ICMPD Migration Outlook 2019

Origins, key events and priorities for Europe

I. REVIEW OF 2018

1. General migration situation in 2018

In Europe, the migration debate is dominated primarily by issues surrounding irregular migration and asylum migration, so indicators on these two factors deserve special examination. The general tenor in politics and media coverage suggests an easing of tension in the situation. Reference is often made to a massive reduction in irregular migration to the EU. It reached its lowest level in five years in 2018. Although this viewpoint is not incorrect, it warrants more precise elaboration. A total of 150,000 illegal border crossings were registered in 2018. This number was in fact as low in 2018 as it had been since 2013 and amounted to only about one twelfth of the figure recorded for 2015 (1.82 million). The main routes shifted away from the Libya – Italy route in the central Mediterranean (a reduction of 80% compared to 2017) to the Morocco – Spain route in the western Mediterranean (an increase of 100% compared to 2017).[1] However, the figures for asylum applications in 2018 suggest that the Mediterranean routes may not be the only way of getting to Europe. The number of asylum applications fell again in 2018 but not as sharply as the number of illegal border crossings. Although final figures are not yet available, it can be assumed that the total number of applications for the EU will end up at around 630,000.[2] That would be about 13% fewer applications than in 2017 (when the total was about 712,000) and about 51% fewer than in the peak year 2015 (1.3 million). The figure for 2018 would nonetheless be the fifth highest in the past 25 years.

EU border apprehenions and asylum applications 2008 - 2018

Source: Eurostat

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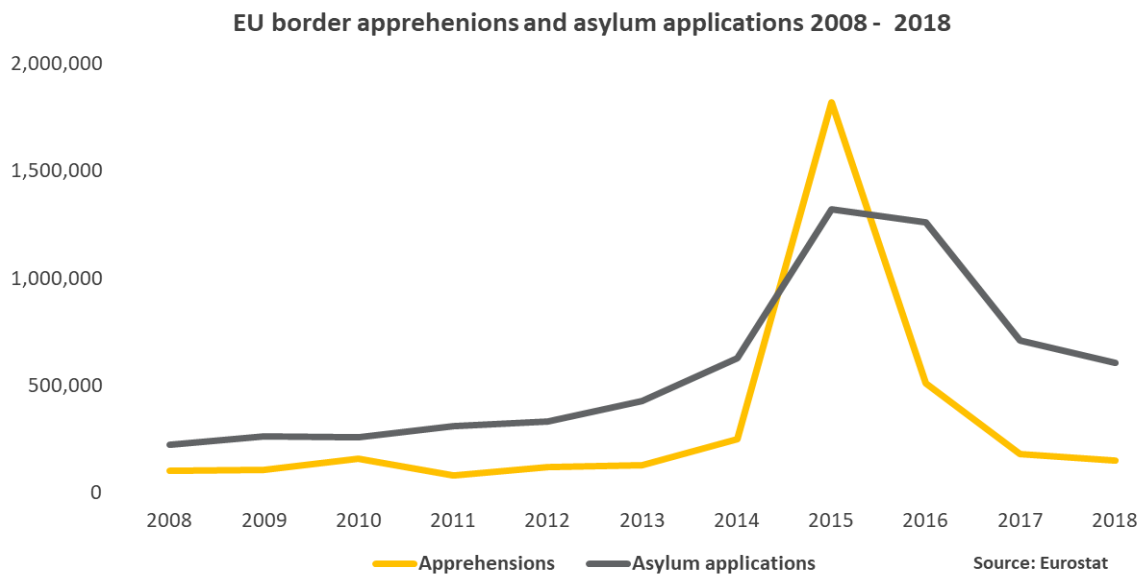
[1] Source: Frontex, detections of illegal border-crossings statistics.
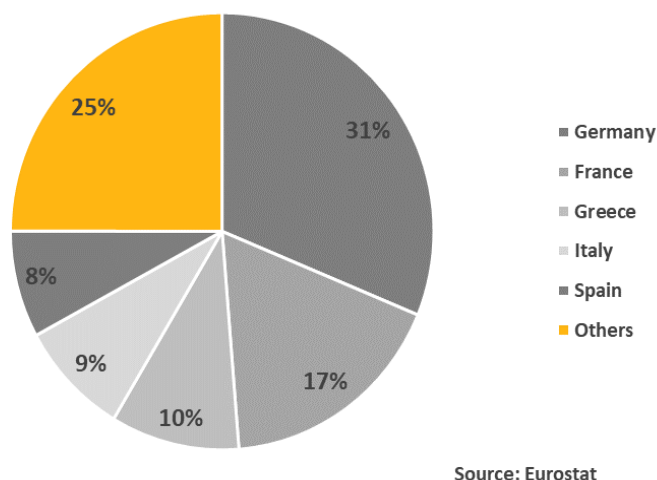[2] Source: Eurostat, asylum and migration statistics, own calculations.

Countries of origin for the applicants in 2018 The nations topping the list for most applications were Syria (13.7%), Afghanistan (7.1%), Iraq (7.1%), Pakistan (4.3%), Nigeria (4.1%), Iran (3.9%), Turkey (3.7%), Albania (3.3%), Eritrea (2.6%), Russia (2.5%) and Somalia (2.1%).[3] The applicants originate – not exclusively but predominantly – from conflict regions within a wider radius of Europe. Asylum migration is largely conflict-induced in the European context. This means, in turn, that developments in global conflicts will fundamentally shape what happens in the asylum sector in the future, too.

EU asylum applications 2018 - countries of origin

Source: Eurostat
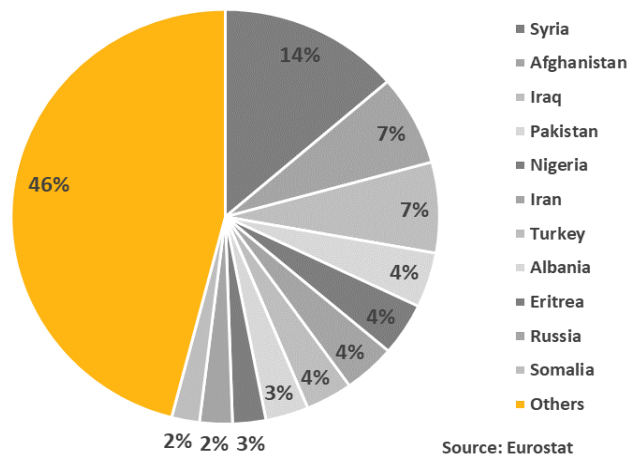
EU countries of destination for the applicants in 2018 As in the past, the asylum applications were concentrated in a handful of host countries within the EU. In 2018 about 75% of all asylum applications were submitted in just five EU Member States: Germany (31.2%), France (17.5%), Greece (9.8%), Italy (8.5%) and Spain (7.9%). This clustering with changing countries of destination has been observed time and again in the past as well.

EU asylum applications 2018 - destinations

Source: Eurostat

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[3] Source: Eurostat, asylum and migration statistics, own calculations.

2. Reforms of EU migration and refugee policy

a.) Internal dimension of EU migration and refugee policy

The reform of the internal dimension made good progress in 2018 in several areas, for instance, the strengthening of the mandate and institutional capacities of Frontex and EASO, the new version of the Eurodac Regulation, the Asylum Procedures Directive, the Qualification Directive and the Reception Conditions Directive.

In a certain respect, 2018 also brought about final clarity on how extensive the reform would be of the **Common European Asylum System (CEAS),** a central element of internal EU refugee and migration policy. The most controversial point in this regard was and still is the **reform of the Dublin II Regulation**. It sets down the criteria for determining which of the participating states is responsible for processing an asylum application. The first-country principle in the Regulation puts more or less the entire burden of all EU asylum procedures on the Member States along the external borders. Under the impression of the collapse of the Dublin-based system in 2015 and under the bywords solidarity and responsibility-sharing, this system was to be reformed to provide a **just** but also **obligatory distribution key for asylum applicants**. The approach entailing mandatory quotas was never capable of winning a majority and 2018 gave final proof of that fact. The Bulgarian Presidency still tried to rescue the Dublin Reform by devising a series of proposed compromises that would have softened the obligations regarding an obligatory distribution key. This attempt bore no fruit either. The Dublin Reform came to a standstill and is not expected to gain steam quickly in 2019.

Implementing other new instruments of EU migration policy prominently discussed in 2018 also proved difficult. The creation of **regional disembarkation platforms** in North Africa met with no willingness for concrete implementation among the EU neighbouring states. The idea of **controlled centres** within the EU to enable the initial examination of applications and distribution within the EU experienced a similar fate. By contrast, there was a clear commitment to increasing the common **pool of border guards under Frontex's mandate to a total of 10,000**, but the original idea of quick implementation by 2020 had to be abandoned for cost reasons.

All the ideas named – from distribution quotas to asylum procedures outside the EU – basically have one and the same goal in common, namely, to decouple an applicant's asylum procedure from access to EU territory or to the territory of a certain Member State. This characteristic of the existing system is a determining factor of irregular migration to the EU, wanting to break through this pattern is a legitimate goal. It is a goal that is very difficult to achieve, however, as 2018 showed and as 2019 will likely also show.

b.) External dimension of EU migration and refugee policy

The reform of the external dimension of EU migration and refugee policy made better progress in 2018 than that of the internal dimension. Following the peak of the crisis in 2015, essential political initiatives were launched, and new instruments created. The **EU-Turkey Statement** of 18 March 2016 is perhaps the most prominent example. A further example is the forging of **EU migration partnerships** that combine migration policy goals with economic cooperation and that were initially concluded with Niger, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Ethiopia. They appear to be working. Through strong border controls and measures against human trafficking, people smuggling in the region was at least able to be reduced while the number of voluntary returns were increased. It would be desirable if the south-eastern partner states all the way to Afghanistan would also be incorporated into this network. The **EU Trust Funds** for Africa, North Africa and Syria also made positive contributions to the local integration of refugees in the main host countries but also to further cooperation on economic and border control issues. It can be assumed that the EU Presidencies and the new Commission will continue this same path in 2019 and probably even expand their efforts.

c.) Bottom line on EU policy development

One can conclude that the EU has made good progress since 2015 in important areas of European migration and refugee policy. This progress is notable for the degree and quality of the cooperation with non-EU-partners, especially with respect to the economic dimension, the control of external borders, the institutional strengthening of the European asylum agency EASO and Frontex, but also of the return policy. The reform of the "internal dimension", namely of the Common European Asylum System, was less successful, and the issue of inner European solidarity and responsibility-sharing made no headway whatsoever. The political tensions among the EU Member States persist, as do the weaknesses in the system. At least no clear-cut affirmation can be given to the question of whether the European system is more resilient today than before the crisis.

II. OUTLOOK 2019

1. Hot spots in 2019 and possible consequences for Europe

The factors that will shape the European migration situation in the near future are found in the "conflict belt" of the Near and Middle East and in North Africa. Of course, other regions in Africa and Asia are just as important, but any major and spontaneous refugee movements in 2019 would likely originate in this conflict belt.

In **Syria**, the battle for Idlib and the announced withdrawal of the US could drive an additional million Syrians to flee to Turkey, already host to more than 3 million Syrian refugees.

In **Iran**, the US sanctions have exacerbated the economic and political situation. On the one hand, this could lead to an increase in asylum applications from Iran in the EU but on the other hand, the situation in Iran is intensifying the exodus of Afghan nationals from Iran to their home country. Their stay in Iran is largely just "tolerated". In the past, they took on low or poor paying jobs, which will now disappear. In 2018, an estimated 730,000 Afghans already returned from Iran to their home country and this trend will continue in 2019. Increased migration pressure is expected in the direction of Turkey and beyond in the direction of Europe.

The situation In **Libya** remains highly volatile. The country is still divided, politically unstable, and at risk of experiencing a breakdown in civil order. The various governmental, quasi-governmental and non-governmental players are central to European foreign policy on migration as key political and practical partners of Europe in the control of the central Mediterranean route. If this cooperation were to collapse, Libya would become a hot spot of irregular migration to Europe again in no time at all.

The **Russia-Ukraine** conflict could flare up again at any time in 2019 as well. It can be assumed, however, that any refugee movements would head in the direction of Russia or Poland and be largely absorbed by the labour markets there.

The list could be continued of course. One thing that can be said in any event is that the conflict situations in this conflict belt can lead at any time to the displacement and flight of large populations, also in 2019. These kinds of events are possible at any time, they are probable, but they are of course not inevitable. As a rule, large refugee movements remain limited to the local area initially. In other words, Europe would be affected primarily in the subsequent years of this escalation. The crisis is by no means over. We are merely in a quieter phase of a long-term crisis.

2. Formative events in 2019 – European election and Brexit

The election of the European Parliament in May 2019 and the subsequent election of a new EU Commission is likely to cause a further slowdown in the development of EU policy on migration into the second half of the year. It is assumed that the elections will strengthen the forces critical of Europe and of migration. At the same time, the election results cannot resolve the contradictions and differences of opinion among the Member States, regardless of the outcome. Against this backdrop, 2019 could become a rather lacklustre year regarding migration policy reforms in the EU.

In addition, the probability of a no-deal Brexit is looming ever larger. This would mean – from a purely legal vantage point – that from 30 March, about 3.8 million EU citizens in the United Kingdom and about 860,000 British citizens in the EU would lose the residence status associated with their Union citizenship. There are declarations of intent from both sides that the status of these individuals and their residence and labour rights should be left untouched. Nevertheless, the form migration should take between the UK and the EU following a Brexit is an issue that will occupy the European governments to a much greater extent than many people have yet realized.

3. Megatrend: legal migration / labour migration

Although the political debate focuses mainly on irregular migration, flight and displacement; a different subject drew attention again in the migration debate, namely, the issue of legal migration and labour migration. This aspect is generally discussed against the backdrop of demographic aging in Europe and its effects on the economic and social systems. The demographic challenge requires myriad measures, of which migration can be just one among many. In fact, this challenge will require an increase in the percentage of working women (which, in turn, assumes improved childcare), longer work lives, further technologies in products and services, and the further qualification of the existing labour pool to cope with the next technical revolutions to come. In addition, there will also very likely be a structural need for immigration, especially regarding medium-level qualifications, which are increasingly not covered by domestic labour.

Germany saw a decline in the birth rate after reunification and was therefore affected earlier by the demographic gap on the labour market than other EU Member States. As a result, it has already passed an immigration law. Other European states will follow. In any event, 2019 will see the representatives of business interests exert greater pressure for openness toward labour migration and for more intensive public debate on the issue. What are needed are unerring medium and long-term reforms to define the need for labour migration, to enable legal immigration of workers to Europe and to organize and finance the necessary training on-site in regions of origin.

4. Priorities for 2019 and beyond

The challenges associated with flight and migration, first, can be dealt with only over the long term, and second, originate primarily outside Europe. This framework also determines the measures that should be taken in 2019 and beyond. First, the main causes of flight and migration must be addressed even more effectively: conflicts, demography, socio-economic transformation processes and economic inequalities. The initiatives Europe has launched over the past three years are heading in the right direction. But more of these initiatives, perhaps many, many more, will be needed. And they will work only if they entail close cooperation with the partners outside Europe and a recognition of these partners' needs and interests.

Second, Europe must move toward a rule-based migration system with clearly defined objectives. It is a question of being able to decide who may or should come and under what conditions. And it is a question of being able to enforce these rules. The European systems and policies must improve, on the one hand, to control legal migration and labour migration and, on the other, to enforce strict and effective migration control.

Finally, policy-makers and politicians must be aware of one fact. Critical attitudes about migration can be found in particular among those who are afraid of losing their job, their livelihood and their social standing. Greater acceptance of migration can only be achieved with a policy that seeks to ensure that no one is left behind or feels left behind, with policies that create jobs, opportunities and perspectives for all parts of society. And this should be the third aspect of the political agenda in Europe. What is needed is a European agenda for innovation, economic growth, social inclusion, and access to opportunities for all. If the EU and the European governments implement this agenda, the citizens and voters will also begin to trust migration policies.