict and violence. Between 1993 and 2021 the number of the **globally displaced** almost quadrupled from **21.4 million** to **82.4 million**; the number of the **internally displaced** increased more than eleven-fold from **4.2 million to 48.0 million**. Internal conflicts lead to the largest numbers of displaced persons. In 2021, UNHCR reported a total of **26.4 million refugees**, 51% of whom came from Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Two years into the pandemic: the impact of COVID-19 on migration

Despite the unprecedented speed in developing COVID-19 vaccines and rolling out vaccination campaigns, hopes that the global pandemic would come to an end in 2021 did not materialise. Although many of the initially more than 100,000 travel and mobility restrictions were lifted, the impact of the pandemic on migration continued. This also affected international migration flows. According to estimates, COVID-19 and the subsequent mobility restrictions led to a **decrease of nearly 2 million (or minus 27%) in the total number of international migrants** compared to pre-pandemic forecasts.

However, whilst mobility restrictions and reduced opportunities for labour migration resulted in reduced legal migration flows, they did **not lead to a reduction in displacement and irregular migration**. Globally, the total number of forcibly displaced (refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced) increased by 3.7% from 79.4 million to 82.4 million in 2021. In 2021 the total number of asylum seekers in the EU increased by 25.7% in comparison to 2020 and the total number of detections of illegal border crossings, by 56.7%. The global economy is expected to grow by 4.9% in 2022 and GDP growth in low-income countries is projected to hit 5.1%, an increase that is clearly below pre-pandemic forecasts and hardly sufficient to offset the adverse economic effects of COVID-19. The uneven access to vaccines among the world regions continued throughout 2021 as well. At the end of the year only 9.9% of the African population was fully vaccinated, compared to 59% in North America, 65% in South America and 62% across Europe. Although the latter regions are still suffering from high infection rates at the beginning of 2022, they can be considered much further along the path out of the pandemic than the regions of the Global South.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the disruptions in mobility and global economy growth **did not lead to a significant decrease in migrant remittances**. Related flows proved to be remarkably resilient. By the end of 2020 they were only 1.6% below 2019 levels (540 billion USD instead of 548 billion USD). This trend is partially an indirect effect of the travel restrictions, forcing migrants to use official channels for financial transfer instead of carrying cash when visiting home. But the observed resilience of remittances is surely not only a statistical effect. It is also an expression of the dependency of households in sending countries on financial transfers from abroad and the readiness of diasporas to step up this support even more in times of crisis. It can also be taken as an indicator for how much developing economies rely on these transfers. Bangladesh already observed a slowing of remittances via official channels in the second half of 2021, as migration ramped up again and informal funds transfer systems gained in importance again.

The pandemic has **increased economic pressures** on large parts of the overall population in low-income countries but also on the migrant and refugee populations residing within their territories. The resilience of migrant remittances might cushion some of these pressures but surely not all of them. A further rebound of the world's economy in 2022 will not lead to a reduction in the inequality gap in GDP and in household income among the world regions; both are expected to rather widen. COVID-19 is by no means the only reason for instability and economic imbalances but it surely exacerbates them. Thus, these imbalances are likely to **fuel irregular migration again in 2022**. Last year already saw a several examples supporting this assumption, such as the increase in irregular migration from North African countries suffering from severe economic decline and the loss of income from tourism, secondary movements of Syrian and Afghan nationals from Turkey and Iran, economies struck hard by COVID-19, or the sharp increase in irregular arrivals from Latin America at the southern borders of the US.

Focus regions

In 2022, the situation in the wider European region will be shaped by migration-related developments in **the Near and Middle East, African regions** and **Eastern Europe**. This does not imply that other world regions deserve less attention, but the major migration movements towards Europe will be linked to the situation in these regions. Violent conflicts and economic imbalances, aggravated by uneven recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue to be the main drivers of related flows. The actual dynamics, however, will also be more strongly embedded in geopolitical contexts than in the past and influenced by attempts to respond to an instrumentalisation of migration for political purposes.

Afghanistan

On 15 August, the Taliban took control of the Afghan presidential palace in Kabul and ended all hopes for a peaceful transition of government in the country. The chaotic scenes at Kabul airport, when tens of thousands of Afghans tried to flee the country on the last outbound flights, were only a prelude to a surge in displacement in Afghanistan and beyond. Between January and November, an additional 676,00 Afghans were displaced, increasing the number of Afghan IDPs from 2.9 million to 3.5 million (around 9% of the population). Displacement is driven by political factors but even more so by a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented magnitude. The Afghan economy is believed to have contracted by 30% in 2021 and the country faces shortages in all essential supplies. The number of Afghans in need of humanitarian assistance could rise from 9.4 million in 2020 to 24.4 million in 2022, representing 59% of the population. The humanitarian emergency is still mainly inside Afghanistan but already in August the UNHCR warned that a total of 500,000 Afghans could flee the country by the end of 2021.

At the beginning of the year, there were around 2.6 million Afghan refugees registered by UNHCR globally. Almost 90% of these refugees are hosted by the neighbouring Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, with 2.2 million in Iran and Pakistan, and another 300,000 in Turkey. According to estimates, these countries host an additional 2.9 to 3.2 million undocumented migrants. Between January and October, there were around 111,600 newly arrived Afghans reported from the neighbouring countries, mainly Pakistan and Iran. Around 5,000 Afghan refugees were reported to have reached Tajikistan, a number significantly lower than some forecasts had expected. According to official sources, Uzbekistan does not host refugees from Afghanistan, military and displaced that had entered from Afghanistan were either returned or relocated to other countries. Turkish authorities reported apprehending 46,000 Afghan nationals in 2021 and preventing another 40,000 from entering the country. The countries in the region, already hosting large refugee and undocumented populations, do not see themselves in a position to admit additional large inflows. They have intensified border control and limited support for newly arriving Afghans. Iran and Pakistan kept their land borders open only to Afghans with passports and valid visas, documents hardly ever issued by the Taliban administration. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan closed their land borders entirely to Afghan nationals.

The EU observed increasing arrivals from Afghanistan as well. In the first nine months of 2021, Afghan nationals submitted a total of 73,682 applications in the EU27, representing an increase of 90.5% in comparison to the first nine months of 2020. A considerable share of these applications, however, pertains to Afghan nationals who were already residing on EU territory and re-entered the asylum system, to secondary movements and to beneficiaries of evacuation programmes. Nonetheless, it is highly likely that the EU and Turkey will see increased arrivals of asylum seekers and irregular migrants from Afghanistan in 2022, comprising secondary movements from Pakistan, Iran and Turkey and persons leaving Afghanistan for humanitarian, economic or security reasons. In view of the strict control measures imposed by the neighbouring countries, it will take the latter category more time to reach Europe. In the long run, it will be difficult to fully control the vast borders in the region and the activities of the well-established smuggling networks. Much will depend on whether international aid will help to ease the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan but also on a structured cooperation between the neighbouring countries, Turkey and the EU to stabilise the migration situation.

Syria

After more than ten years of war, Syria is still the largest displacement crisis in the world. More than half of the population has been forced to flee; 6.7 million are internally displaced; 6.6 million are refugees, 3.7 million of them in Turkey, 844,000 in Lebanon, 673,000 in Jordan, 255,000 in Iraq and 136,000 in Egypt. One million Syrian refugees are located outside the region, the vast majority of them hosted by Member States of the European Union.

Violence continued throughout 2021 and hostilities re-intensified in the north-west of Syria for the first time since the March 2020 ceasefire agreement. The war in Syria has not ended and the security situation will remain highly volatile again in 2022. Constitutional talks have stalled and no breakthrough to peaceful reconstruction can be expected in the near future. Overall living conditions have deteriorated even further for the vast majority of the population due to the continued decline of the Syrian economy, currency depreciation, reduced fiscal spending, huge unemployment, soaring prices, food insecurity, damaged infrastructure and insufficient basic service delivery. Fourteen million Syrians need humanitarian assistance, 3 million more than last year. For 2022 both the security situation and the supply situation are expected to worsen. Displacement is likely to remain on the same scale as in 2021 or to increase even further. Returns will be affected as well. Over the years, Syrians have returned to their home country in significant numbers despite the precarious security situation and dire living conditions. Official Turkish sources put the number of Syrian returnees from Turkey at between 450,000 and 1 million; the UNHCR reported a total of around 282,000 self-organised returns to Syria between 2016 and 2021. As a result of the crisis, the annual number of the latter decreased from 94,970 in 2019 to 14,780 in 2021, a trend that is expected to continue in 2022. The worsening situation in Syria and the economic downturn in Turkey, the major host of Syrian refugees worldwide, make increased primary and secondary movements of Syrians towards the EU a likely development. Already last year, the number of asylum applications lodged by Syrian nationals in an EU Member State was 71.0% higher than in 2020 and 45.6% higher than in 2019, the last year before the pandemic struck. This trend can be expected to continue in 2022 as well.

Iraq

The Iraq conflict has resulted in the displacement of more than 3.3 million Iraqi citizens since 2014. Over the years, the security situation has improved, but there are still an estimated 1.8 million IDPs and returnees in Iraq. Almost 20% of the entire population are believed in need of humanitarian assistance. Since 2019, the security situation in Iraq has improved and the parliamentary elections in October 2021 ran smoothly. Still, the country must cope with regional rivalries and the impacts of US-Iranian tensions on the outside and sectarian divisions and the activities of rival militias reinforced by external actors on the inside. The humanitarian situation remains difficult although the economic outlook has improved as well. Iraqi GDP is projected to grow by 2.6% in 2021 and by more than 6% in 2022 after a COVID-19 related contraction of 9% in 2020. But water scarcity, food insecurity and uncertain energy supply have worsened the living conditions for big parts of the Iraqi population. This is even more the case for the large number of internally displaced who by now have exhausted all their savings and assets. The dependence on food and livelihood support programmes is expected to increase in 2022. However, it was not only the humanitarian crisis but also an overall lack of perspective that drove emigration in 2021. The high proportion of Iraqis from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a relatively stable and secure region, confirms this assumption. Yet, rampant unemployment, corruption and economic crisis, which has led to massive cuts in state salaries, in a region with high employment in the public sector, are key factors that emerge from media reports with Iraqi migrants from the Kurdistan region who availed themselves of this route. The bleak economic prospects in conjunction with the protracted and multi-facetted socio-political challenges in Iraq and its neighbourhood might reinforce emigration trends, especially among young and well-educated Iraqis headed to Turkey and the EU. The number of asylum applications lodged by Iraqi nationals in the EU increased again in 2021 but did not reach pre-pandemic levels. In view of the above developments, this picture might change in 2022.

Lebanon

Lebanon faces a set of complex and multi-layered challenges. The deep-seated, long-running economic crisis was exacerbated by COVID-19, driving many Lebanese into poverty. According to UNHCR, up to 90% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are also living below the extreme poverty line, up from 55% in 2019. The political impasse persists in the aftermath of the warehouse explosion in August 2020 and is accompanied by one of the worst economic recessions ever recorded. The economy contracted by 20% in 2020 and is expected to shrink by another 10% in 2021. The currency has lost more than 90% of its value and the country is suffering from hyperinflation and an upsurge in food prices of as much as 600%. The situation has led to many Lebanese leaving legally and to an uptick in the number of Lebanese attempting to cross to Cyprus irregularly. But Lebanon is also host to almost 1 million refugees, mainly from Syria, but also to a smaller number of Iraqi nationals. The volatile situation in Lebanon and the geographic proximity to Cyprus might lead to an increase in secondary movements towards the EU in 2022.

Libya

For nearly twenty years, Libya has been both a major host to a large and mixed migrant population and an important steppingstone for irregular and flight movements towards the EU along the Central Mediterranean Route. This route gained in importance again in 2021, with an 83% increase in irregular arrivals in the EU departing from Libya, Tunisia and Turkey (90% of migrants crossing the Mediterranean via this route leave from Libya). In Libya, the migrant population includes refugees, labour migrants, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and migrants in transit towards Europe. By the end of November 2021, UNHCR had counted around 41,500 registered refugees and around 200,000 IDPs. In early September 2021, an estimated 610,100 migrants from over 44 nationalities were residing in Libya, a number slightly below pre-pandemic levels.

Since the signing of the ceasefire agreement in October 2020, the humanitarian situation has improved and the number of IDPs has decreased by nearly 25%. Given the relative political stability and the remarkable rebound of the hydrocarbon sector in 2021, Libya's economy is expected to grow by a record 78.2% in 2021. Still, 800,000 persons are believed in need of humanitarian assistance. Vulnerable populations, including refugees, migrants and returning IDPS, have no or only limited access to basic services, health care or accommodation. Although the ceasefire agreement brought a temporary end to largescale hostilities, the agreed withdrawal of foreign armed forces was never implemented. The envisaged December election date did not hold because of controversies about candidate eligibility and electoral rules and was postponed to 2022. It remains to be seen if the electoral issues can be resolved by a mutually accepted compromise or if tensions flare up again, endangering the fragile state of stability in the country. Disputed election results would also have an impact on migration from and through Libya and on Libyan partners' capacity to cooperate with the EU and the international community on resolving migration issues. In conjunction with growing instability in sub-Saharan Africa and the political and economic challenges faced by neighbouring Tunisia such a development would make it very likely that the scale of irregular migration along the Central Mediterranean Route remains high or even increases in 2022.

Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria

Last year saw the continuation of a trend that had already started in 2020, namely a significant relative increase in arrivals from North African countries of origin. In the first nine months of 2021, there was a 32% increase in arrivals from North Africa to Italy and Spain in comparison to the same period in 2021. The number of apprehended Tunisian nationals increased by 43.9% in 2021 and was thus five times higher than in 2019. The number of apprehended Moroccans increased by 48.0%, whilst apprehensions of Algerians remained stable, but their total number was still three times higher than two years ago. Analysts agree that irregular migration from North Africa mainly involves the younger generations and is driven by a worsening economic situation, also by COVID-19, high unemployment or underemployment and little hope of speedy economic and social reform. In particular, it is the dire economic situation but also the enhanced operations of smuggling networks that drive increasing numbers of migrants to attempt to reach Europe in an irregular way. At the same time these networks appear to play an ever-smaller role in the region, especially for young Tunisians, who increasingly engage in forms of self-smuggling, pool their resources, jointly source boats and depart independently. Irregular migration from North Africa is caused by structural and lasting factors rather than by short-term events. Migration pressures from the region will persist and irregular migration trends in line with last year's figures or above are a likely development in 2022. Instability in Southern Africa, particularly the Sahel crisis, will affect North African countries as well and result in increasing migration pressures at their Southern borders.

African countries

There are more than twenty active refugee situations in Africa, many of them protracted over long time periods and simultaneously including inflows and outflows of refugees but also involving large-scale internal displacement. Thus, the **East Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes** is the region most affected by displacement in all its forms. The region hosts 4.7 million refugees and asylum seekers, representing 67% of the refugees on the African continent and 20% the global refugee population. In 2021, the worsening of the Tigray conflict added to the crisis. Clashes between separatists and federal government forces in Ethiopia resulted in large-scale displacement of civilians forced to flee the violence. In addition to some 650,000 displacements due to flooding and other disasters during

The year, almost 1.7 million were uprooted because of the conflict. The crisis has also led to over 60,000 refugees crossing into Sudan, and some 20,000 into Somalia. Whether or not the current emergency in Tigray will provoke wider disruption in the East Africa region and further displacement elsewhere remains to be seen.

In **West Africa**, the Sahel has developed into one of the world's worst humanitarian crises and to one of the fastest growing displacement crises in the world. The situation deteriorated further in 2021. Although much of the conflict is centred along the borders between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, it has already had a significant impact on neighbouring countries such as Chad, with the possibility that it could spread towards the coast, affecting Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo. Nigeria's North and Northwest Zones are afflicted by a multidimensional crisis rooted in long-standing tensions between ethnic and religious groups. Criminal activities and kidnapping have recently pushed some 10,000 Nigerians to Niger. In the south, independence movements in Biafra are increasingly active and criminality has increased throughout the country, creating further push factors on a rapidly growing population.

As in previous years, most of the displacement will occur within Africa and only a small share of African migrants and refugees will attempt to reach Europe. However, the Africa-wide increase in displacement and the worsening situation in major conflict zones do not suggest that related figures will go down in 2022. Much will depend on the development of the Tigray and Sahel crises and the political situation in Libya as the main point of departure for irregular movements towards Europe.

Latin America

The UNHCR reports a total of 18.4 million persons of concern in the Americas, mainly in and from Central and Latin American (LAC) countries. This number corresponds to more than a tripling in comparison to the situation ten years ago and includes approximately 5.6 million Venezuelan refugees and displaced. The main cause of displacement in Latin America is not state persecution but rather high crime levels, food insecurity, state fragility, collapse of livelihoods and the adverse effects of climate change. Income inequalities, widespread informal work and a lack of social security coverage for large shares of the population also seem to imply that Central and Latin America were hit even harder by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic. On average, LAC economies grew by 6.3% in 2021 but that was not enough to make up for the huge contraction during the first year of the pandemic. The number of Latin Americans living in poverty rose by another 4.7 million to around 236 million in 2021. Migration pressures will remain high.

Thus, these pressures will affect the LAC region itself and the US more than the EU. Immediately after taking office, the new US administration took several steps aimed at reforming the immigration system. Cornerstones of these plans were to create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, a temporary suspension of deportations, the termination of the state of emergency at the southern border and a pausing of border wall construction. Moreover, the administration announced the creation of a taskforce to reunite families, measures to promote immigrant integration, the development of a strategy to address irregular migration across the southern border, as well as the creation of a more humane asylum system. An increase in the refugee cap to 62,500 for 2021 and to 125,000 for 2022 was proposed to Congress. These plans were met with immediate resistance.

The discontinuation of the “Remain in Mexico Programme” was challenged by states and blocked by the Supreme Court. At the same time, the influx of migrants at the southern border surged to nearly 200,000, the highest level in twenty years, increasing political pressure on the government.

It responded with a plan to address the root causes of displacement and irregular migration and to provide financial support to Central American countries in order to stabilise irregular migration flows. Nonetheless, analysts consider it unlikely that President Biden will be able to push his ambitious plans for a comprehensive immigration reform through Congress.

In recent years, asylum seekers from LAC countries, mainly Colombia and Venezuela, had ranked high in European Union apprehension statistics. Their number had already decreased significantly in 2020. At the time, the decrease was believed to be the result of the extensive restrictions on air travel from third countries to the EU during the first phase of the pandemic. The gradual lifting of restrictions in 2021, however, has not led to a resurgence of Latin American asylum migration to the EU. Citizens from Latin American are still exempt from visa requirements in Spain and the decrease in asylum applications is believed to be the result of fewer flight connections to Europe and increased movement towards the US. As outlined above, the actual changes to the US immigration and asylum system might be limited in the end. Nonetheless, the initially envisaged policy changes of the Biden administration sparked hopes for a more liberal stance towards migrants and refugees and prompted a reorientation of related flows from European destinations to the US. Such expectations and a continued limitation of travel options due to COVID-19 are the two factors that will most likely limit Latin American asylum migration to the EU again in 2022.

Finally, developments in the second half of 2021 suggest that geopolitical conflicts involving the Union and emerging in the immediate neighbourhood will affect the EU migration situation in 2022 much more than in the past. This conclusion refers to the **Belarus situation** (for a more detailed analysis see section 5 of the Outlook) but also to the **aggravation of Russian-Ukrainian relations and increasing tensions between Russia and NATO**, which entail the risk of armed conflict greater than at any time since 2014 when Russia seized part of southern Ukraine. The 2014 conflict displaced an estimated two million Ukrainian nationals, forcing around 100,000 to flee across borders and seek asylum.

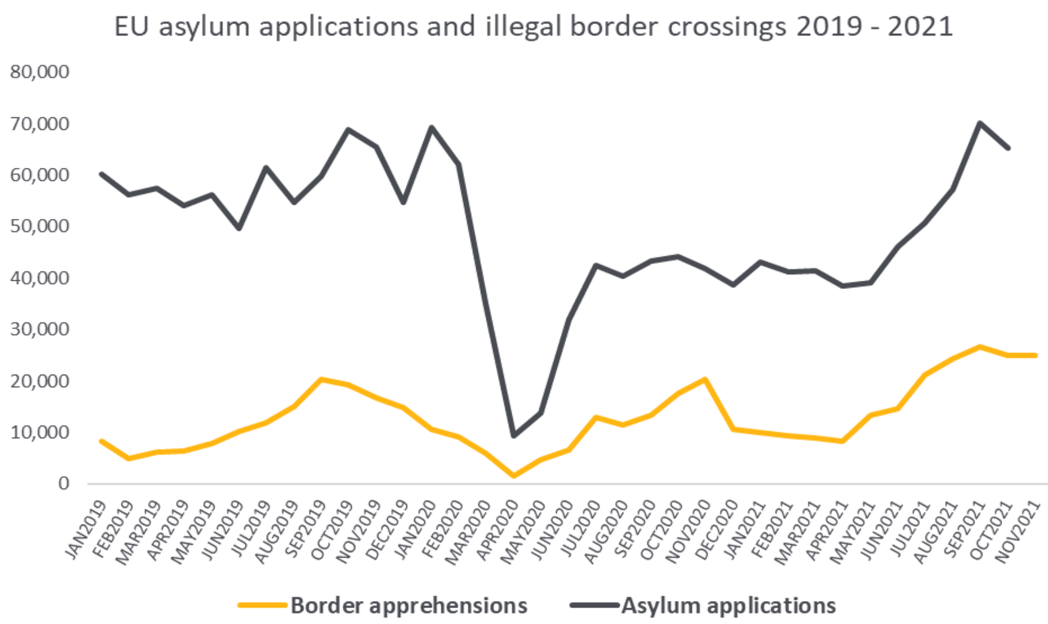
Migration trends in the EU

As in previous years, the European migration debate in 2021 was shaped by issues related to **irregular migration and asylum** that revolve around the continued impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on mobility and economic recovery, the migration-related effects of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the emergence of new state-induced flows at the eastern borders of the EU.

Two sets of indicators provide information about related developments: the **detections of illegal border crossings** and the total numbers of **asylum applications** submitted in the EU. As a result of mobility restrictions to contain the pandemic, 2020 had already seen a decrease in both asylum applications (minus 24.8%) and border apprehensions (minus 7.8%). The question was whether the lifting of containment measures in conjunction with developments in major regions of origin of irregular migration flows would lead to a return to pre-COVID trends.

Irregular migration and asylum applications

Between January and December 2021, Frontex registered a total of **196,034 illegal crossings** at the external borders of the EU. This figure corresponds to an **increase of 56.7%** in comparison to the **125,110 cases** recorded in 2020 but also an **increase of 38.3%** in comparison to 2019, the last year before COVID-related mobility restrictions were imposed. The decrease observed in 2020 was largely caused by one-off effects from the tight travel restrictions introduced by EU Member States during the spring of that year. As soon as these restrictions were lifted, figures went up again, a trend that continued throughout 2021. Year-end figures suggest both a limited effect of COVID-19 on apprehensions and a significant increase in irregular migration flows towards the EU.



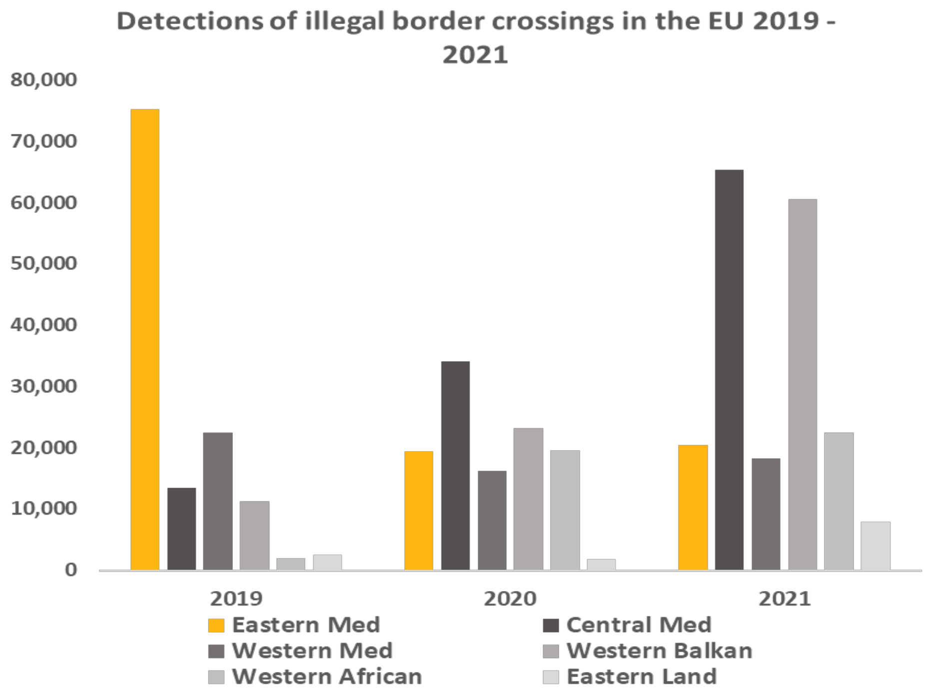
Source: Eurostat, Frontex

Thus, the observed overall increase did not affect the main routes in similar ways. In 2021, detections continued to shift away from the **Eastern Mediterranean Route** to the **Central Mediterranean Route** and the **Western Balkans Route**. Along the Eastern Mediterranean Route, the number of detections were almost the same as in 2020, but the big shift had already taken place before. In reaction to increasing migration pressures, Greece had closed its external borders and temporarily suspended the admission of asylum applications in 2020. The Greek government introduced additional measures in 2021, namely the building of "closed controlled structures" for reception, the processing of claims of sea arrivals in island centres only, a wider use of administrative detention and the extension of physical border control facilities and surveillance. The strict Greek asylum policy apparently prompted many irregular migrants and asylum seekers to switch to alternate routes.

The **Central Mediterranean Route** saw an increase in detections of **83.6%** (a total of 65,362 detections in 2021) and the **Western Balkans Route,** an increase of **125.3%** (a total of 60,540 detections). In 2021, these two routes registered **64.2% of all detections of illegal border crossings in the EU**, a significant shift compared to two years ago, when they had recorded only 19.5% of all detections. The Western Balkans countries are mainly transit countries of irregular migrants on their way to northern and western destinations in the EU. The border control, reception and return systems in these places are overburdened by the high inflows experienced in 2021, turning them almost into natural targets for migrant smuggling networks to direct clients to their aspired destinations in the EU.

In relative terms, the biggest increase in detections was observed along the **Eastern Borders Route**. According to Frontex, a total of 7,915 irregular migrants were detected at the eastern borders in the first eleven months of 2021, a number more than twelve times higher than in 2020. Based on observations of the border management and asylum systems in Poland, Lithuania and Germany it is obvious that the real numbers of irregular migrants along this route were even much higher. In total, 43,000 illegal entries were reported by Poland and 4,000 by Lithuania.

The past has shown that irregular migration routes can change rather quickly. However, if the current migration regime in the Eastern Mediterranean, i.e. the EU-Turkey Statement and the strict Greek border and asylum policy, remains in place, it is safe to assume that the patterns that have developed over the past two years will continue to shape the distribution of detections towards the Central Mediterranean Route, the Western Balkans Route and, to a lesser degree, the Eastern Borders Route again in 2022.



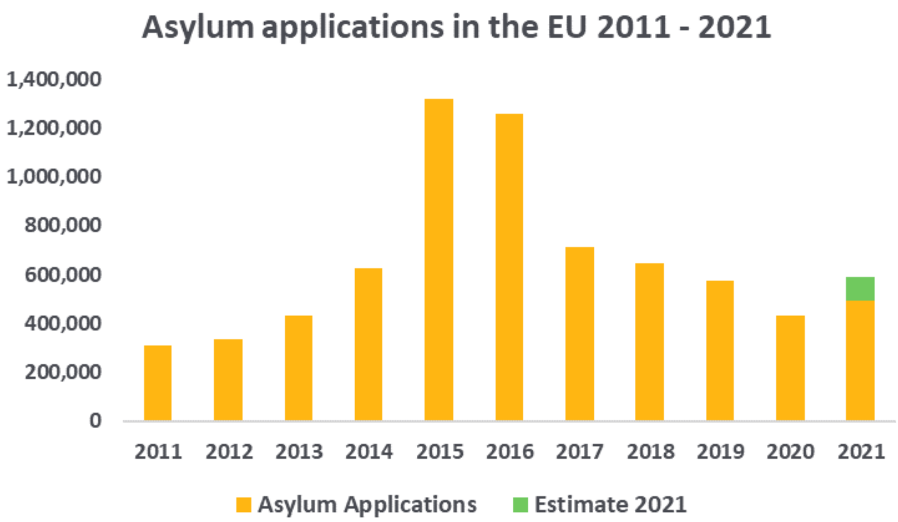
Source: Frontex

The nationalities that dominated the numbers of irregular arrivals and asylum applications in previous years all saw increases in detections. By the end of November, apprehensions of **Syrian nationals** had increased by 128.0% (from 15,604 in 2020 to 35,578 in 2021), of **Afghan nationals** by 16.3% (from 8,765 in 2020 to 10,195 in 2021) and of **Iraqi nationals** by 428.4% (from 1,459 in 2020 to 7,709 in 2021). Thus, the stark growth in apprehensions of Iraqi nationals in 2021 implies a return to pre-pandemic trends after a significant drop in irregular arrivals in 2020 rather than a change in overall dynamics. The regime change in Afghanistan has not yet led to a dramatic increase in irregular arrivals of Afghan nationals in the Schengen Area. However, emerging displacement situations usually affect Europe with a certain delay. The rapidly worsening economic and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is still likely to cause significant outflows in 2022, first to the neighbouring countries and subsequently in the form of secondary movements also to Europe.

Last year saw the continuation of a trend that had started back in 2020, namely a significant **relative increase in arrivals from North African countries of origin**. The number of apprehended Tunisian nationals increased by 43.9% in 2021 (from 11,305 detections to 16,273 detections) and was thus five times higher than in 2019. The number of apprehended Moroccans increased by 48.0% (from 8,765 detections to 12,976 detections). Apprehensions of Algerians remained stable (minus 3.8%), but the total number of 10,745 detections was still three times higher than two years ago. Analysts agree that irregular migration from North Africa mainly involves the younger generations and is driven by a worsening economic situation, also due to COVID-19, high unemployment or underemployment and little hope of speedy economic and social reform. Irregular migration from North Africa is caused by structural and lasting factors rather than by short-term events. Migration pressures from the region will persist and irregular migration trends in line with last year's figures or above are a likely development in 2022.

Asylum applications in 2021

In **the first ten months of 2021, a total of 492,781 asylum applications** were submitted in Member States of the European Union. This represents a **25.7% increase in comparison to the previous year** (end-of-October figure for 2020: 392,040 applications; end-of-October figure for 2019: 578,860 applications). Asylum figures saw a significant drop in 2020 as a result of the strict mobility restrictions imposed in the EU (March 2020: minus 38.9% in applications compared to March 2019; April 2020 minus 82.7%; May 2020 minus 75.6%). Like border detections, monthly application figures started to catch up again in the second half of 2020. Throughout 2021, they moved in the same ranges as in 2019, the year before the pandemic struck. Based on an extrapolation of the monthly application data to October, it can be assumed that the **year-end figures will range from 570,000 to 590,000**. However, a real assessment of asylum migration in 2021 will not be possible until final EU application statistics are available in March 2022. The figures below refer to the most recent country statistics available at the time of writing.

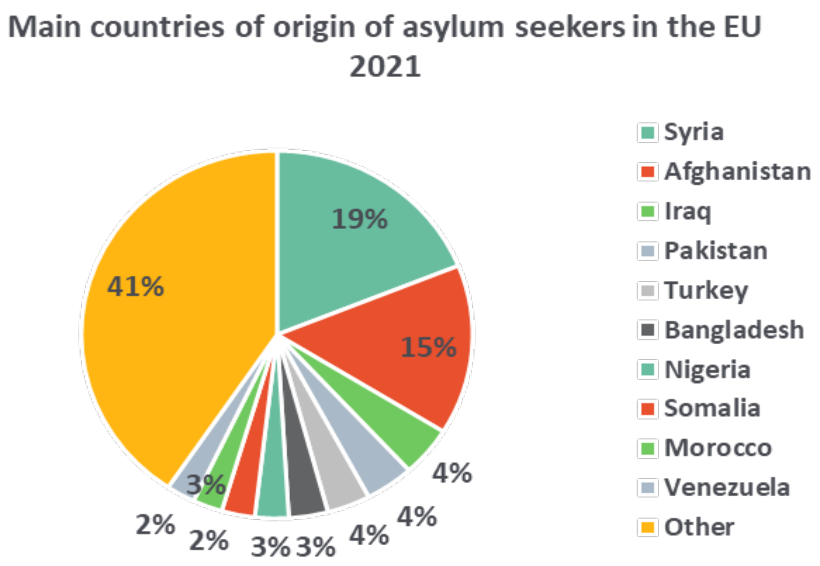


Source: Eurostat

The three most important countries of origin for asylum seekers over the last couple of years, **Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, showed significant increases in 2021** following a drop in 2020. In the first ten months of 2021, asylum applications from Syria increased by 71.0% (from 54,410 applications in 2020 to 93,068 in 2021), from Afghanistan by 90.5% (from 38,685 applications in 2020 to 73,682 in 2021) and from Iraq by 34.5% (from 16,050 applications in 2020 to 21,586 in 2021). Notably, asylum applications submitted by Afghan nationals increased more significantly than detections at the external borders, suggesting that a certain share of applications pertain to Afghans already residing on EU territory , either undocumented or after rejection of a previous application.

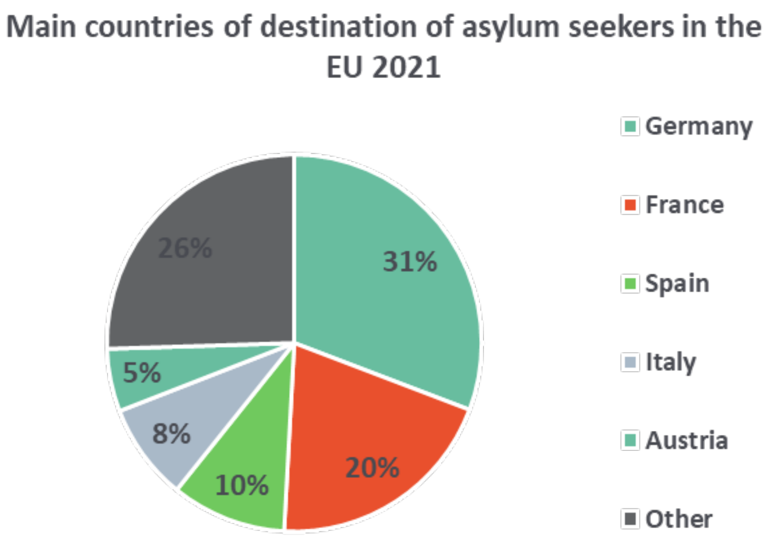
The increased relevance of irregular migration from North African countries of origin is also reflected in asylum application figures. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of applications submitted by Moroccan nationals increased by 94.2% (from 6,215 applications in 2020 to 12,072 in 2021), the ones submitted by Tunisian nationals by 269.6% (from 2,130 applications in 2020 to 7,872 in 2021) and the ones submitted by Algerian nationals by 8.0% (from 5,930 applications in 2020 to 6,402 in 2021). Still, Morocco is the only North African country among the ten most important countries of origin of asylum seekers in the EU. Apart from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, which accounted for almost 40% of all applications in the EU in 2021, Pakistan (19,806 applications), Turkey (17,597 applications), Bangladesh (15,898 applications), Nigeria (13,754 applications) and Somalia (13,501 applications) all rank above the North African countries.

The relative increase in applications from many countries of origin was somewhat offset by a significant **decrease in asylum claims** submitted by nationals from **Latin American countries**. In 2021, Venezuelan nationals submitted a total of 11,783 asylum applications in the EU (minus 58.0% in comparison to 2020) and Colombian nationals a total of 9,146 applications (minus 65.6%). The number of applications submitted in the EU by Colombian and Venezuelan citizens had already gone down significantly in 2020. At the time, that decrease was believed to be the result of the extensive restrictions on air travel from third countries to the EU during the first phase of the pandemic. The gradual lifting of restrictions, however, has not led to a resurgence of Latin American asylum migration to the EU. Citizens from Latin American are still exempt from visa requirements in Spain and the decrease in asylum applications is believed to be the result of fewer flight connections to Europe and increased movement towards the US, two factors that are likely to limit Latin American asylum migration to the EU again in 2022.



Source: Eurostat

As in previous years, applications were concentrated in a small number of Member States, with **74.5% of all asylum applications submitted in just five EU Member States**: **Germany** (30.8%), **France** (20.1%), **Spain** (9.9%), **Italy** (8.3%) and **Austria** (5.4%). Out of this group Austria saw the highest relative increase in applications (plus 134.7% compared to 2020; 23,025 applications in total), followed by Italy (plus 111.7% compared to 2020; 35,650 applications in total), Germany (plus 50.3% compared to 2020; 131,630 applications in total) and France (plus 30.1% compared to 2020; 86,055 applications in total). Spain was the only country from this group to observe a significant drop in applications (minus 41.0%; 42,500 cases in total), a development largely attributable to the decrease in claims submitted by Latin American nationals.



Source: Eurostat

Migration policy developments in the EU – Belarus and the instrumentalisation of migration

The instrumentalisation of migration is not an entirely new phenomenon. Analysts have counted more than sixty historical cases in which states have used forced migration to put other states under pressure and to achieve foreign policy goals. More than once, they succeeded in getting the opposing state to withdraw sanctions, increase economic aid or turn a blind eye to human rights issues. Given the decisive influence of migration issues on election outcomes and the simultaneous expectation to fulfil minimum humanitarian standards, democracies are easier to blackmail by the threat or actual creation of irregular migration movements. In the case of the EU, this has repeatedly been the case. Neighbouring countries have threatened before to "open the floodgates", allowed irregular migrants to pass through their territories towards the EU and received considerable economic aid and political gains in return for implementing control measures. In those cases, however, the states exerting coercion were hosting large migrant and refugee populations themselves and were under pressure to provide relief or at least receive financial compensation. They therefore maintained a dialogue with the EU and thus made it possible to return to diplomacy and to reach agreement on at least temporary solutions.

The situation with Belarus is different. After the EU had imposed sanctions in May following a disputed presidential election, months of unrest, and the hijacking and subsequent arrest of a prominent opposition figure, Belarus began allowing asylum seekers, mainly Iraqis but also Syrians and Afghans, to enter Minsk with single-entry visas. Apparently, there was also structural cooperation on the part of state agencies with migrant smuggling networks in countries of origin, which actively solicited clients on behalf of Belarusian authorities. Each client reportedly paid several thousands of euros for the flight, travel documents and accommodation in hotels controlled by the government. From Minsk, they were transported to the borders with Poland and Lithuania. Observers widely agreed that this scheme was intended to retaliate and to bring about the softening of sanctions, noting that before May of this year there were no relevant migration corridors to Belarus, no migrant communities from these countries of origin within its territory, and no significant movements along the route leading from Belarus to the EU. Thus, the deliberate creation of said situation has a truly different dimension than previous instances and can indeed be regarded as a case of hybrid aggression. In total, 43,000 illegal entries and attempts to enter were reported by Poland and 4,000 by Lithuania.

The EU response was swift and robust with crucial non-European partners following suit. Poland, Lithuania and Latvia closed border crossing points and erected effective barriers to illegal entry, and thousands of migrants found themselves stuck in no man's land between borders or on Belarus territory. Simultaneously, the EU mobilised its diplomatic power to convince carriers and authorities in countries of origin to close down air routes to Belarus. Turkey stopped citizens of Iraq, Syria and Yemen from flying from Turkey. Iraq withdrew the rights of the Belarus consulate in Baghdad to issue visas. Finally, the EU and the US activated a fifth round of sanctions in early December. As a result, the number of attempts to cross the Belarussian border into the EU dropped drastically. Belarus started to return migrants to their home country, sources estimate about 2,000 in total, whilst around 7,000 migrants are still stuck in Belarus under precarious conditions. The situation remains volatile and thousands of migrants are in a state of limbo with their lives and well-being in imminent danger.

What lessons can be learned from this experience for the year 2022 and beyond? First, the instrumentalisation of irregular migration is a viable tool to put pressure on the EU. It might happen again. Second, if the EU reacts in a swift, robust and unified way, it has the means to respond successfully. Third, for a successful response the EU needs the cooperation of non-EU partners and non-state actors. Fourth, the toolbox to respond to similar attempts in the future must include official sanctions, carrier blacklisting, removal of visa privileges, trade restrictions but also fast-reacting direct diplomacy based on a clear and unanimously supported mandate. Fifth, the EU response also included the use of measures in "emergency migratory situations at the EU's external borders", namely the identification of specific registration points at the border for lodging and registering an asylum application, the extension of the limit to register an application to four weeks, the application of the accelerated border procedure to all applications and for up to sixteen weeks and the disapplying of the suspensive effect of appeals in all border procedures. In December, the European Commission presented a general proposal for a regulation to address situations of instrumentalisation, taking up these measures together with derogations from the asylum acquis, extended registration periods, expanded and prolonged border procedures, limited reception conditions and exceptions from Return Directive standards. The proposal was welcomed by many Member States but also sparked concerns about a weakening of asylum seekers' rights.

Despite significantly reduced pressures, the situation at the Belarussian border remains volatile and a rerouting of flows towards Ukraine is always possible. Moreover, thousands of migrants are left in a state of limbo and immediate threat to their lives and well-being. For the EU, the sometimes-inevitable conflict between the need for border protection and the commitment to international protection remains unresolved.

European elections and the French Presidency of the European Union

2022 is a big election year in Europe. Hungary, Portugal, Serbia, France, Malta, Sweden, Latvia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Italy and Austria will hold parliamentary or presidential elections. Against the backdrop of various positions on migration and the necessary European responses, this issue will feature prominently in all national campaigns and the electoral outcomes will influence the direction of EU migration policy in 2022 and beyond.

It is obvious that all of this year's elections are important for European migration policy making, but the French presidential election stands out for a number of reasons. First, France holds the presidency of the European Union during the first half of the year and must drive forward the Council's work on EU legislation, a task that is difficult enough for any government but even more so during election times. Second, Euroscepticism is widespread both among the French electorate and the far-right, centrist and left-wing candidates and is often linked to a tougher stance on immigration and the wish to repatriate power from the EU to the Member States. These views are shared by candidates, parties and voters in other Member States as well and will have their impact on the European debate, irrespective of the final outcome of the French election. Finally, this debate might also influence French-German cooperation on migration issues and beyond. When working together, France and Germany have often been the engine of European Union reform, able to steer the debate and to catalyse agreement among other Member States. It remains to be seen to which extent the new German coalition and the French government can agree on a joint agenda before and after the presidential election, between themselves and with the other Member States.

Under the title of "Recovery, Strength and a Sense of Belonging", the Programme of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union commits to taking the work on the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum further. It focuses on two headings in the area of migration: the reform of the Schengen Area and the continuation of the work on asylum and migration. The reform of the Schengen Area should aim at enhancing the protection mechanisms for the external borders of the EU, provide solutions to the instrumentalisation of migration by (certain) third countries and prevent irregular migratory flows within the Schengen Area. The governance of Schengen should be improved and the Council's role of political steering strengthened. Internal border controls were a much-debated issue in the EU before, with the European Commission and several Member States insisting that such controls must remain the exception. It can be assumed that this debate will continue in 2022 and throughout the French Presidency. In the area of migration and asylum, the French Presidency seeks to further strengthen the cooperation with the main countries of origin or transit based on concrete action plans and supported by an operational structure yet to be created, in order to ensure effective coordination and steering. Regarding the internal dimension, the French Presidency Programme commits to a continuation of negotiations on all legislative proposals to ensure a balance between the protection of external borders, responsibility and solidarity. Finally, it aims at moving forward on a unified European policy on returns, supporting the actions of the Member States.

But the European migration policy agenda in 2022 will be influenced by last year's elections as well. The new German government's coalition agreement contains an extensive chapter on integration, migration and flight. It calls for a restart of Germany's migration and integration policy to reflect the stance of a modern immigration country. The chapter includes several reform goals for domestic residency law, integration policy and the asylum system. Under the heading "European and international refugee policy", the coalition agreement calls for a strengthening of functioning partnership agreements with non-EU countries that follows a holistic approach and includes economic cooperation, strengthening of migration governance capacities, visa facilitation, skills transfers, job platforms and cooperation on the reintegration of rejected asylum seekers. The German government commits to a fundamental reform of the European asylum system, ensuring a fair sharing of responsibility and solidarity. Thus, Germany aims to forge a coalition of Member States that are receptive towards admission. In this regard, Germany has held talks with Italy on signing a joint action plan on climate, economy and migration by mid-year, intended amongst other things to support the two countries' joint vision on refugees and migration. At the same time the coalition agreement commits to a strengthening of the external borders and to looking at ways to prevent the instrumentalisation of migrants, to process, in exceptional cases, asylum claims outside EU territory and to prevent the misuse of visa-free travel for secondary movements within the EU.

The above priorities of the French Presidency and the new German coalition are representative of the common questions that have been discussed in the EU for years and the varying positions that the Member States have taken in answering them. These issues will also influence other European elections in 2022. The question now is this: In which of these areas will progress be possible and where is agreement less likely? A cautious assessment based on the experience of recent years would suggest that the EU and the Member States are more likely to find agreement on jointly responding to the instrumentalisation of migrants by non-EU countries, the strengthening of the external borders, common return policies, enhanced cooperation with third countries and ways to limit secondary movements within the EU. They will have greater difficulty finding common ground on the reform of the Schengen Area and the issue of solidarity and responsibility-sharing for asylum seekers among the EU Member States.

Labour shortages and the discussion on legal migration channels

The European Union has entered a period of demographic ageing. By 2050, the share of the EU population of working age (aged 15 to 64) will shrink by 12.8% from a total of 287.1 million to 250.5 million. In absolute terms this corresponds to a loss of 36.7 million people of working age across the Union by 2050. The whole EU will be affected but demographic ageing will be most pronounced in the eastern, southern and south-eastern Member States. As a consequence, a number of sectors of the European labour markets have entered a period of structural undersupply in terms of available labour force and this trend will continue. At the same time, European labour markets are undergoing fundamental transformations and the effects in the medium and long term of digitalisation and automatisation on existing job profiles and overall labour demand are not yet fully clear. Analysts expect a constant decline in the demand for menial jobs and low-skilled labour force and increasing demand for skilled workers in STEM jobs (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) but also in the crafts, care and healthcare, hospitality, tourism and logistics sectors. The deficit in EU Member States' healthcare sectors, for instance, is predicted to rise to 4.1 million workers by 2030.

Already now, many vacancies cannot be filled with domestic applicants and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even clearer how much the European economies depend on essential workers, whether they come from another Member State or a non-EU country. Last year, an apparent shortage of heavy goods vehicle drivers ("HGV" or "lorry drivers") in the UK and other European countries made the headlines, spurring fears of interrupted supply chains and missing deliveries of food, fuel and other essential goods. Estimates published by transport organisations spoke of shortages of 120,000 HGV drivers in Poland, 100,000 in the UK and 60,000 in Germany. A deeper analysis revealed that an exodus of drivers had been caused by COVID-19 related mobility restrictions, low wages and bad working conditions but also by the fact that many of them were close to retirement age and had decided to leave the logistics sector altogether. Similar developments, however, were seen in other essential sectors across Europe, such as care and healthcare or tourism, all of which had to cope with recruitment bottlenecks. Last year's experience ultimately showed that the actual labour shortages in most sectors were less dramatic than portrayed in the media and that much can still be done by upskilling, higher wages and better working conditions. That said, European labour markets will remain tight in 2022 and beyond.

The EU Member States will have to respond to the challenge of demographic ageing with a sound mix of policies, including the upskilling of the existing labour force, the mobilisation of the working age population not yet engaging in employment and the further promotion of labour mobility within the EU. Labour migration from non-EU countries alone will not be sufficient to meet this challenge but will have to form part of an overall labour market strategy. Thus, European governments will try to ensure that the creation of legal channels for non-EU migrants ensures the required skills and qualifications but also safeguards migration control and return. 2022 will see a debate on ways to fill immediate shortages and to cope with long-term labour market demands, both at EU and Member State level. This might also give renewed impetus to the further development of instruments like the EU's Talent Partnerships and to overall cooperation with non-EU countries on labour migration issues.

Conclusions for 2022

In 2022, the situation in the wider European region will be shaped by migration-related developments in the Near and Middle East, African regions and Eastern Europe. This does not imply that other world regions deserve less attention, but the major migration movements towards Europe will be linked to the situation in these regions. Violent conflicts and economic imbalances, aggravated by uneven recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue to be the main drivers of related flows. The actual dynamics, however, will also be more strongly embedded in geopolitical contexts in the immediate neighbourhood and influenced by attempts to respond to an instrumentalisation of migration for political purposes. This conclusion refers to the Belarus situation but also to the aggravation of Russian-Ukrainian relations and tensions between Russia and NATO.

2021 revealed that the instrumentalisation of irregular migration is a viable tool to put pressure on the EU but also showed that if the EU reacts in a swift, robust and unified way, it has the means to respond successfully. It needs to cooperate with non-EU partners and non-state actors and to apply an extensive toolbox including official sanctions, carrier blacklisting, removal of visa privileges, trade restrictions but also fast-reacting direct diplomacy based on a clear and unanimously supported mandate. The debate on the use of measures in emergency migratory situations, such as the limitation of registration points, the extension of time limits to register an application or the extended use of the accelerated border procedure, will continue in 2022. Related proposals were welcomed by many Member States but also sparked concerns about a weakening of asylum seekers' and migrants' rights.

The rise in irregular migration will be a second major concern of the European Union in 2022. Illegal crossings detected at the Schengen borders in 2021 increased by 57% in comparison to 2020 and by 38% in comparison to 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic began. Driven by growing instability in major countries of origin and aggravated by the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, this trend is likely to continue again in 2022. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the flare-up of the Syrian conflict, tensions in Libya and growing instability in several African regions are the most prominent but by no means the only examples of worsening security and humanitarian crises in the wider European neighbourhood. Not least because of the strict asylum and migration policy imposed by Greece since the beginning of 2020, irregular migration routes have further shifted from the Eastern Mediterranean Route to the Central and Western Balkans Routes. The latter link countries that are mainly transit countries of irregular migrants on their way to northern and western destinations in the EU. Border control, reception and return systems in these places are overburdened by the kinds of high inflows experienced in 2021, turning them almost into natural targets for migrant smuggling networks to use in directing clients to their aspired destinations in the EU. All facts speak for strengthening cooperation along this route and for more firmly integrating the Western Balkan countries into the EU's regional migration system.

Labour shortages and a discussion on legal migration channels will be another main topic in 2022. The European Union has entered a period of demographic ageing. By 2050, the share of the EU population of working age will shrink by 13% or 37 million in total. Even today, many vacancies cannot be filled with domestic applicants and the COVID-19 pandemic has made it even clearer how much the European economies depend on essential workers, whether they come from another Member State or a non-EU country. Last year, an apparent shortage of lorry drivers in the UK and other European countries made the headlines, spurring fears of interrupted supply chains. Current labour shortages might be less severe than portrayed in the media and much can be done through upskilling, higher wages and better working conditions. But European labour markets will remain tight in 2022 and beyond, intensifying the debate on ways to fill immediate shortages and to cope with long-term labour market demands. This might give renewed impetus to the further development of instruments such as the EU's Talent Partnerships and to overall cooperation with non-EU countries on labour migration issues.

ICMPD
International Centre for Migration Policy Development

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