

**Analysis on migration drivers and trajectories
along the Eastern Mediterranean Route (South-
Central Asia & Middle East); Central and Western
Mediterranean Routes and the Western Africa
Route (North, West, and the Horn of Africa), and
the Atlantic Route (South-Central America)**

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I Introduction¹

The analysis in the following pages is produced within the Work Package 3 of the ITFLOWS Project (IT Tools and Methods for Managing Migration Flows) and constitutes the second deliverable of the Work Package (D3.2). D3.2 is the outcome of the qualitative analyses that examine the drivers, patterns and trajectories of mixed migration from three different regions along the major routes arriving in the European Union (EU), while also paying attention to human mobility at the (inter)regional level, as well as the role played by policies in shaping migration dynamics.

The analysis is presented in three main sections entailed in this document, focusing respectively on:

(A) Migration drivers and trajectories along The Eastern Mediterranean Route (South-Central Asia & Middle East) - presented in the Section II of the deliverable

(B) Migration drivers and trajectories along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes and the Western Africa Route (North, West, and the Horn of Africa) - presented in the Section III of the deliverable

(C) Atlantic Route migration drivers and trajectories: Human mobilities from LAC countries to EU Member States - presented in the Section IV of the deliverable

Each main section, written by different sets of authors, entails a dedicated executive summary and a list of references, and has its own numbering system for the subsections, tables and figures used in the section.

¹ The authors of this report would like to thank all participants in the ITFLOWS closed-door online expert workshop, held on 28 September 2021, for their invaluable input. The usual disclaimer applies: views are of the authors only.

II Analysis on migration drivers and trajectories along The Eastern Mediterranean Route (South-Central Asia & Middle East)

Asli Selin Okyay, Daniela Huber, Flavia Fusco

Executive Summary

Migration has been typically seen as a function of a set of push factors operating in an origin country paired with pull factors operating in a destination. Such reading also suggests a straightforward and direct movement from the source to the destination country. However, population movements taking place in different regions of the world over the last decades, including Europe, are increasingly characterized as mixed migration flows, which depict a different and more complex picture in terms of the drivers, trajectories and modalities of cross-border human mobility. Mixed migration flows encompass people who move across the borders with diverse – and at times intertwined – motives and entail the crossing of multiple borders and stays of varying length in different countries. They typically involve several decision-making processes as to whether, where and how to move, which are (re)shaped in relation to the conditions, policies, constraints and opportunities faced, and experiences lived by people on the move throughout their journeys.

Drawing on such reading and aiming to do greater justice to the complexity of the phenomenon, the analysis seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the drivers, patterns and trajectories of mixed migration from the Middle East and South-Central Asia, both at a regional level and towards the European Union (EU) via the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR). Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the report focuses on three countries of origin that have accounted for a large share of (inter)regional mixed migration flows over the past decades, namely, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

In line with the objectives of the ITFLOWS project, our main focus is on the drivers that inform (changing) patterns of migration from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria at the EMR, with a specific focus on irregular arrival trends and asylum applications

in the period between 2009-2020. However, taking into account the fragmented nature of cross-border movement and dynamically shifting migration decisions *en route*, the analysis departs from the premise that these movements cannot be seen in isolation from the conditions and developments in the wider region, across which mixed migration journeys unfold. Therefore, besides inquiring into migration drivers in the three countries of origin, the study also examines the social, economic, political, security conditions in countries that act as transit, destination and host contexts for Afghan, Iraqi and Syrian migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Particular attention is paid on how such conditions and dynamics across different contexts combine and interact in informing migration dynamics.

Beyond structural conditions, policies on and beyond migration play a role in shaping the multiple contexts in which migration decisions are made and journeys are undertaken. In particular, the EU migration policy framework has increasingly been oriented towards prevention through a mixture of internal and external measures. The analysis therefore also seeks to shed light on the implications of EU policies and their ripple effects on the origin, transit and host contexts in the wider region, and the ways in which the interplay between these policies influence conditions, alternatives as well as opportunity-constraint structures for those considering (onward) migration, including in gender- and sexuality-specific ways.

The analysis highlights a number of key points in terms of the drivers across different contexts. When it comes to the *contexts of origin*, the direct effects of conflict on physical safety, often combined with targeted political persecution, have heavily informed outmigration from all three countries, while ebbs and flows in the extent of violence have influenced the intensity of internal and international displacement at particular points in time. However, as the conflicts get protracted, they generate long-lasting negative effects on infrastructure, economy, governance structures, and basic services. This translates into an almost permanent experience of insecurity in terms of livelihoods, fundamental rights, and access to education or healthcare, informing the decisions of those that might not have been directly affected by physical violence and persecution. Furthermore, conflicts impacts men,

women and LGBTQI in different ways ranging from increased discrimination to changing roles in families. Often the motives for leaving are multi-layered and intertwined, although conflict, political instability and the ensuing insecurity and uncertainty provides the overarching context.

Further, the case studies demonstrate the importance of the conditions in countries that act as *host and transit contexts* in driving onward movement and leading to changing plans and intentions regarding destinations. Insecure livelihoods, social marginalisation and experience of gender-specific discrimination, precarious legal statuses (or the lack of any legal status), and the ensuing difficulties in accessing formal employment and essential services such as education as well as the risk of deportation in countries of first (or second) displacement act as major drivers for onward movement. Existing and exacerbating economic challenges in these countries (e.g., recent economic crises in Iran or Lebanon, the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on all host countries), which bear a disproportionately high share of responsibility for hosting refugees and migrants for extended periods of time, lead to further deterioration of livelihoods, generate repercussions for these countries' absorption capacity in socio-political and economic terms, and consequently inform onward movement within the wider region, including Europe.

When translating into migration decisions, drivers act in different ways depending on one's ethnic, religious, cultural belonging, political affiliation, gender and sexual orientation, age, marital status, socioeconomic background. Beyond the decision to leave, by shaping people's needs, aspirations and expectations, these differences also inform destination choices, while social and economic resources, age, gender, marital and parental status also play significant roles in varying capabilities to reach such desired destinations. These individual traits and social divisions often intersect in shaping people's experience of, and interaction with structural conditions in contexts of origin, *en route* and upon arrival, informing *who* migrates where and how, beyond a simple headcount of irregular arrivals from one country to another. This also underlines the importance of an individual assessment of protection claims, and the flawed nature of the thinking behind linking "legitimate"

claims of protection to particular nationalities.

While the main expectations from a new destination include accessing physical safety, livelihoods, a secure legal status, and access to basic services, in particular education, the analysis demonstrates that whether one can reach the intended destination depends on the structural constraints, emerging opportunities and whether and how one can overcome the constraints and tap into the opportunities. Policy shifts seem to play a significant role in changing such opportunity-constraint structures that facilitate, impede, or change the pathways of cross-border mobility. The opening of a transit mobility corridor in 2015 enabling movement up until preferred destinations in Europe that are perceived as meeting the abovementioned expectations presented an opportunity, contributing to shaping the timing and intensity of the movement by those considering migration or those already *en route*. The EU's gender-blind policy response that came in the form of enhanced mobility control at its borders and beyond; augmented political and financial investments in instruments geared to preventing and dissuading departures from countries of origin (most notably Afghanistan) and from host and transit countries (most notably Turkey); and intra-EU measures oriented to limiting access to and quality of protection from early 2016 onwards have contributed to elevating the constraints. While showing variation in terms of their timing, a shift from more open to restrictive policy frameworks aiming to limit new arrivals and encourage returns of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from all three countries has been visible in all host countries in the region, narrowing down and changing available destination alternatives.

The analysis shows that the combined effects of these policy shifts might imply that some countries primarily acting as transit contexts transform into *de facto* destination and host contexts for some people (e.g., Turkey, Greece), while others that were initially intended destinations turn into transit contexts (e.g., Iran for Afghan migrants and refugees). Other major implications stemming from an increasingly generalised restrictive turn are enhanced risks faced by people on the move throughout their journeys and deepening social marginalisation experienced in various contexts *en route* (including in the EU), which play out in particularly gendered ways.

1. Introduction

Migration has been typically seen as a function of a set of push factors operating in an origin country paired with pull factors operating in a destination context. This reading is often accompanied by an understanding of cross-border mobility as a 'direct movement from A to B' (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016, 3; see, also Schapendonk 2013, 12). As such understanding foresees crossing of a single border, whether that border-crossing was authorised or unauthorised in nature determines whether it is regular or irregular migration. Further, the need to make sense of different forms of population movement from a conceptual and analytical point of view as well as a public policy perspective leads to classification exercises that rely on a clear-cut separation of human mobility into that motivated by political reasons, persecution and conflict on the one hand, and that driven by social and economic reasons, e.g., escaping poverty, accessing livelihoods, or for education, family-related factors, on the other. These categories often fall short of matching the complexity of real-life migration, the intertwined motivations underpinning human mobility, including from a gender-and sexuality sensitive perspective, and of morphing plans, motivations and intentions shaped by conditions faced and experiences lived throughout the journeys (Crawley and Skleparis 2018).

Population movements taking place in past decades in different regions of the world, including those eventually reaching the external borders of the European Union (EU), defy such straightforward and simplistic conceptions of drivers, trajectories and forms of migration. Instead, contemporary population movements have been increasingly conceptualised as “mixed migration flows”: mixed flows are characterised by journeys that entail regular and/or irregular crossing of multiple borders and stays in various countries, they involve several decision-making processes informed by different contexts, and they are often driven and shaped by multiple and intertwined motives that can change at different points of one's trajectory.

The qualitative analysis of this report draws on such understanding of migration flows that aims to do greater justice to the complexity of population movements.

The report aims to contribute to a better understanding of **drivers, patterns and trajectories of mixed migration** unfolding in a broad space of mobility interlinking several origin, transit, destination and host contexts in **South-Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe**. In line with the objectives of the ITFLOWS project, particular attention is paid to examining the factors that inform mixed migration flows that reach the European Union (EU) from the most relevant regions of origin via major migratory routes.² While the focus of this report is on mixed flows arriving at the EU's eastern borders via the so-called Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR), the analysis departs from the observation that these movements cannot be seen in isolation from political, social, economic, geopolitical conditions and policy developments taking place in, and shaping a larger space of human mobility – of which the EU and the EMR forms part.

The EU's role as a destination context for mixed migration flows unfolding in the abovementioned regions has become increasingly accentuated due to intensifying human mobility at the EMR in the last two decades. However, it should be noted that despite increasing political, policy, public and scholarly attention they receive in Europe, mixed flows arriving at the EU external borders comprise only a small share of cross-border movement that is taking place at (inter)regional levels in South-Central Asia and the Middle East in a context of external intervention and intensifying conflicts. Mixed migration to the EU is therefore only one side of broader human mobility dynamics. The EMR is merely the final crossing point for mixed flows that originate mainly in the Asian continent and reach the EU. The analysis is therefore built on the premise that population movements arriving at the EU external borders are intrinsically linked to, and deeply embedded in, a wider space of mobility interconnecting countries of origin to multiple transit, destination, and host contexts. Beyond geographical proximity, it is also the interlocking of the political, economic, security and (migration) policy landscapes that make these different contexts part of a common space of mobility.

² The two other qualitative analyses that complement this section focus on mixed migration flows in and from Africa eventually reaching the EU via the so-called Central and Western Mediterranean Routes and the Western Africa/Atlantic Route; and those in and from South-Central America reaching the EU via the so-called Atlantic Air Route.

Besides structural conditions in different countries and the geopolitical landscape in the relevant regions, policies on and beyond migration play significant roles in shaping the context in which migration decisions are made and migratory journeys unfold. The analysis will therefore also pay specific attention to the **implications of EU policies and their ripple effects on the origin, transit and host contexts in the wider region**, and the ways in which the interplay between these policies influence conditions, alternatives as well as opportunity-constraint structures for those considering (onward) migration, including in gender- and sexuality-specific ways. Providing policy proposals is beyond the scope of this report, as this will constitute the main objective of upcoming work that will be conducted at a later stage of Work Package-8 of the ITLFOWS project. That said, the report aims to provide the background for and feed into the future task of providing policy recommendations.

The notion of mixed migration acknowledges that journeys entail both regular and irregular forms of border-crossing and stays depending on particular stages of the trajectory. While spontaneous mixed migration inflows recorded at the sea and land borders at the EMR (and the rest of the EU external borders) are regarded irregular, and hence, will be treated as such in the analysis, irregular forms of border-crossing, although a predominant feature, are not an exclusively defining feature of mixed migration flows. For the purposes of this analysis, we adopt the understanding of mixed migration proposed by the Mixed Migration Centre (no date, 1):

‘Mixed migration refers to cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have different legal statuses, as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.’

Case selection, timeframe, primary data

In order to gain a better grasp of the conditions and policies that have informed the patterns and trajectories of mixed migration flows at a regional level and across the EMR, the report focuses on three in-depth case studies focusing on the most relevant **countries of origin** in South-Central Asia and the Middle East, namely,

Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. A combination of factors guides the choice of the cases. These are countries from which a large share of mixed migration flows originated in past decades: movement of Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians – the latter almost exclusively in the last decade – did not only constitute the bulk of mixed flows taking place in the immediate regions where they are situated in, but also represented a large share of spontaneous arrivals at the EMR particularly in the second half of the 2010s.

In all three cases, conflict and war, heavily informed by geopolitical rivalries and foreign interventions, sit at the heart of the context in which migration decisions are taken. Afghanistan represents a textbook case of protracted conflict, where conflict dynamics intertwine with decades-long political instability, various external interventions, fractured state capacity, and substantial economic and developmental challenges. This has also provided the background for a protracted displacement situation. Iraq represents a not too dissimilar case, with conflict, inter-state war, external intervention and civil war being present since 1980. Syria witnessed unprecedented escalation of violence particularly in the mid-2010s in the context of a fully-fledged war. Both the crisis in and displacement from Syria are increasingly acquiring a protracted nature in light of dim prospects for a political solution and post-conflict reconstruction. As conflict dominates the picture, asylum-related migration have come to the fore in population movements from all three countries. This has also been the case for the arrivals at the EU, which makes these cases highly relevant in terms of policy and civil society responses with regards to first response, asylum processing, second level reception as well as longer-term inclusion in the EU.

At the same time, the political, economic and security conditions marking the last decades in the case countries display differences as well as similarities in terms of prevalent understandings of insecurity underpinning distinctions between categories such as “genuine” or “legitimate” refugees as opposed to “economic migrants”. Such categorical distinctions have increasingly become visible in the European public and policy debates particularly during and after Europe’s so called “migration crisis” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). “Refugee-producing”

situations are increasingly associated with situations of all-out conflict presently and directly affecting (the physical security) of people. However, as Crawley and Skleparis (2018, 53) argue:

[i]t is ... impossible to fully appreciate the drivers of migration without examining the ways in which political and economic factors come together to shape the experiences of those living in times of war. The longer the conflict continues, the more complicated – and difficult to unpack – this relationship becomes.'

As conflicts get protracted and generate an insecure political and economic environment also 'undermin[ing] the ability to earn a livelihood and feed a family', migration might become the sole strategy available to cope with such insecurity for many 'even if they are not specifically targeted or, as yet, directly affected' (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 53). All three countries present a context in which conflict and insecurity feature predominantly in shaping migration decisions. Yet, the case countries also present differences in terms of the timing of the escalation and the evolution of the conflict, as well as the extent to which it has been protracted generating deeply engrained implications for the overall political and economic context. While early-mid 2010s marked a context of active conflict directly affecting the lives and livelihoods of large sections of society in Syria, by that time the conflicts in Afghanistan – and to a certain extent also in Iraq – had evolved differently and have become protracted. Surely, the acuteness of the conflict at a particular time does not "guarantee" being regarded as legitimate refugees, as even 'many Syrians who crossed to Greece in 2015 have come to be represented as 'migrants' despite widespread coverage of the conflict' (Crawley and Skleparis 2018, 57). Further, for many people from Syria the political, security and economic motives to embark on the journey were intertwined even during 2015 (Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Yet, the latter kind of excessively protracted conflict and displacement situations make it even more complex of a task to fit the motives and experiences of people into neatly defined and mutually exclusive categories of refugees versus economic migrants.

Mixed flows from these three countries particularly towards the EU use similar routes and means of movement by people 'often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers' (Mixed Migration Centre, no date).

Multiple border-crossings and stays in different countries characterise ‘fragmented journeys’ (Collyer 2010) of Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians, although the length and resources to embark on, and complete such journeys might vary depending on the distance to be covered and the hurdles to be overcome, but also depending on differences at the individual level. Reflecting the non-linearity of such migration journeys (i.e., a complex trajectory far from a direct line connecting origin contexts to the “final” destination),³ journeys from the three countries (particularly Afghanistan) involve ‘serial migration decisions’ sometimes separated from another for lengthy periods of time (Crawley et al. 2016). This implies that initially intended destinations and host contexts might evolve into transit contexts if and when the decision to move onward is made, while initially intended transit countries might also turn into de facto host contexts if constraints to further movement result in immobility.

The main **destination, host and transit contexts** included in this report are as follows: **Turkey** acts both as a destination and host country, mainly for Syrian refugees but also for Afghans and Iraqis, and as a transit context for westward movement for all groups. **Iran** continues to be a major host country for a sizable population of Afghans and a smaller group of Iraqis; while also acting as a transit country for Afghans aiming to move westward. **Pakistan** is another major host country for Afghan populations, also acting, albeit to a lesser extent than Iran, as a crossing point for westward movement. Both Iran and Pakistan have also been receiving new arrivals from Afghanistan especially in the aftermath of the Taliban’s takeover of power and the withdrawal of US and NATO forces in August 2021. **Lebanon** is among the major host countries for Syrian refugees, whereas **Jordan** has been highly relevant for subsequent waves of Iraqi migration, and the relatively more recent Syrian refugee movement. **The EU**, while receiving a smaller share of mixed flows relative to the countries in the relevant regions, also witnessed increasing arrivals from these origin countries particularly in the past decade, and especially during the large-scale movements that took place in 2015-16. Taking this connected geography of human mobility into account, the case

³ Final destination is another term challenged by the difficulty in determining the finality of the migration cycle. Yet, for the scope and purposes of this report the final destination is considered as the EU.

studies will not only examine migration drivers in countries of origin, but also the social, economic, political, security and policy developments in these countries acting as transit, destination and host contexts for individuals involved in mixed migration flows. We will pay particular attention to how such conditions across different contexts combine and interact in informing migration dynamics.

While the **case study approach** adds value in terms of the depth of analysis, it also has its **limitations**. These three cases dominate mixed migration flows in the past decade, including towards the EU. Yet, the drivers and patterns of human mobility across the EMR and the regions and routes to which it is connected is clearly much more diverse, which remains beyond the scope of this analysis. In particular, the three origin countries – albeit with differences – are all contexts marked by conflict. This choice comes at the expense of taking into account other contexts in which no active conflict is present, but where migration represents a coping strategy in the face of political repression, violation of human rights, lack of rule of law and/or wide economic inequalities, inability to access decent jobs, and impoverished livelihoods. Some such cases in the regions this report is looking at include Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, and further away also Bangladesh and Pakistan.

In terms of the **timeframe**, the main focus of the analysis is on the last decade, in particular the period between **2009 and 2020**, while attention is paid to historically contextualise migration. This timeframe has been selected primarily due to the availability of systematic and complete data on mixed flows spontaneously arriving at the EU external borders as well as on asylum applications in the EU. It is also a period in which the volume of mixed flows across the EMR and the regions and routes to which it is connected witnessed a relative increase, especially due to the effects of the Syrian movement. Further, with the effects of the relatively larger scale arrivals the EU received in the 2015-16 period, the second half of the decade also saw significant developments in terms of EU migration policy both in its internal and external dimensions, generating effects for the wider political and policy context shaping human mobility at the EMR as well as the regions, countries and routes to which it is connected. Such policy changes

have also taken place beyond the EU, as several countries in the region have been subjected to and affected by growing population movement in the last decade.

In order to have a comprehensive perspective on the shifting migratory trends in this period, the report covers **data on the apprehensions of irregular border-crossings at the EMR**. Besides apprehensions, annually aggregated data on **asylum applications** provided by Eurostat is used in order to complement the analysis with a focus on asylum-related patterns.⁴ With regard to border crossings, due to their systematic and complete nature, the analysis uses the figures provided by Frontex.⁵ A common problem with data on irregular migration flows is that it requires ‘counting the uncountable’, and therefore the available figures can only provide us with a partial view of the phenomenon, although apprehension figures are commonly used as considerably reliable approximations (Triandafyllidou 2010).

Therefore, Frontex apprehension figures can only serve as an estimate of the actual volume of mixed flows reaching the EMR. Frontex data has further **limitations** in that it reflects the number of what the Agency refers to as ‘detections of “illegal” border-crossings’:⁶ as the same person may be apprehended multiple times while crossing the border, the figures are likely to reflect a number higher than that of actual persons who were apprehended while crossing the border.⁷ While it is not as accentuated in the EMR data as in the case of Central and Western Mediterranean routes, it should also be noted that some nationalities get unnoticed in the apprehension figures, as they are lumped in in the unknown/unspecified

⁴ Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]"

https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

⁵ Frontex monthly statistics on “Detections of illegal border-crossings”, available at Frontex, “Migratory Map” <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

⁶ While “illegal” is the term used by Frontex and will therefore be used throughout the report when making direct references to Frontex data sources (and other secondary sources) using this term, we do not endorse the use of the notion “illegal” when referring to unauthorised border crossings or stays. When referring to the crossing of international borders, entry or stay in the territory of a state other than one’s country of citizenship, the terms “irregular”, “unauthorised”, and “undocumented” are used in this report instead.

⁷ While Frontex data does not specify whether the persons apprehended while irregularly crossing the EU borders had refugee/international protection status in a third country or whether they lodged an asylum application after entry into EU territory or not, given the mixed nature of the flows, these figures include irregular border crossings by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

category, such as for example the Palestine refugees from Syria in secondary displacement.

Furthermore, as argued by Kofman (2019, 2186), there is a ‘need for socially disaggregated data (gender, age, marital status and nationality) that help us to better understand the changing flows and trajectories and the implications for policies concerning transit, reception and relocation’. While Eurostat asylum application statistics are sex-disaggregated (and are analysed in the report), no such breakdown is provided by Frontex when it comes to the data on irregular crossings. The limited, scattered and non-systematic nature of disaggregated data has been a major shortcoming in particular with regards to arrivals in Europe, as underlined by Shreeves (2016, 4): ‘[d]ata collection on arrivals is problematic and disaggregated figures for all land and sea arrivals are unavailable’ (see, also, Fry 2016 on this point). Beyond **limited sex-disaggregated data**, accessing comprehensively and systematically collected quantitative data on (the experiences of) migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who are single men/women, persons on the move self-identifying as LGBTQI, those travelling with/without children, or male/female (accompanied and unaccompanied) children is even a bigger challenge.⁸ The report will therefore seek to provide qualitative data and analyses accounting for such social differences and to reflect on the ‘gendered experiences of mobility’ (Kofman 2019, 2188), to the extent possible.

Scope, aims and some conceptual clarifications

In terms of its scope and aims, this analysis is limited to and primarily interested in examining how structural/contextual factors and relevant policies in origin, transit, destination and host contexts making up the space of mobility connecting South-East Asia, the Middle East and Europe have shifted and interacted in tandem in driving and shaping mixed migration flows, including across the EMR. While our focus is primarily on the structural elements, our analysis builds on the framework that conceptualises **migration as a social process shaped by the interaction**

⁸ For further information, see, Migration Data Portal, ‘Gender and Migration’, available at: <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender-and-migration>

between structure and agency (see, *inter alia*, de Haas 2010). Therefore, while the primary focus of the analysis is on the (shifts in) structural contexts and policies playing a role in driving and shaping mixed migration, we also pay attention to the individual dimension through incorporating evidence from secondary sources that give voice to and analyse the decisions, preferences, experiences and accounts of people on the move to the extent possible.

Structural factors play a significant role in setting the wider context in which migration takes place. Yet, it is the constant, two-way interaction between structures and individual aspirations, experiences and capabilities that inform migration decisions and thereby determines the outcomes of this social process. In this vein, we build on the conceptualisation of ‘individual migration as a function of capabilities and aspirations within a given set of structural constraints’ proposed by de Haas (2010, 16). Deriving from such an understanding is that structure, to which the concept of migration drivers closely speak to, does not automatically or exclusively “cause” migration or shape its volume, direction or form. It also implies that the same set of structural factors does not inform migration decisions (e.g., to move or to stay, the means to be used for cross-border movement, the choice of destination) in a uniform manner. It is the individual differences – which might themselves be structured as in differences pertaining to e.g., gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class – in preferences, aspirations, (social or economic) resources and experiences that shape the ways in which individuals respond to and interact with structural shifts, opportunities and constraints.

While acknowledging that the individual dimension and the structural dimension mutually shape one another, and hence the two cannot be neatly disaggregated in conceptual terms when looking into migration processes, for analytical purposes, we follow the **definition of drivers** proposed by Van Hear et al. (2018, 930) as: ‘the array of factors that may make up the external structural elements shaping the decision space for those considering migration’. Drivers are therefore understood as those structural/contextual factors that ‘shape the broader context within which aspirations and desires to migrate are formed and in which people make their migration decisions – whether to move or not’ (Ibid.).

Another central premise, which our analysis builds on, regards the **importance of the journey**, of what happens *en route*, between the first point of departure and the last point of arrival in understanding what drives and shapes migration. An emphasis on what happens *en route* becomes particularly important for mixed migration towards the EU: against a background of preventive migration policies, far from being a straightforward move between origin and destination, migratory movements originating in different regions of Asia and Africa and reaching Europe across the Mediterranean have been more and more characterised by long, risky, and costly journeys involving several border-crossings, stays of differing length in multiple countries, and repeated decision-making processes regarding (im)mobility (BenEzer and Zetter 2015; Collyer 2007; 2010, Schapendonk 2012, 2013; Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016; Crawley et al. 2016; Squire et al. 2017).

‘Fragmented journeys’ refer to those that are ‘broken into a number of separate stages, involving varied motivations, legal statuses and living and employment conditions’ for those who are undertaking them (Collyer 2010, 275). This implies that most of these journeys are characterised by multiple decision-making processes (as to move or to stay put, where to move, and how to move) across several contexts and in the face of changing conditions, dynamics, policies and constraints. In some cases, periods spent in different locations are considerably lengthy and intentions regarding settlement or onward movement change compared to one’s initial plans, which requires thinking of ‘serial migration of consecutive movements’ rather than a single journey (Crawley et al. 2016, 28). This also implies that the motivations for leaving one’s country of origin or habitual residence might be completely different than those culminating in the decision to move onward, while preferences as to one’s intended destination change during long and multi-legged journeys (Crawley et al. 2016; Gebrewold and Bloom 2016).

Therefore, a focus on the structural conditions and contextual factors in the countries of origin (and a single and fixed destination), while necessary, is not sufficient to understand what drives and shapes fragmented journeys or serial migration movements. The conditions, dynamics, legal and policy frameworks in

transit contexts, host countries, and different destination alternatives should be taken into account for a more complete and nuanced understanding of mixed migration. Besides placing greater emphasis on secondary drivers informing onward movement in different contexts (Crawley et al. 2016), approaching migration journeys as non-linear processes unfolding in, and being shaped by different contexts also requires paying attention to how the opportunity-constraint structures that facilitate, hinder or alter the pathways of cross-border mobility (e.g., entry-exit regulations, border control measures, availability of and access to migrant smuggling services in restrictive border regime contexts) change *en route*.

While the scope of and importance attached to **migration policy** – particularly in the EU – has been growing, whether and which policies play a role in shaping migration is still debated in the literature. Migration policies are largely defined as those instruments that are ‘established in order to affect behaviour of a target population (i.e. potential migrants) in an intended direction’ (Czaika and de Haas 2013, 489). The spectrum of what can fall under this category is broad, and includes immigration, emigration, and integration policies as well as border and mobility control measures.

In the **EU migration policy context**, the emphasis has been increasingly placed on the prevention of undesired movement from non-EU countries before they already reach the EU, through through a mixture of typically gender-blind internal and external measures primarily oriented at reinforcing the control of the Union’s external borders as well as those oriented at containment (outside the EU) and deterrence. This policy approach, reflecting increasingly ‘securitised’ and ‘externalised’ ways of migration management is not new (for earlier accounts on securitisation, see, *inter alia*, Huysmans 2000, 2006; on externalisation, see, Boswell 2003). Yet, it has become further reinforced in the aftermath of the large-scale population movements that arrived in the EU during 2015-16, when ‘the incapacity or lack of political willingness by many EU Member States to secure solidarity-based responses and safe reception conditions for those seeking international protection’ transformed it into a major political and policy crisis (Carrera et al. 2019, 1).

Preventive policies are based on the assumption that they can deter and dissuade people considering migration from moving, and from moving towards a specific direction (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016). According to Carling and Hernández-Carretero (2011, 52-53), EU policies designed to restrict unauthorised migration can be categorised into those aiming ‘direct control’, ‘deterrence, and ‘dissuasion’. Examples to ‘direct control’ in the EU countries as destination include hardening the physical borders through fences and walls, clamping down on smugglers, elevating entry barriers through more rigorous visa requirements, restricting legal migration and asylum channels, deportations and push-backs. Policies aiming at deterrence include measures that are considered to reduce the “pull factors” in the EU, such as narrowing down the rights of migrants and refugees, maintaining sub-standard national reception conditions, or (negative) messaging and information campaigns about the risks of migration journeys or the limited nature of protection, employment or legal residence opportunities in destination countries (see, *inter alia*, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway 2014; Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016).

On the **external dimension**, policies targeting third countries along the routes, e.g., extending stringent border and mobility control regimes to transit and origin contexts aim to incorporate these countries ‘in the remote control of the European Union’s external border’ (Fargues 2020, 377). Further, as part of ‘the externalisation of protection obligations and containment of migrants in third transit states’ (Tsourdi 2019, 30), the EU provides humanitarian aid and development assistance to host countries. Finally, preventive policies also expand to countries of origin, as demonstrated by the increasing EU emphasis on addressing the “root causes” of migration, which is, mainly pursued through channelling aid to countries of origin and mainstreaming migration into development policies so as to reduce departures (see, *inter alia*, Chetail 2019).

Despite their growing scope, evidence suggests that migration **policies’ capacity to generate their intended effects** remains rather limited, particularly when it comes to ‘the overall volume and long-term trends of migration’ (de Haas 2011, 27; see also, Czaika and de Haas 2011, 2013; de Haas and Vezzoli 2011). Deterrence

policies often generate effects that ‘reshape’ particular migration dynamics rather than preventing or stopping it in absolute terms (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016). According to de Haas (2011, 25-27), restrictive policies generate ‘substitution effects’, which include diversion of flows to contexts with less restrictive policies; re-direction of migration channels, e.g., from regular to irregular; adjustments in the timing of onward movement (i.e., expediting or postponing); or discouraging return. Within the EU context, the qualitative study by Hagen-Zanker and Malett (2016) found that such policies seem to have played a role in redirecting some migrants’ destination to a country that is perceived more welcoming relative to more restrictive alternatives, which was particularly the case for those who did not have a clearly defined destination. In other words, it is the combined effect of restrictive/welcoming policies (and the comparison made between different alternatives) rather than the policy decision of a single country that seem to reshape the direction of movement for some (Ibid). This is in line with our approach of embedding migration dynamics in a larger space of mobility (beyond a binary pair of origin and destination), in which the interlocking of the political, economic, security and migration policy landscapes in different destination, host and transit contexts plays a combined role in influencing migration dynamics.

Literature points out a greater influence of **non-migration policies**, such as those in the labour, macroeconomic, welfare, foreign, trade, or aid realms as well as that of colonial legacies on migration (Czaika and de Haas 2013, 489). When it comes to countries in conflict in particular, a greater role can be attributed also to the geopolitical dynamics and multilateral or peacebuilding fronts. At the receiving end, the analysis by Thieleman (2004, 3) of 20 OECD countries in the period between 1985 and 1999 suggests that ‘key determinants of an asylum seeker’s choice of host country are historical, economic and reputational factors that largely lie beyond the reach of asylum policy makers’. Similarly, Hagen-Zanker and Malett (2016) found that in the EU context, access to education, other essential services, and to employment in a potential destination play a much greater role in determining one’s preferred destination than migration policies.

All this implies that policies *per se* cannot shape migration, as migration decisions

are informed by a complex combination of factors that are beyond a single policy area's reach. However, all these policies shape the wider security, political, economic context in which migration decisions are made. Migration/deterrence policies, instead, seek more directly to manipulate the opportunity/constraint structure of migrants. The latter, albeit not being the only determining element, can influence the opportunities and constraints informing mobility, generating some effects on 'the dynamics of migration (where people go, when they leave, how they do it)' (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016, 1). As the analysis in the following pages demonstrates, such policies also generate significant effects on the lives and experiences of people on the move, as well as their trajectories.

Besides the EU, policies of non-EU countries relevant to mixed migration flows in the mobility space connecting Asia to Europe also play a role in shaping the structural elements informing migration decisions and journeys. More importantly, growing externalisation of the EU's prevention-oriented policy framework generates a closer interplay with policies enacted by governments in origin, transit, destination and host countries, and influences the conditions, alternatives as well as opportunity-constraint structures for those considering (onward) migration in these contexts. Our analysis therefore pays attention to how national policies have been developed, changed, or enforced as part of migration cooperation with the EU, and how these might have influenced certain migration dynamics in combined – and sometimes unintended – ways. While covering the entire set of non-migration policies is beyond the scope of this report, to the extent possible, attention is also paid to the implications of the wider set of EU foreign, security, development policies, which are increasingly interlinked with EU migration policy objectives, for the origin, transit, destination and host countries.

The structure of the report is as follows: after a brief introduction on the overall patterns of mixed migration at the EMR and the regions and routes connecting it to the countries of origin to it in Section-2, Section-3 delves into the case studies on Afghanistan (Section 3.1), Iraq (Section 3.2) and Syria (Section 3.3). In each section, we historically contextualise migration and displacement in a sub-section on "migration profile", paying particular attention to the prevalent drivers and

forms of outmigration from each country until the last decade, as well as the main destinations. This is followed by analyses of the (shifts in) arrival and asylum trends at the EMR over the 2009-2020 period. In a final subsection, key drivers and policy developments in the countries of origin as well as the relevant transit, host and destination contexts in the selected timeframe are analysed. Particular attention is paid on examining how structural conditions and policy landscapes in these different countries and regions (including the EU) might have acted in tandem in jointly shaping the wider context in which migration decisions were made and cross-border journeys unfolded. In line with the ITFLOWS Gender Action Plan (Boland and Tschalaer 2021), the analyses also seek to integrate a gender perspective. Finally, Section-4 presents a brief synthesis of the three analyses and provides some concluding remarks.

2. Eastern Mediterranean Route: An overview

While in maps dotted with arrows the EMR is often depicted as starting from South-Central Asia and the Middle East and directly connecting to the Eastern borders of the EU, it represents merely the last crossing point of a larger and diversified space of mobility; the leg between Turkey and EU territory, i.e., to Greece, Bulgaria and Cyprus. Movement between Turkey and Greece takes place both at the Aegean Sea (between the west coast of Turkey and the nearby Greek islands) and at the land border in the Evros region. The Turkey-Greece corridor constitutes the principal crossing point in the EMR, which has acted as such since Greece's membership in the EU in 1981, when the land border, the faster and easier option, had been the main entry point (Fargues 2017, 11). Migrants and asylum seekers cross the land border between Turkey and Bulgaria, while sea crossings to Cyprus might originate from Turkey, but also the coastal line of Lebanon and Syria.

Before uniting in this final culmination point, trajectories start from various regions and follow splintered, non-linear, changing directions. People on the move do not necessarily take the shortest and most direct route connecting two points, but follow complex trajectories on the basis of the hurdles and opportunities they face and depending on the resources they have throughout the different stages of the journey (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016). Nevertheless, trajectories from Afghanistan towards this direction typically follow the crossing into Iran either directly from southwest Afghanistan, or after a detour through Pakistan, then to cross the mountainous border with Turkey into Van or Erzurum, to further continue towards Istanbul, Izmir, or the coastal line in the west (Dimitriadi 2013), the latter part evidently also followed by Iranian nationals. Travel through Pakistan or Iran via Turkey continues to be the main option (Mixed Migration Centre 2018; 2019). However, some recent studies point out the potential emergence of a differentiation between those who irregularly cross land borders first to Pakistan (after passing mainly through Kabul and Nimruz in Afghanistan) and then to Iran (and Turkey) relying on smugglers at all crossing points; and those who directly enter/fly to Iran with a visa, and then arrange with the smugglers the rest of their journey from Tehran mainly to Istanbul via Van (GAR

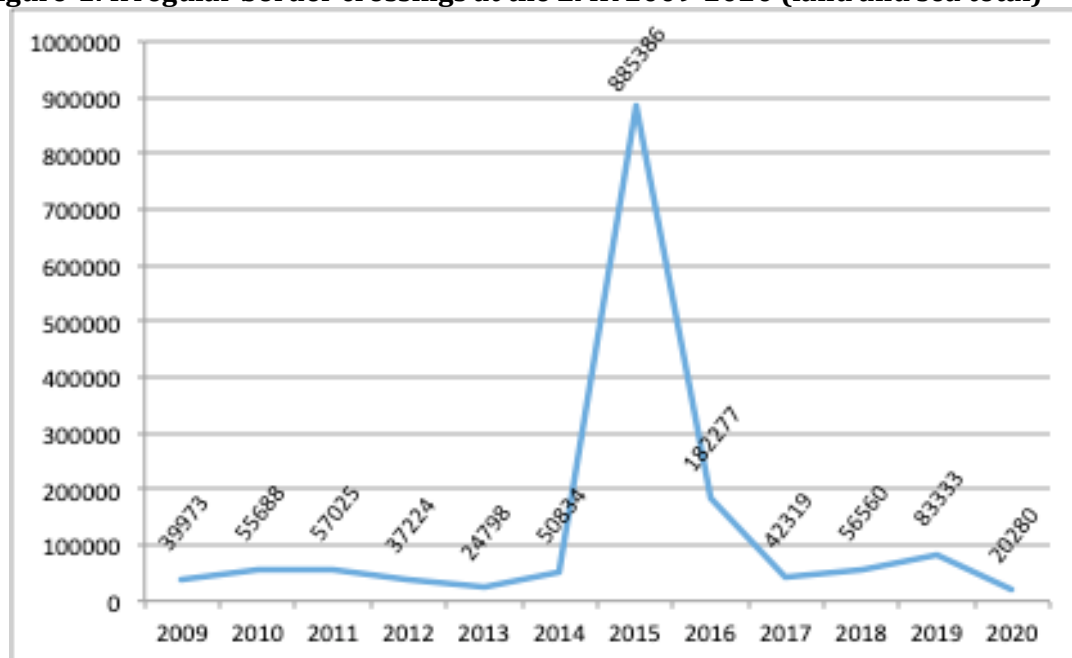
2021, 21-26). The accounts of those who made the journey indicate that the latter – and relatively less risky – option is largely reserved to those with higher economic resources (GAR 2021, 21). The land borders between Turkey and Iraq and Syria respectively represent significant crossing points, although nationals of these countries also arrived to Turkey via air or sea borders, particularly when visa-free travel or obtaining a visa at the border (for Iraqis) was still a possibility (see sections 3.2 and 3.3.).

Relying on the services provided by smugglers is typically a necessity at least at some '*legs of the journey*', while whether/at which point such services are needed largely depends on the risks to be averted (e.g., fighting, deportation, arrest) and hurdles to be overcome when crossing the international borders as well as within single countries, and the possibility of authorised travel with documentation (Crawley et al. 2016, 49), Border control measures, enhanced restrictions to mobility and the lack/limitation of legal avenues of travel and access to protection typically generate or augment the need to use facilitation at different stages (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012; Crawley et al. 2016; Fargues 2017). Particularly in the first half of the last decade, the interaction between border and migration control measures by the EU and its member states (as well as Turkey, increasingly in cooperation with the EU) on the one hand, and the adaptation strategies adopted by migrants and those mediating movement, i.e., actors involved in migrant smuggling on the other, have led to route diversions and re-diversions between the sea and the land borders separating Greece from Turkey (see, Aksel et al. 2015; Dimitriadi 2013; Karaçay 2017).

Informed both by the diversion of some of the movement from Africa mainly due to more stringent border control by Italy and Spain towards the EMR and an increase in mixed flows from the Middle East and Asia, irregular crossings at the EMR increased in the 2000s (Fargues and Bonafanti 2014). In the period between 1995 and 2009, journeys from the Middle East and Asia crossing through Turkey and arriving at the EMR were mainly undertaken by Iraqis, Pakistanis, Iranians, afghans and Palestinians (İçduygu 2011, 5). In the 2010s, citizens of Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as nationals of North African countries such as Morocco and

Algeria have also ranked among the top nationalities using this route; the latter group becoming particularly visible in the first half of the decade.⁹ The EMR had been among the routes used by migrants and asylum seekers from East Africa at the beginning of the past decade, in particular by Somali and Eritrean nationals. The aftermath of the Syrian war changed the picture both in terms of the overall volume of migration at this route (See Figure – 1) and to a certain extent, also the composition of irregular arrivals, with Syrians ranking as the first nationality since 2013 with the exception of 2019, when migrants and asylum seekers from Afghanistan became the main national group crossing to the EU via the EMR.

Figure-1: Irregular border crossings at the EMR 2009-2020 (land and sea total)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map" <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

The so called "migration crisis" was largely baptised as such following the peak in 2015 at the EMR, composed mainly by the movement of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis – and others who were either on the move or considering migration, and whose movement had been facilitated by the opening of a transit corridor between the EMR, Western Balkans, and the rest of the EU countries to the west and north,

⁹ Based on authors' analysis of Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map" <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

which was likely to be heavily influenced by the large scale movement of Syrian refugees (see Fargues 2017, 11). Yet, the mixed flows received by the EU in this period are largely overshadowed by the scope of the population movements in the regions in which the main countries of origin are situated. As also mentioned in the introduction, the large-scale movement of 2015-16 was met with a reinforcement of the EU approach focused on prevention of new mixed migration flows arriving at the external borders and containment of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in non-EU geographies through internal as well as external measures (for further details on the implications of these policy changes for human mobility from the three case countries, see Sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3).

In the post-2016 period, the introduction of a series of policy measures aiming to elevate the hurdles to mobility across the entire corridor connecting Turkey, Greece and the rest of the EU seems to have considerably limited (for the time being) access to EU external borders. At the same time, the “acute” drivers of migration that existed in the region, such as escalation of violence during the 2014-2015 period both in Syria and Iraq (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3), have not been as present in the last years.

Yet, many migrants and asylum seekers (much greater shares than those moving to or hosted by the EU) continue their mobility in the broader region. Countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran - and further ahead also Pakistan – act as major destination and/or host countries. Despite the reduction in the overall volume of mixed flows reaching the EU’s Eastern borders in this period (with the exception of 2019), Turkey, another key country in the wider space of mobility, has witnessed a growing number of irregular arrivals since 2016, particularly of Afghan migrants and asylum seekers, with record highs in terms of the apprehension of irregular migrants in 2018 and 2019 (See Section 3.1.2). Turkey has also been receiving an increasing number of Iranian migrants moving regularly through buying property or using other legal means of mobility, a process that has gained momentum after the financial and economic crisis that hit Iran following the US sanctions in 2018 (Ziabari 2021). At the same time, in the aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016 and given the democratic backsliding and further erosion of rule of law, Turkey has

also started to prominently appear among the top origin countries among the apprehensions linked to irregular crossings at the EMR, ranking 5th in 2017, 4th in 2018, and 3rd in 2019 and 2020.¹⁰ While not yet at notable levels at the EMR, a growing number of Egyptians (a country with no active conflict, yet where political repression and economic fragility has been reigning) have been arriving to Italy in the last years (UNHCR 2021k).

These examples point out that human mobility from the Middle East and Asia and taking place at the EMR has been, and continues to be broader and more diverse than the movement of the three main nationalities this report focuses on in the following sections. Beyond arrivals in Europe, mixed flows, often driven by intertwined reasons – but essentially marked by human insecurity in the wider sense of the term – continue to unfold following various trajectories of different complexity and involving regular and irregular forms of movement, albeit receiving relatively less scholarly and policy attention in the EU context. Yet, further bordering work and preventive policies continue to largely dominate the current landscape at the EMR and beyond. This is against a background of sustained, if not augmented, political, security and economic challenges in many origin, transit and host countries in the wider region. At the same time, legal and safe mobility options to the EU (or other destinations) remain rather limited. This picture is likely to have implications for the mixed migration journeys at the EMR and the regions connected to it, as well as for the risks and precarity involved for the migrants, asylum seekers and refugees who undertake them.

¹⁰ Based on authors' analysis of Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map" <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

3. Case Studies

3.1 Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located between South and Central Asia, bordering Iran in the West, Pakistan in the East and South, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the North, and China in the Northeast. On the one hand, its location situates the country as a connection point between two major regions, namely, the 'resource-rich' Central Asia and 'resource-stretched' South Asia, bearing potential for its long-term development prospects if closer regional integration were to materialise (Quie and Hakimi 2020, 26). On the other hand, the same location also implies that political, economic and security conditions in Afghanistan are intrinsically linked with geopolitical dynamics unfolding in three complex regional systems, namely, South Asia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, where great power involvement interlocks with regional dynamics, generating significant implications for prospects on peace, stability, prosperity, and development in Afghanistan (Strand et al. 2017, 11-15).¹¹ Such geopolitical context has also made foreign intervention an almost permanent feature in the country's history, marked with invasions by the British Empire, the Soviet Union and the US-led coalition forces. These geopolitical dynamics have played a major role in shaping migration and displacement from Afghanistan.

The ethnic and religious composition of the country – which itself is a function of post-colonial state-building processes – has had significant implications for domestic politics as well as the relations of both the Afghan state and population with the neighbours. There are 14 ethnic groups mentioned in the 2004 Constitution and the national anthem (Qutb 2020; Siddique 2012).¹² However, the lack of census data, the politically sensitive nature of the issue and the criss-crossing of linguistic, religious, local, familial, tribal and political affiliations with the ethnic dimension makes it a difficult task to provide accurate numbers as to the share of each ethnic group (Siddique 2012, 2-3). 'The dominant but undocumented assumption' is that Pashtuns are the largest group followed by Tajiks and Hazaras

¹¹ For an extensive discussion on the implications of regional geopolitical dynamics, see Harpviken and Tadjbakhsh (2016).

¹² These groups are Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Balochis, Turkmens, Nooristanis, Pamiris, Arabs, Gujars, Brahuis, Qizilbash, Aimaq and Pashai.

(Strand et al. 2017, 2) and Uzbeks. While the population is overwhelmingly Muslim, estimates give the share of Sunni Muslims between 84 – 89 %, and that of Shia Muslims between 10 - 15% (Qutb 2020). Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims, while Shia Muslims mainly belong to the Tajik and Hazara ethnic groups. According to 2017 estimates, Dari and Pashto are the two main languages spoken by 78 % and 50 % of the population respectively (Central Intelligence Agency 2021). Border-crossing networks based on ethnicity, tribe, religion and kinship have traditionally linked all these groups to the neighbouring countries, as in the case of Pashtun communities inhabiting both sides of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, relations held by Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmens across the northern border, and the religious and political ties between the Hazaras and Iran (Strand et al. 2017).

Despite such diversity along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, political power has traditionally rested with the Pashtuns, who have held leadership positions throughout the country's history with few exceptions (Katzman 2015, 2; Strand et al. 2017, 2). This has made inclusiveness, representation and power-sharing particularly contentious and contested issues in Afghanistan. Besides ethnic divisions, the rural-urban divide, the cleavage between the secular and religious, the division of power between the local and the central have traditionally constituted overlapping fault lines underpinning the political landscape, and acting as sources of tension and conflict in the country (International Crisis Group 2011). Trans-border links between ethnic groups as well as a regional context marked by porous borders have contributed to making cross-border movement and transnational 'people-to-people connections' one of the features characterising Afghanistan (Quie and Hakimi 2020).

While there has not been a population census in Afghanistan for more than four decades, according to the UN Population Fund, the country has an estimated population of 39.8 million as of 2021. 41.2 % and 56.1 % of the population is aged between 0-14 and 15-64 respectively, with only 2.7 % being over 65 (UNFPA 2021). According to World Bank data, Afghanistan's population grew from 8,9 million in 1960, to 12.4 million in 1990, and to 38.9 million in 2020 (World Bank,

no date). With a population growth rate of around 2.3 % and a young age structure, the World Bank estimates that in the medium term 600,000 Afghans would reach working age every year (World Bank 2021a). This exacerbates the already existing challenge of creating and diversifying jobs and livelihoods, in a context where the economy remains largely based on low-productivity agriculture, aid dependence is high and the illicit sector is burgeoning (World Bank 2021a).

Over four decades of conflict and political instability has had its heavy toll on human security, while hampering political and economic development in Afghanistan. Initial social and economic gains that had been achieved with massive international assistance flowing in since 2002 backslided in the last decade, instead of paving the way for sustainable development. Progress remained limited also in terms of political transition, state-building and security provision. By 2020, Quie and Hakimi (2020, 10) aptly described Afghanistan as being ‘riven by ethnic hostilities and ravaged by the effects of a weak state, a predatory political economy, ideological fragmentation, high levels of crime, poor infrastructure and services, inadequate institutional capacity and environmental degradation’. The current picture, marked by the Taliban’s takeover of power and the withdrawal of the US and NATO troops from the country, exacerbates this already fragile humanitarian, political and security landscape in Afghanistan.

In short, fragile security, political instability, weak state capacity, violation of basic human and civil rights of particular groups, vulnerable livelihoods in a struggling economic and developmental landscape (exacerbated by demographic pressure and environmental shocks), combined with the effects of complex geopolitical dynamics and the role played by external actors, have shaped and continue to shape the wider context in Afghanistan. This also constitutes the background of migration and internal and international displacement, almost permanent features of the country for over four decades.

3.1.1 Migration profile

3.1.1.1 Afghan populations abroad

As a result of protracted conflict and insecure livelihoods, millions of Afghans have

become internally and internationally displaced for over forty years. There are 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees in the world (UNHCR 2021a). As of 2021, 3.5 million Afghans are internally displaced, and more than 600,000 people were displaced only this year (UNHCR 2021b). An overwhelming majority of Afghan refugees are in Pakistan (1.4 million) and Iran (780,000) (UNHCR 2021c). In addition to registered refugees, an estimated 2.2 million undocumented Afghan migrants, and nearly 600,000 Afghans with student and family visas live in Iran (UNHCR 2021d). In Pakistan, the number of undocumented Afghan migrants is estimated at 1.5 million (IOM 2019b 9).

According to latest available UNHCR data (UNHCR 2021e), the top five countries with the largest number of Afghan refugees under the UNHCR's mandate in Europe are: Germany (147,994), Austria (40,096), France (31,546), Sweden (28,927) and Greece (21,456). In Turkey, there are 4219 refugees from Afghanistan under UNHCR's mandate, and 125,104 asylum seekers. This number is 10,659 for Australia, 2,261 for Canada and 1,592 for the US. In terms of the overall size of the Afghan diaspora in Europe, Germany hosts the largest Afghan community (263,000), while the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and Austria are the other European countries with sizable Afghan communities (Cordaid 2021, 2). While these countries have received Afghan asylum-seekers since the 1990s, Greece typically acted as a gateway and transit country within the EU. With the EU policy changes following the population movements in 2015-16 (See section 3.1.3.3.), it has become one of the major countries of asylum.

Beyond Europe, an estimated 80,000 Afghans live in the US, 55,000 in Canada and nearly 60,000 in Australia (See Table 1). 100,000-150,000 undocumented Afghan labour migrants – often with falsified Pakistani passports – are estimated to be working in low-skilled jobs in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (ICMPD 2013, 35). Afghan government estimated the number of Afghan workers in these countries at 100,000 (IOM 2014, 89).

Table 1: Total migrant stock from Afghanistan in selected countries (1990 – 2019)

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Austria	4.748	5.357	5.966	6.668	7.370	8.620	20.561
Australia	2.729	7.893	12.580	18.620	30.840	49.550	59.798
Canada	5.321	13.677	22.359	30.718	40.945	51.641	55.339
Belgium	93	79	60	2.488	4.244	12.819	23.386
Germany	33.279	51.537	69.794	75.824	80.611	83.992	208.732
Iran	3.123.968	2.029.435	2.087.864	2.171.005	2.372.090	2.348.369	2.310.292
Netherlands	9.865	14.531	19.683	32.382	31.153	33.852	37.216
Norway	253	351	638	5.071	8.864	13.270	17.347
Pakistan	3.374.973	1.291.867	2.069.977	1.162.810	1.988.641	1.710.378	1.589.146
Sweden	3.368	3.997	4.287	8.345	14.420	31.267	45.413
Turkey	7.652	9.633	9.020	9.325	11.022	13.601	18.390
UK	2.076	8.160	14.382	36.100	38.029	48.633	55.227
USA	28.444	37.312	46.342	51.965	59.330	74.106	80.026

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). International Migrant Stock 2019 (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2019), Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>

The total size of the Afghan diaspora worldwide is estimated at six and a half million persons, corresponding to more than 18 % of Afghanistan's population (UNU-MERIT 2020, 8). According to UNDP data on total migrant stock (including refugees), in 2019 there were over 5 million Afghan migrants in the world: 4.4 million in Asia, followed by nearly 480,000 in Europe and 135,000 in North America (see Table-2).

Table - 2: Total migrant stock from Afghanistan in different regions (1990-2019)

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
World	6.823.350	3.716.077	4.606.374	3.898.656	5.055.805	4.977.010	5.120.756
Asia	6.702.728	3.544.112	4.382.617	3.592.951	4.692.612	4.501.612	4.432.460
Europe	82.736	111.671	141.085	201.567	228.466	296.193	488.944
North America	33.765	50.989	68.701	82.683	100.275	125.558	135.162
Oceania	2.885	8.382	13.294	20.671	33.154	52.090	62.408

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). International Migrant Stock 2019 (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2019), Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>

Even if the Afghan migrant population in Europe, North America and Oceania has steadily grown in the last three decades, the overwhelming majority of Afghan migrant population has been hosted in the immediate region, mainly by Iran and Pakistan both in this period and before.

The Afghan diaspora is highly fragmented along ethnic, religious, local, political-ideological lines reflecting the cleavages in Afghanistan (UNU-MERIT 2020). Transnational links and remitting behaviour are perhaps among the few traits uniting this heterogeneous group. Remittances by Afghan nationals abroad amounted to 828 million US dollars in 2019 and to 788 million US dollars in 2020 (World Bank 2021b). Remittance inflows represented 4.3 % and 4 % of the GDP respectively in these two years (World Bank 2021c), highlighting the significance of the diaspora for the economy of Afghanistan.

3.1.1.2 Human mobility as a complex phenomenon and deeply embedded feature of Afghanistan

Despite the prevalence of conflict-driven displacement in the country's migration history of over four decades, as Quie and Hakimi (2020, 38) argue, human mobility from, to, and through Afghanistan should be seen as part of 'the *longue durée* of people-to-people connections and movement across Eurasia'. Migration, mobility and transnational networks spanning particularly to Iran and Pakistan, but also going beyond, have been a deeply embedded feature of both Afghanistan and the region in which it is situated. Social and economic links nurture such border-crossing connectivity, while migration, mobility and transnational networks constitute a significant livelihood strategy for local populations (Monsutti 2006).

Ethnic, religious and linguistic links as well as nomadic practices and commercial networks had shaped human mobility between Afghanistan and British India already before the existence of Pakistan as a nation-state (Kronenfeld 2008; Marsden and Henig 2019). Multi-directional movement and seasonal migration across the porous and contested border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, i.e., the Durand line, separating Pashtun communities on both sides, took place already before 1979 (Collective for Social Science Research 2005). Records of temporary

and circular migratory movements from Afghanistan to Iran owing to the economic differentials between the two countries date back to the 19th century (Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook 2006). Outmigration where political reasons intermesh with economic ones also predates the 20th century: seeking refuge from the centralist rule imposed by the emir Abd al-Rahman was the primary motivation behind the outmigration of the Hazara to Quetta in the then British India, and to Mashad in Iran in the late 19th century (Monsutti 2004). The 1970s witnessed the arrival of several thousand Afghan labour migrants to Iran, attracted by the oil-led construction boom, while the movement was also influenced by the effects of the drought in Afghanistan on livelihoods (Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook 2006; Ashrafi and Moghissi 2002). Afghan migration to destinations beyond the region such as Europe, US, Canada and Australia was marginal before the late 1970s, even if some countries, such as Germany received few Afghan migrants who were mainly students and businessmen (IOM 2014).

The episodes of displacement in the last four decades should therefore be seen against such historical background. Migratory movements, albeit to a smaller scale, existed before the end of the 1970s. Each phase of migration has contributed to the formation and perpetuation of border-crossing networks, which have played a significant role in motivating departure of those considering migration and shaping future directions of movement. Conflict, violence, and political instability set the broader context in which generations of Afghans made the decision to leave since 1979. Political crisis and war also led to a significant scaling up of the volume of both internal displacement and outmigration since 1979, compared to these earlier phases of migration (Kronenfeld 2008; Monsutti 2006). However, economic factors both in home and destination contexts, the search for income-generating opportunities, the need to cope with the loss of livelihoods due to droughts or other cyclical crises have constantly intersected with direct and indirect effects of conflict in shaping migration from Afghanistan, and in the transnational space linking the country to Iran, Pakistan and beyond.

This multi-layered and complex picture of factors that have typically motivated and mediated Afghan migration is reflected in decisions to leave and choices of

destination. More importantly, such complexity also defies neat categorisations of Afghan mobility as one of either voluntary or forced migration (Monsutti 2006), underlining the gap between the complexity of real life mobility and the clear-cut labels, on which public policy and the international policy framework are centred (Scalettaris 2010). Especially as the conflict protracted and mutated, this has made the reality of Afghan migration an uneasy match with neat distinctions between those fleeing war and persecution versus those fleeing poverty or striving for decent living conditions. Such distinctions often translate into juxtapositions between “legitimate refugees” and “economic migrants”, labels that have become increasingly predominant in guiding policy discourse and responses. This has particularly been the case in the post-2015 EU context (Crawley and Skleparis 2018), generating significant implications for Afghan migrants and asylum seekers arriving to Europe, also in gendered ways (see Section 3.1.3.3).

Furthermore, migration in the post-1979 era, as was the case before, often did not imply a definitive “uprooting” or a permanent return to the homeland, owing to the ‘multidirectional, cross-border movements and the ongoing, cyclical nature of migration’ (Monsutti 2006, 7). Many refugees in the neighbouring countries have repeatedly crossed the porous borders back and forth, cyclically becoming “returnees” in Afghanistan and “refugees” in the host countries (Turton and Marsden 2002; Kronenfeld 2008). Border-crossing networks – built mainly, but not exclusively on family, kinship and social ties – have facilitated such movement. The circular and cyclical nature of migration has in turn further nurtured transnational networks and practices, which have typically constituted a key livelihood strategy for both those who move and those who stay put.¹³ This also implies that the experiences of many Afghans can fall under the categories of refugee, returnee or internally displaced person (IDP) in different points of their life (Quie and Hakimi 2020), sitting uncomfortably with such categories that reflect the widespread policy assumption on which return and repatriation programmes

¹³ For detailed empirical analyses of Afghan migration to and return migration from Iran and Pakistan and Afghan transnational networks spanning Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, see, research produced as part of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) project on ‘Afghan transnational networks and sustainable reintegration’. See, in particular, Abbasi-Shavazi et al. (2005); Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook (2006), Stigter (2005) for Iran; Collective for Social Science Research (2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c) and Habibi and Hunte (2006) for Pakistan; and Monsutti 2006 for a study synthesizing research done in all three countries.

are built: ‘that refugees cross a border only twice: once to escape a country and once – if they are lucky – to return’ (Kronenfeld 2008, 54).

3.1.1.3 Afghan migration since 1978

While combinations of reasons underlying migration decisions vary, protracted conflict and insecurity, the impact of decades-long political turmoil and weak state capacity on the rule of law, economy, physical infrastructure, livelihoods and basic services set the broader context of Afghan migration since the late 1970s. Political, economic and security conditions in the country have direct effects on the daily lives of local populations and hence play significant roles in informing migration decisions. However, “the domestic” in Afghanistan has always been deeply embedded in and shaped by complex – and often conflictual – regional and international geopolitics. While geopolitics has influenced drivers and patterns of migration as well as the experiences of Afghan people on the move, migration has in turn become an additional facet informing geopolitical dynamics.

Set in this macro-context, several turning points have shaped the history, volume and patterns of migration from Afghanistan from the late 1970s onwards: the 1978 coup by the communist party followed by the Soviet invasion one year later; the victory of the *mujahideen* and the fall of the communist government in 1992 and the ensuing civil war that lasted until 1996 when the Taliban came to power; the US-led invasion in 2001 that put an end to the Taliban regime; and very recently, the Taliban’s capture of Kabul and return to power on 15 August 2021 and the hasty withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from the country. The political, economic and migratory repercussions of the latter still remain largely uncertain (see below).

The first wave of large-scale population movement occurred in the aftermath of the **1978 coup by the Marxist People’s Democratic Party**, which was followed by the **1979 invasion by the Soviet Union** in support of the newly established communist regime. In the decade until the withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989, millions of Afghans fled to geographically as well as socially, culturally and linguistically close Pakistan and Iran (Ashrafi and Moghissi 2002). 1.5 million

Afghans are known to have moved to Pakistan between 1979 and 1980, the large majority of which were Pashtuns from rural areas (IOM 2014). The refugee flow to Iran started with the Soviet invasion (Ashrafi and Moghissi 2002). The scale of displacement grew as fighting between the communist regime and the Soviet forces and the *mujahideen* fighters¹⁴ intensified in the 1980s. By 1990, there were 3.3 million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and another 3 million in Iran (Turton and Marsden 2002). The majority of refugees in this period were from rural areas, who escaped bombing and armed conflict (Monsutti 2006).

Refugee movement remained limited beyond the two host countries, although a small group of professionals are known to have left for the US, Europe and India in this period (Turton and Marsden 2002). The majority of Afghans in the US are those who had fled after the Soviet invasion, while Germany also received a relatively higher number of Afghan refugees after 1978-79, most of them belonging to the educated elite (IOM 2014). While Afghan migration to Turkey was negligible before the 1980s, a 'transportation and settlement arrangement' brought over 4,000 Afghan refugees with Turkmen, Hazara, Uzbek and Krygyz origin from the camps in Pakistan to Turkey, leading to the formation of what is now a sizeable Afghan community in Turkey (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018, 9).¹⁵

In this first phase, both Pakistan and Iran had a welcoming attitude towards Afghan refugees, which was informed both by geopolitical interests and cultural and religious affinity. In Pakistan the large majority of refugees were hosted in the camps along the border with Afghanistan. These camps also served as bases for action of *mujahideen* groups, who have received military and humanitarian support from the US through the Pakistani government (Turton and Marsden 2002), interlocking the refugee issue with regional and Cold War geopolitics. The Cold War context also meant that the Pakistani government received large amounts of humanitarian aid from the West in managing these camps (Turton and Marsden 2002). In the context of post-Islamic revolution in Iran, Afghan refugees

¹⁴ *Mujahideen* were led by seven Sunni Islamist parties engaged in 'anti-Soviet *jihād*', which were militarily and financially backed by the US, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (ICG 2011, 3).

¹⁵ The arrangement was based on the 1934 Law of Settlement, which grants immigrant status with permanent residence and eventual citizenship rights to persons with 'Turkish culture and origin', and not within the framework of international protection (Ibid.).

were admitted as *mohajerin*, or ‘involuntary religious migrants’ (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005, 16) and benefitted from indeterminate residence and (limited) employment rights as well as access to healthcare and education. Iran received insignificant amounts of humanitarian aid from the international community (Turton and Marsden 2002), and 97.5 % of Afghan refugees lived in the peripheries of big cities (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005).

With the **withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989**, the strategic importance of supporting Afghan refugees faded out both for the host countries and the donor countries. Repatriation from Pakistan and Iran emerged as the new priority, with Pakistan launching its first voluntary repatriation programme in 1990, and Iran, in cooperation with the UNHCR and the Afghan government, in 1992 (Turton and Marsden 2002). 900,000 Afghan refugees were estimated to have returned from Pakistan in 1992, followed by an additional 300,000 returns in 1993 (Turton and Marsden 2002, 12-13). The estimated number of returnees from Iran in the period between 1992 and 1995 stood at 1.3 million (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005, 16).

The *mujahideen* victory against the fall of the communist regime did not bring stability, instead giving way to factional fighting among *mujahideen* groups from 1992 on. The pace of returns slowed down. **The 1992-1996 civil war** destroyed Kabul, caused indiscriminate suffering among the population with a high toll of civilian casualties, and led to a new wave of large-scale displacement both within and outside Afghanistan’s borders. Refugees in this period came predominantly from the urban middle classes (Monsutti 2006). The two main destinations were once again Pakistan and Iran, while European countries such as Germany and the UK also received a higher number of refugees in this period (IOM 2014).

It was during the civil war when the Taliban began battling other *mujahideen* groups and expanding its control beyond its stronghold in the South towards Kabul, which also gained it considerable popular support (Giustozzi and Ibrahimi 2012). The group captured Kabul in **1996**, which marked the **beginning of the**

Taliban regime that would last until the US-led invasion in 2001.¹⁶ Having inherited a country heavily suffering the devastating effects of war on the economy, infrastructure, arable land and basic services, challenged by armed resistance, and under heavy international isolation, the Taliban channelled its energy into its military offensive in the north and in ‘the imposition of an obscurantist version of Sunni Sharia law’ (ICG 2011, 5). Local populations therefore not only suffered the effects of fighting between the Taliban and armed resistance groups and the Taliban’s repressive regime – which particularly affected women and minorities, but also the lack of jobs, livelihood opportunities and access to basic services, all of which contributed to eroding popular legitimacy of the Taliban (Ibid.). The drought that started in 1998 further deteriorated livelihoods and deepened indebtedness (Pain and Lautze 2002). As a result of all these factors, internal and international displacement continued during the Taliban regime.

Despite the 1992-96 civil war, international humanitarian aid was downsized from mid-1990s on due to the geopolitical downgrading of the Afghan refugee issue after the Soviet withdrawal and the increasing rate of returns from the two host countries.¹⁷ Against a background of growing costs of protracting displacement and mounting domestic economic and political pressure (and decreasing international assistance in the case of Pakistan), both Iran and Pakistan started to harden their position towards Afghan refugees from mid-1990s on. This translated into policies limiting new arrivals and encouraging repatriation (see Section 3.1.3.2). Even if displacement from Afghanistan continued during the civil war and under the Taliban regime, both countries started to regard Afghans as ‘economic migrants or “economic refugees”’ (Turton and Marsden 2002, 14). By the end of the 1990s, Afghans were no longer granted refugee status on a *prima facie* basis in

¹⁶ See, ICG (2011), pp. 3-5 for an account on the rise and fall of the Taliban in the 1992-2001 period.

¹⁷ Increasing return of Afghan refugees in the first half of the 1990s was among the official donor arguments justifying the decrease in humanitarian aid for refugees in Pakistan. However, in the absence of accurate data on actual volume of repatriations, return numbers only reflected those refugees who deregistered in Pakistan in order to receive the assistance package upon crossing back to Afghanistan. The Pakistani government estimated that only one-third of those had actually repatriated, which, according to the UNHCR stood over two-thirds by 1994 (Turton and Marsden 2002).

these countries.¹⁸

Despite growing restrictions, in the period between 1991 and 2000, over 300,000 new Afghan refugees arrived to Pakistan (IOM 2014). By 2001, 2 million Afghan refugees were estimated to be in Pakistan (Kronenfeld 2008). Movement to Iran also continued, although at a slower pace than the previous decade. By 2000 the number of Afghans in Iran was estimated at 1.3 million (Abbasi-Shavazi and Glazebrook 2006). While Pakistan and Iran remained the two countries hosting the large majority of Afghan refugees, Afghan movement towards Europe, Canada and the US, and to a lesser extent also Australia started to increase in this period (IOM 2014). In Europe, a relative growth in the stock of Afghan migrants was witnessed between 1990 and 2000 mainly in Germany, but also in the Netherlands and the UK, and Austria (See Table 1 above).

The US-led invasion in October 2001 following the 9/11 attacks marked another turning point in Afghanistan's history, which also had significant implications for migration from and return to Afghanistan. The US-led bombing and fighting between the coalition forces and the Taliban in the autumn of 2001 led to another episode of displacement (Stigter 2006). The Taliban regime fell in December 2001 and was excluded from the UN-brokered Bonn Agreement later that month, as a result of which the interim administration led by Hamid Karzai was formed. The International Assistance Security Force (ISAF) was deployed in 2002 and massive international assistance started to flow into Afghanistan. The Karzai government took office in 2004.

In a context of growing expectations for peace and political and economic reconstruction – which was also reinforced by the international community's messaging – (Turton and Marsden 2002), outmigration slowed down, while the pace of returns increased in the first half of the 2000s. **Returns** also took place in a context of crystallising policy priorities of Iran and Pakistan as well as the international community. Iran and Pakistan, which were already showing signs of

¹⁸ This already applied to a large group of Afghans arriving to Iran, who, from 1993 on were regarded as 'illegal aliens' (Turton and Marsden 2002, 14-16).

‘asylum fatigue’ in the late 1990s (Turton and Marsden 2002; Ashrifi and Moghissi 2002), made repatriation of most Afghan refugees an explicit policy goal after 2001. Repatriation and reintegration became a priority also for the interim administration, and was promoted by the UNHCR and the international community at large as the “durable solution” to the protracted Afghan displacement (Stigter 2006; Kronenfeld 2008; Scalleratis 2010).

Scholars agree on the difficulty of having an accurate number of “actual repatriations” in this period due to ‘spontaneous returns’ taking place outside the UNHCR programme, the initially common practice of ‘recycling’, i.e., returning to Afghanistan to collect the assistance package to then cross the border back to the host country (Turton and Marsden 2002), and the more established pattern of back-and-forth movement across the porous borders separating geographically proximate areas – particularly relevant at the Afghanistan-Pakistan border – for social and economic reasons (Kronenfeld 2008). Notwithstanding, it is widely accepted that between 2002 and 2005, 3.5 million Afghan refugees returned from Pakistan (2.7 million) and Iran (800,000) within and outside the framework of the UNHCR’s voluntary repatriation scheme (Monsutti 2006, 6). The hardening stance of the two neighbouring countries also led to large-scale deportations, especially from Iran: more than 270,000 and over 5,000 Afghans were deported from Iran and Pakistan respectively between 2002 and 2005 (Stigter 2006, 113). While returns lost momentum after 2005, by 2008 more than 5 million refugees were assumed to have returned to Afghanistan (Monsutti 2008, 60).

The **sustainability of large-scale returns** emerged as a major challenge, despite the inflow of significant sums of international aid. Several factors were influential: Afghanistan did not have the absorption capacity for such a large volume of returnees, the ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach adopted both by Afghan authorities and international donors failed to match the diverse needs and expectations of returnees, and reinstating land and property rights, which lies at the heart of sustainability of reintegration in post-conflict contexts,¹⁹ proved to be a major

¹⁹ The 2015 Survey of Afghan Returnees from Iran to Afghanistan that was conducted with 425 returnees, majority of which returned in the 2002-2006 period, found out that ‘having a house or

challenge (Quie and Hakimi 2020).²⁰ Reintegration challenges and continuing discrepancies between the economic opportunities and living standards – including public services – offered by Afghanistan and its neighbours, implied that a definitive return was not a viable option for many, whose expectations evolved during their time outside Afghanistan (Monsutti 2006; 2008).²¹ As a result, flows of outmigration, re-migration of returnees to Iran and Pakistan as well as circular migration (supporting livelihoods particularly through remittances) continued.

From **the second half of the 2000s**, the security situation started to deteriorate, with the re-emergence of the Taliban and persistent violence affecting civilians, i.e., the attacks of the Taliban and affiliated groups as well as instances of indiscriminate bombing by the US-led coalition forces. The Taliban particularly targeted those working for the Afghan government, security forces and civil service and those collaborating with the international forces. Partial and limited social and economic progress recorded in the 2000s further slowed down following the reduction of international aid after 2012 (Bizhan 2016). Shocks generated by droughts and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the picture. Gradual reduction of the US and NATO troops, empowerment of the Taliban and other non-state groups running parallel governance structures and benefitting from a flourishing illicit economy, fragile power-sharing arrangements following the two disputed presidential elections in 2014 and 2019 were major developments marking the political/security landscape in the last decade, while the problem of weak state capacity has remained persistent.

Against such background in Afghanistan and in light of sustained focus on repatriation by the neighbouring countries, (voluntary and involuntary) returns from **Iran and Pakistan** as well as (re)migration to these countries continued in the last two decades. While the stock of registered refugees showed an increasing trend after mid-2000s (particularly in Pakistan), the official number of registered

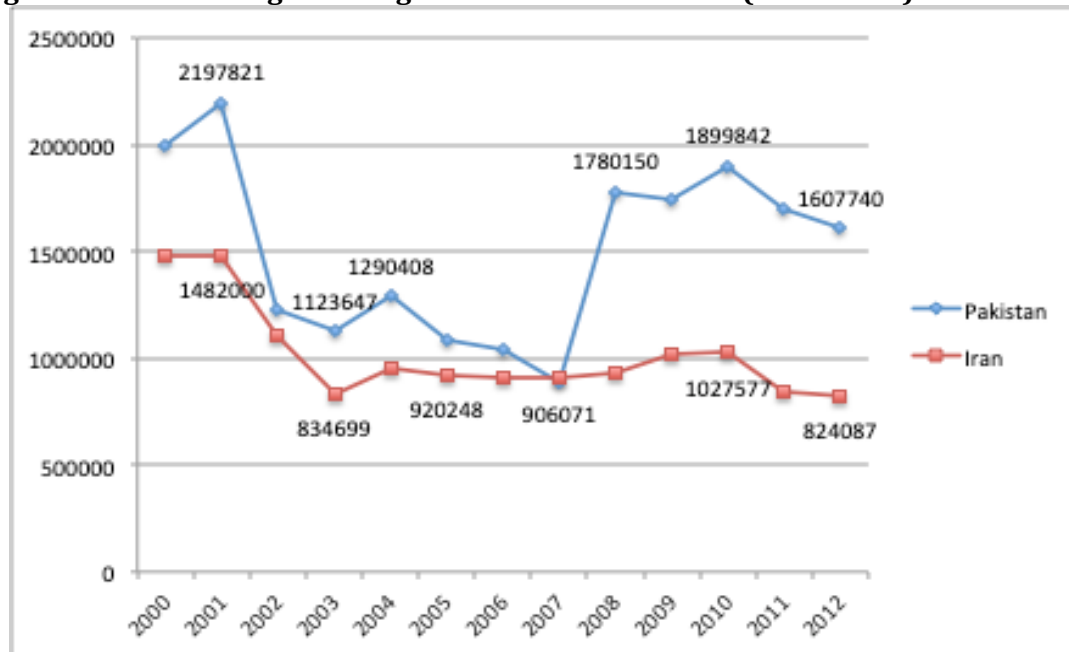
land on return had direct impact on the level of economic reintegration' (Mohammadi et al. 2018, 264).

²⁰ See, also, Stigter 2006 and Kronenfeld 2008 on the challenges to sustainable reintegration of returnees from Afghanistan.

²¹ Research shows that those who had access to better education and health systems while living in Iran had greater difficulties to reintegrate to life in Afghanistan (Mohammadi et al. 2018).

refugees in both countries remained lower than in 2001 (see Figure - 2). Yet this was also linked to the shrinking protection space for, and increasing irregularisation of Afghans (particularly new arrivals) in these two countries. According to Iranian authorities, in 2011 there were nearly 1.5 million Afghans living without documentation in Iran (HRW 2013, 18). Close to 1 million undocumented Afghans were estimated to be living in Pakistan (ICMPD 2013, 35). Therefore, despite a relative decrease in the number of registered refugees, Iran and Pakistan have continued to host an overwhelming majority of Afghan migrants.

Figure - 2: Stock of Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan (2000-2012)



Source: IOM 2014, 98-99.

While at much smaller scale compared to the size of the population of concern for Iran and Pakistan, **Afghan asylum applications** showed an increasing trend in the 1990s and the second half of the 2000s also in the **EU and EFTA countries** (See Figure - 3). After peaking at over 50,000 applications in 2001, the numbers considerably decreased in the first half of 2000s. The second half of the 2000s saw an increasing trend, peaking at 22,696 in 2009.

Figure – 3: Afghan Asylum Applications in the EU 27 and Switzerland, Norway, Lichtenstein and Iceland (1990-2010)

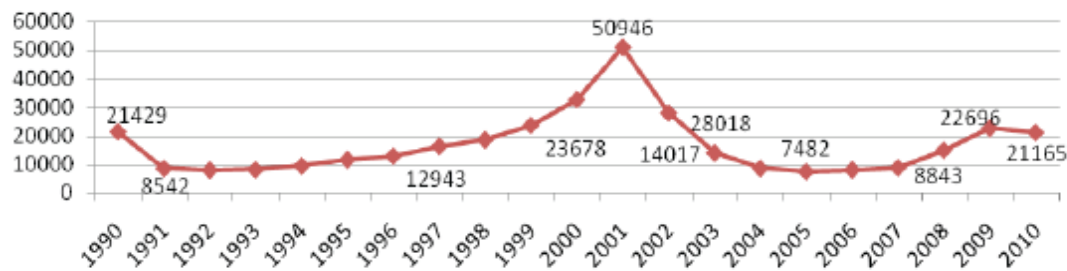


Figure reproduced from ICMPD 2013, 33.

Large majority of **Afghans irregularly arriving to the EU in the 2000s** did so via the EMR,²² following a long and risky trajectory through Iran, Turkey and arriving mainly to Greece (Dimitriadi 2013; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012). Until 2012, Afghans residing in Iran constituted a larger share of Afghans arriving to Greece than those whose journeys started in Afghanistan or Pakistan (Dimitriadi 2018, 34). Supporting this, interviews conducted as part of Frontex Joint Operation Poseidon Land in 2011 revealed that ‘more than 60 % of Afghan migrants apprehended in Greece were refugees residing in Iran either legally or illegally’ (ICMPD 2013, 36). This suggests that secondary drivers in Iran, such as deteriorating livelihoods of refugees, – within a broader context of economic fragility in Iran also informed by US sanctions – combined with a restrictive policy framework, played a significant role in driving Afghan mobility towards the EU until the early 2010s.

In the last decade, irregular arrivals and asylum applications by Afghan nationals **in the EU** started to considerably rise after 2013, peaking in 2015 (see Section 3.1.2). Turkey, which has constituted a crucial point in the trajectory of Afghan mixed migration flows arriving to the EU since the 1990s, has become a key country both as a point of transit for onward movement, and increasingly as a country of destination particularly in the last decade (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018). Even if identifying the starting point of fragmented migration journeys is not a simple task, research indicates that in Greece, the number of Afghans starting their

²² For instance, in 2009, 12,397 of a total of 13,097 irregular crossings by Afghans detected by Frontex at all entry points to the EU were recorded at the EMR (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018).

journey in Afghanistan rose notably in the 2012-2015 period, while movement from Iran continued (Dimitriadi 2018, 34). Secondary movement of Afghans residing in Pakistan towards the EU seems to remain small in numbers (Dimitriadi 2018, 4). Confirming this, Crawley et al. (2016, 42) found out that 77 % of Afghan respondents in Greece (in a survey carried out between September 2015 and November 2016) 'had spent a considerable period of time in Iran (years rather than months) and several were born there'. In Turkey, Buz et al. (2020, 13) found out that the starting point for 71.6 % of respondents was Afghanistan, while 24.6% departed from Iran, and 3.8% from Pakistan. This suggests that while the share of departures from Afghanistan in mixed flows towards Turkey and the EU seems to be increasing, secondary movement of Afghans residing in Iran continue to pertain its relevance.

Arrivals and asylum applications in the EU significantly subsided in the **post-2016 period**, mainly linked to a gearing up of EU prevention, containment and deterrence policies, which also generated ripple effects beyond (See Section 3.1.3.3). COVID-19 related mobility restrictions contributed to a further drop in arrivals at the EMR, including by Afghan nationals, in 2020. However, Afghan mixed flows continue, while a 'substitution effect' (de Haas 2011) deriving from restrictive EU policies seems to be emerging, as illustrated by the significant rise in the number of Afghans irregularly arriving to Turkey especially after 2018 (see Section 3.1.2).

In the period leading up to and following the Taliban's takeover of power in August 2021 and the hasty withdrawal of US-led NATO troops, outmigration from Afghanistan continued, mainly in the immediate region and towards Turkey. Over 48,000 newly arriving Afghans were recorded by the UNHCR in Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan from the beginning of the year to mid-October (UNHCR 2021b). According to data provided by Turkey, 48,361 irregular migrants from Afghanistan were apprehended from January to mid-October 2021 (DGMM 2021a). Between January-September 2021, only 1,015 irregular crossings by Afghan nationals were recorded at the EMR (Frontex 2021).

3.1.2. Irregular migration and asylum trends in the EU

Over the period between 2009 and 2020, Afghan citizens entered the top three national groups who were apprehended for irregularly crossing the land and sea borders at the EMR every year. Afghans constituted the largest group in the years 2009-2012 and in 2019, while ranking second after Syrian nationals in the remaining years, with the exception of 2017 when they constituted the third largest group after Syrians and Iraqis.²³

Following a significant increase after 2009 for two consecutive years, a notable yet temporary decrease in the apprehension numbers was recorded at the EMR in the years 2012 and 2013 (See Table-2). The peak was reached with 213,635 detections in 2015, accounting for over 24 % of overall crossings at the EMR, given the large-scale nature of the population movement in that year.

Table-2: Crossings of Afghans EMR (Sea and Land Total), 2009-2020

Afghanistan			
YEAR	Irregular crossings by Afghans	Total crossings	Afghans as % of total crossings
2009	12397	39973	31,01
2010	22762	55688	40,87
2011	19618	57025	34,40
2012	9566	37224	25,70
2013	6129	24798	24,72
2014	12475	50834	24,54
2015	213635	885386	24,13
2016	43120	182277	23,66
2017	3985	42319	9,42
2018	10738	56560	18,99
2019	28693	83333	34,43
2020	3927	20280	19,36
Total 2009-2020	387045	1535697	25,20

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map" <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

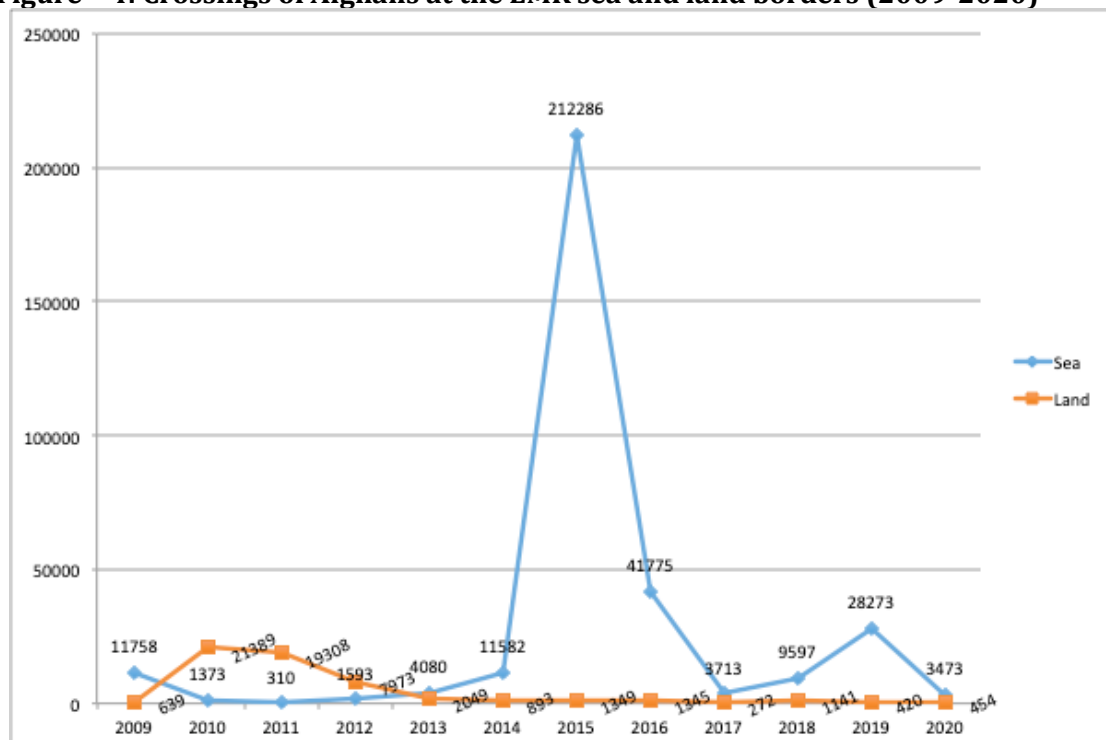
A significant drop from the record high of 2015 was recorded in 2016, while 2017

²³ Ranking calculated by authors based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map" <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

saw a record low (and a 92% decrease in comparison to 2016) with less than 4,000 crossings. The numbers continued to increase in 2018, and particularly in 2019 (accounting for 34 % of all detections at the EMR, demonstrating an increase both in absolute and relative terms), to witness a new low of less than 4,000 crossings in 2020.

Frontex data also points out noticeable changes in the use of the land and sea borders as the main crossing point by Afghan migrants and asylum seekers in the 2009-2020 period (see Figure-4). In 2009, the sea border was the main point of crossing at the EMR – mainly from Turkey to Greece – not only for the Afghans, but in general terms.²⁴ A clear shift from the sea border to the land border (between Turkey and Greece as well as Bulgaria) occurred in 2010-2013, while the sea border has regained clear predominance as the point of crossings from 2014 onwards, reflecting again a general trend, not peculiar to Afghan migrants (see sections 3.2 and 3.3).

Figure – 4: Crossings of Afghans at the EMR sea and land borders (2009-2020)

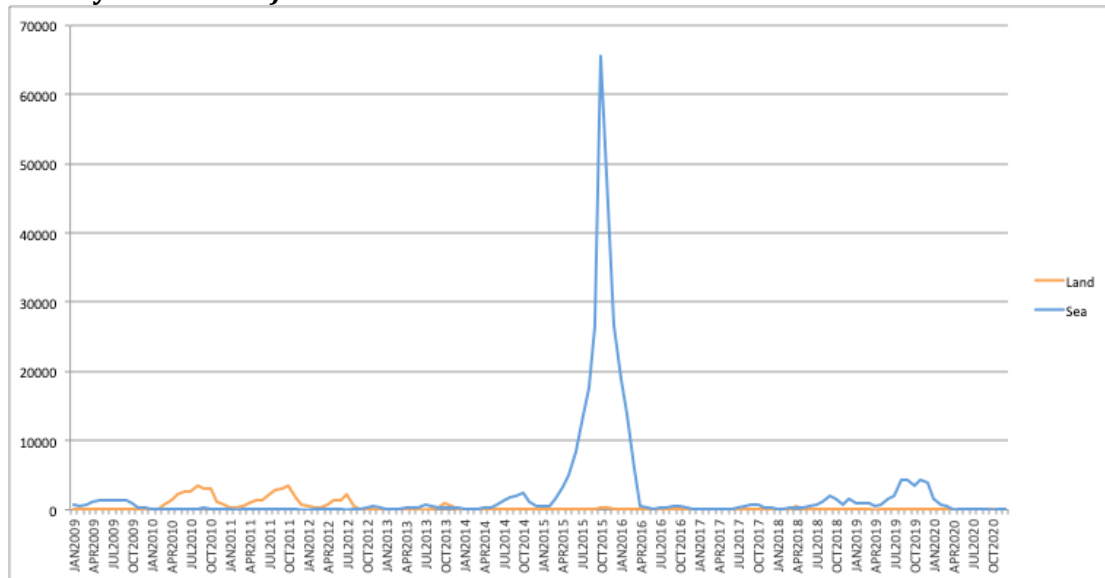


Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map" <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

²⁴ This was the case in general in the late 2000s, illustrated by the fact that 75 % of all IBC detections in the EU were at the sea border between Greece and Turkey (Dimitriadi 2013, 15).

In the 2015-16 period, when the number of arrivals by Afghan nationals – alongside other nationalities – (mainly) to Greece peaked, the monthly figures show the concentration of such movements in the period from the summer of 2015 until March-April 2016, with October 2015 witnessing a record high of over 65,000 detected irregular border-crossings by Afghan nationals (See Figure – 5).

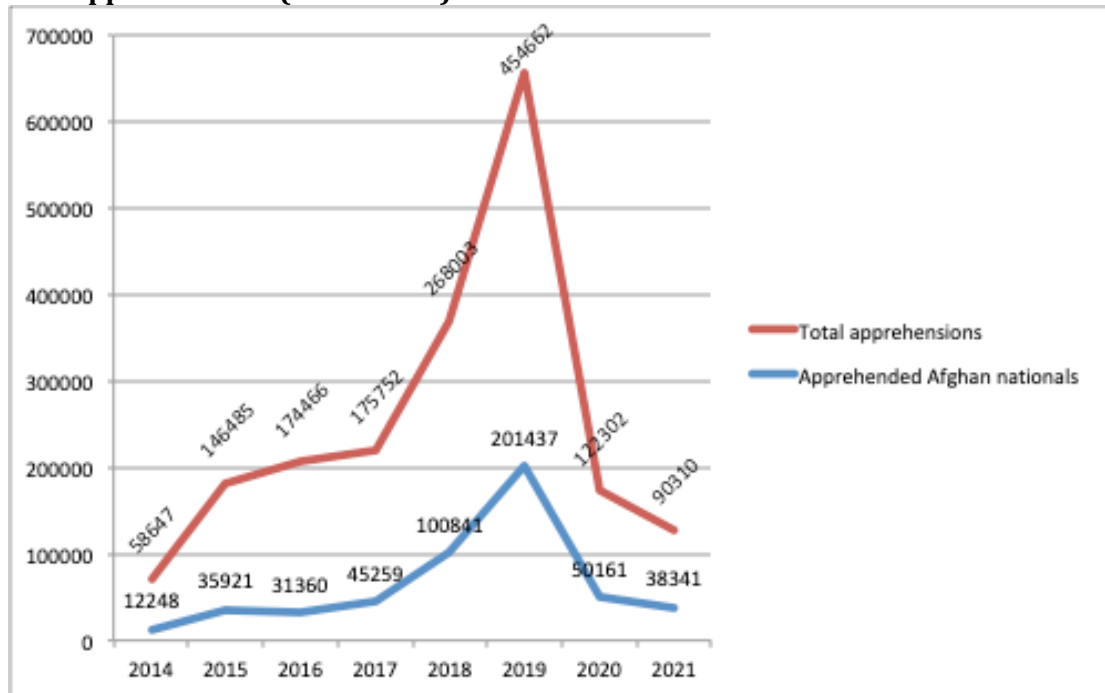
Figure – 5: Crossings of Afghans at the EMR sea and land borders (2009-2020 - monthly breakdown)



Source: Frontex monthly statistics on “Detections of illegal border-crossings”, available at Frontex, “Migratory Map” <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

Beyond crossings to the EU, available data on apprehension of irregular migrants provided by Turkey (which includes apprehensions at the border as well as inland) show a significant increase in the number of apprehended Afghan nationals both in absolute and relative terms since 2015. Such increase is particularly visible in the years 2018 and 2019, representing 38% and 44 % of total apprehensions respectively (See Figure – 6). There has been a drop since the peak year of 2019. With the exception of 2016, the number of apprehended Afghan migrants has stood above the nearly 36,000 which was recorded in 2015.

Figure – 6: Apprehensions of irregular migrants in Turkey – Afghan nationals and Total apprehensions (2014-2021)*



Source: Ministry of Interior of Turkey, Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM). 2021a. Statistics: Irregular Migration, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration>, accessed 9 September

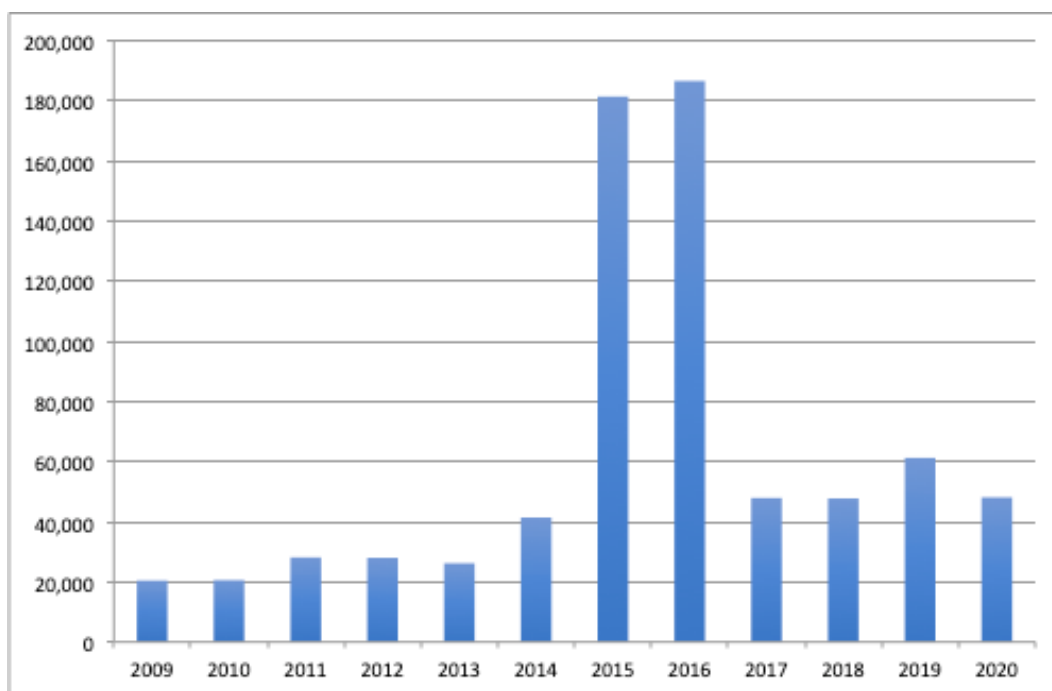
* The figures for 2021 are as of 26 August 2021.

This illustrates that the migration movement of Afghan citizens has not been dramatically reduced, let alone having disappeared after 2016, even if their access to the EU territory seems to have considerably limited. That said, not all Afghan migrants apprehended in Turkey can or should be assumed to be “in transit” on their way towards the EU. According to the survey conducted by Buz et al. (2020, 31) with 341 Afghan migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in six provinces of Turkey, when asked about their intended destination, 43.1% of the respondents indicated Turkey, 19.1% European countries, 17.9% Canada, and 10.9% the US (Buz et al. 2020, 31). Yet, research also shows that intentions and plans change during the journey.

Eurostat data on asylum applications lodged by Afghan nationals in the EU over the 2009-2020 period show that the protection claims have stood in the 20,000-30,000 range in the 2009-2013 period, with a notable increase in 2014, and peaking in 2015 (181,425) and 2016 (186,605) (See Figure – 7). The peak in asylum applications parallels the notable increase in irregular crossings in 2015

and the first months of 2016 – also considering the lag of time between one’s arrival on EU territory and filing an asylum claim, especially in a context of overburdened asylum systems. While apprehension figures can act only as an estimate of the total volume of individuals who entered the EU territory without authorisation, such parallel between the volume and timing of irregular crossings and asylum applications (taking into account the lag between arrival at the external border and claiming asylum) indicates that most Afghan nationals that have irregularly entered the EU in that period did so in search of protection.

Figure – 7: Asylum applications lodged by Afghan nationals in the EU²⁵



Source: Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]"

https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

Resonating with the drop in the crossings, since 2017 the number of asylum claims decreased notably.²⁶ In this period, the applications stood at 47-48,000 range with the exception of 2019 (a year which also saw a notable increase in crossings at the EMR), when over 61,000 protection claims were made by Afghan nationals, with

²⁵ The figures between 2009 and 2012 reflect the EU-27 (excluding Croatia), those between 2013 and 2019 reflect the EU-28, that for the year 2020 reflects EU-27 (excluding the UK).

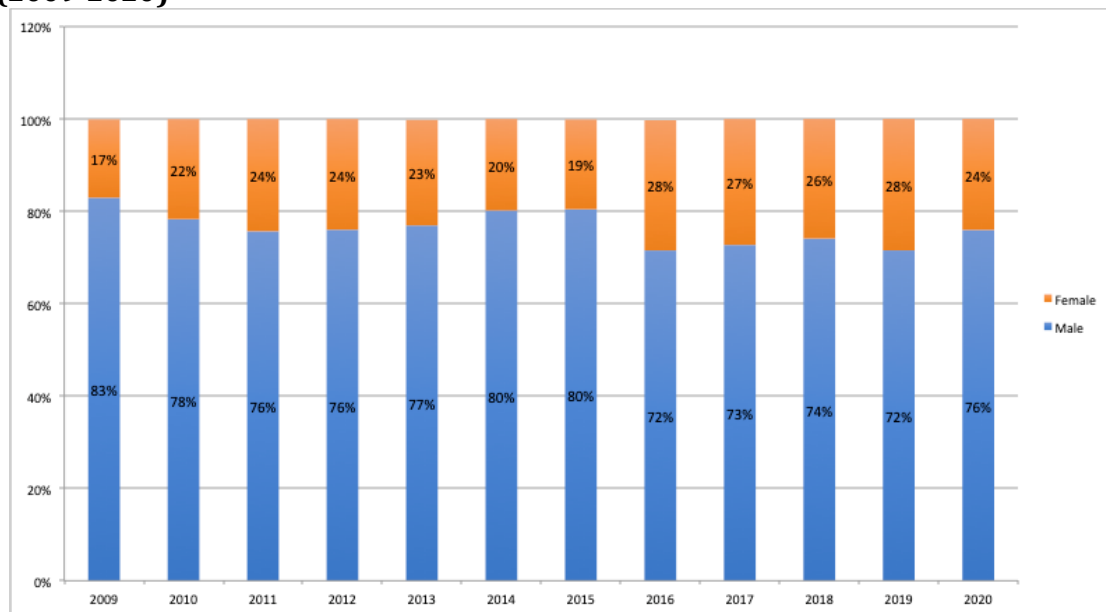
²⁶ The analysis in this and the following paragraphs draw on authors’ calculations based on Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]" https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

Greece topping up the list that year with 23,825 applications, followed by France (12,085) and Germany (11,280).

When it comes to how these applications have been distributed among member states, Germany clearly emerges as the country that has received the great majority of claims. Bearing parallels to the list of EU countries with largest Afghan communities, Sweden, Austria, the UK (until end 2019), and the Netherlands, despite some fluctuations, have been among the top ten countries where Afghan nationals applied for asylum in the last decade, besides EFTA countries such as Norway and Switzerland. Hungary, which, in the 2013-2015 period received an increasing share of applications by Afghan nationals in the EU (9% in 2013, 21% in 2014, and 25% in 2015), sharply climbed down the ladder after 2016, receiving 6% in 2016, 3% in 2017, 1% in 2018 and less than 1% in 2019 and 2020. Greece and France emerge as two countries whose share of asylum claims by Afghan citizens significantly increased after 2016. France's share went up from 3% in 2016, to 14% in 2017, and 25% in 2018, while it received 20% and 22% of all applications in 2019 and 2020 respectively. Greece has seen its share increase from 2% in 2016, to 16%, and to 25%, 39% in 2017, 2018, 2019 respectively, ranking first for the second year consecutively with a share of 24% in 2020.

In terms of the **gender composition of Afghan asylum seekers** in the EU, Eurostat data shows a clearly larger share of male applicants over the years, which constantly remained above 70 % in the entire period (See Figure – 8). While the female/male ratio has remained approximately around the 20-80% range in the period between 2009 and 2015, the share of female asylum applicants increased to 26-28% in the 2016-2019 period, slightly decreasing to 24% in 2020.

Figure – 8: Female-male ratio – Asylum applications by Afghan nationals in the EU (2009-2020)



Source: Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]"

https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

While gender-disaggregated data is scarce when it comes to arrivals, the increase in the share of female asylum seekers from 2016 onwards confirms the findings by Kofman (2019, 2189), who demonstrated that from the Summer of 2015 on and particularly in the Autumn of 2015, the share of women and children arriving in Greece (predominantly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq) significantly increased. With the entry into force of the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement, the gender balance tilted back to favour male migrants and asylum seekers, with the share of males increasing from 38 % in February to 47 % in April, and 63 % in June 2016 (Kofman 2019, 2189). The relative decrease in the number of women and children is considered to be caused by the fact that the crossing became more difficult and dangerous after the EU-Turkey Statement (Ibid.).

Afghans represented a considerably high share of **unaccompanied minors** arriving in Europe already before 2015, while India, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia also constituted destinations beyond Europe for Afghan unaccompanied children (UNHCR 2010, 1). A significant number of unaccompanied minors arrived in Europe over 2015-16. Half of the 90,000 unaccompanied minors who arrived in 2015 were Afghans, while boys constituted the majority (International Rescue

Committee 2016). Nearly 15 % of all the asylum claims in Europe in 2015 were made by Afghan unaccompanied and separated children (UNHCR 2016d, 10). Sweden has received more than half of these children in 2015 (UNHCR 2016d, 10). Of the more than 100,000 children who arrived in Europe in 2016, nearly 34,000 were unaccompanied and separated children (UNICEF and REACH 2017, 2). The large majority of 63,290 children who arrived in Greece in 2016 were accompanied (58,728), while the share of unaccompanied minors (4,562) in this group amounted to 7.2 % (UNICEF and REACH 2017, 49-50). The large majority of children (84 %) were between 15-17 years old and boys significantly outnumbered girls (Ibid.). Afghans constituted 27 % of the unaccompanied minors who arrived in Greece in 2016 (UNICEF and REACH 2017, 51).

While the UNHCR has provided some gender-disaggregated data on arrivals of minors in the 2015-16 period, this has not been comprehensive and systematic, which led Kofman (2019, 2190) to argue that minors have been dealt with as an ungendered category by the UNHCR. However, based on disaggregated data provided by the UNHCR during 2015-16 in Greece,²⁷ Kofman (2019, 2190) found out that the respective share of boys and girls were 'fairly balanced' in the 0-14 age group, while male minors constituted the dominant demographic only in the 15-17 age group, and this imbalance was further accentuated among unaccompanied minors.

Qualitative studies shed some further light on the profile of Afghan unaccompanied minors who arrived in Europe in 2015. While confirming the arrival of a significant number of unaccompanied minors and young adults during the large-scale movement, Donini et al. (2016, 6) have identified three main groups: ethnic Hazara who were second generation refugees residing in Iran (often without documentation) as well as in Quetta, Pakistan, and young males from rural areas in the southern and the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. A UNHCR study (UNHCR 2016d, 17) based on 240 interviews and focus groups conducted in Sweden with Afghan unaccompanied and separated children who arrived to Europe in 2015

²⁷ For UNHCR factsheets on the profiling exercise on Afghan arrivals in Greece in the period between January and March 2016, see, UNHCR 2016a, 2016b, 2016c.

found out that the large majority of those children (74 %) were Hazara and 71% were Shiite. 58 % of these minors had lived in Afghanistan before departure, and 37% in Iran (Ibid.). 75 % of the unaccompanied Afghan children who lived in Iran, and 63 % of those who lived in Afghanistan before departure worked, while more than half of these minors reported to have dropped out of school in order to work (UNHCR 2016d, 22). The majority of the participants to a smaller scale UNHCR study conducted with 52 Afghan unaccompanied minors in Norway were Hazara and Pashtun, all were born in Afghanistan and most lived in Afghanistan before embarking on the journey, indicating a lower share of second generation refugee children residing in Iran and Pakistan in this country (UNHCR 2017).

The large majority of children did not have Greece as a preferred destination, which, however, transformed into a de facto country of asylum after the closure of the borders (UNICEF and REACH 2017, 55). Confirming this, Donini et. al. (2016, 37) point out that 'Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece or Italy remain very low in the ranking of destination countries ... [a] successful trajectory means reaching the UK or Germany in the past and increasingly a Scandinavian country today'. This is particularly true for 'adolescents and young adults' for whom 'success means reaching Sweden or Norway' (Donini et. al. 2016, 8).

3.1.3 Analysis of drivers across origin, transit, host and destination contexts

Before delving into the structural factors and policy shifts across the various countries that have combined in shaping Afghan journeys towards Europe in the last decade, particular features characterising Afghan displacement and cross-border mobility should be underlined. First, due to the protracted nature of displacement and decades-long history of mixed migration, the notion of country of departure does not only apply to Afghanistan, but also to the traditional host countries, i.e., Iran and Pakistan. As mentioned above, in addition to Afghans from Afghanistan, a non-negligible part of Afghans arriving in Greece (and Turkey) start their journey in Iran, after having stayed for long periods in this country, in some cases being born and raised there.

Second, far from being linear processes directly linking the country of origin to the country of (EU) destination via brief stops at transit countries, Afghan migrants and asylum seekers' journeys towards Europe are characterised by their long duration and 'fragmented' nature (Collyer 2010). This implies that destinations and intentions change during the journey (see, *inter alia*, Dimitriadi 2018a; Kaytaz 2016; Kuschminder 2017). What might have initially been an intended destination country can, after a period spent there, turn into a transit country in the face of changing conditions and experiences leading to the decision to move onward. It might also imply that a country, initially intended merely as a transit point on the way to the EU, due to increasing hurdles to onward mobility or lack of resources might turn into a context in which migrants and asylum seekers aspiring to move on find themselves immobilised. Furthermore, considering that substantial investment goes to the organisation of these protracted journeys (e.g., selling property, borrowing), those aspiring to return to Afghanistan might also find themselves stranded *en route* due to loss of assets and safety nets upon potential return to Afghanistan (Kuschminder et. al 2014).

Third, the long and complex nature of the journey requiring – often irregular – crossing of several borders, multiple – and at times considerably long – stays in various countries means that Afghan migrants and asylum seekers need to navigate a set of hurdles (e.g., changing entry barriers, hardened borders), adapt to different legal frameworks (e.g., applicable protection regimes and reception policies), while they might also encounter opportunities (e.g., employment – typically in the informal sector). This dynamically changing opportunity-constraint structure in different contexts *en route* not only informs the means used to continue the journey, but it can also alter the direction and duration of journeys, while leading to changes in one's intended destination, or creating disparities between intended and 'de facto' destinations.

All these imply that real-life decision-making processes and trajectories shaping Afghan mixed flows towards Europe are often more complex and fluid than a straightforward journey with a clear starting point, i.e., Afghanistan, and a clear ending point, i.e., the EU, with two transit stops in between (i.e., Iran and Turkey).

As put forth by Crawley et al (2016, 42), such migration processes ‘cannot be interpreted as one and the same journey, rather they consist of separate or serial migration decisions’. Therefore, a focus on drivers in the country of origin, i.e., Afghanistan feeding into the first decision to leave, while necessary, is not sufficient to understand the context shaping these connected, yet different, subsequent migration movements, which might culminate in the particular outcome of irregular arrival to Europe.

In sum, political, economic, and social conditions, as well as developments affecting the migration and protection-specific policy framework of countries which might simultaneously act as intended destinations, host contexts, and transit countries and how these conditions, developments and policies in different contexts might combine as to drive, facilitate, inhibit and shape Afghan migration towards Europe should be taken into account. The following pages attempt to do so. The subsections below first focus on the evolution of the structural elements in Afghanistan that have shaped the wider context for those considering departure. Then the focus shifts to the conditions and policies in non-EU countries that act as (potential) destination, transit and host countries for Afghan mixed flows, while paying attention to the implications of EU prevention and containment policies for these countries. Finally, the EU as a destination is examined.

3.1.3.1 Deteriorating security, political instability and insecure livelihoods in Afghanistan

In essence, the failed reconstruction and stabilisation process after the fall of the Taliban in 2001 has acted as the main migration driver in the last decade. While factors pertaining to the domestic political context such as political fragmentation, abuse of power by elites and corruption have informed such failure, external actors, mainly the US and NATO, and the international community at large have also played a significant role in failing to mobilise and support a sustainable political and economic reconstruction process despite billions spent in aid. While acute shocks, such as the drought in 2018 and the COVID-19 pandemic acted as multipliers of existing challenges, large-scale repatriations, often based on continuing demands from the neighbouring host countries as well as the EU, have

generated additional strain on the already weak capacity of the state and the fragility of the economy.

The evolution of the political, security and economic context post-2001

Following the atmosphere of relative stability and renewed hope for the reconstruction of Afghanistan in the early 2000s, the security situation has gradually, but steadily, deteriorated. Among others, the dynamics of the power transfer process in the post-Taliban era, in which the US was heavily involved, played a role in this. The US supported the *mujahideen* groups that fought against the Taliban during the 1992-96 civil war, members of which dominated the interim administration as well as the security apparatus; the US' counter-terrorism campaign with a focus on Al-Qaeda provided an opportunity for the empowerment of warlords, the Karzai administration and the US failed to exploit intra-Taliban fragmentation, all of which played a role in the Taliban's resurgence later (ICG 2011, 5-6). The Taliban and affiliated groups (until then based in Quetta in Pakistan) resurged as early as 2006, leading to a gradual proliferation of bombing attacks and fighting between the Taliban and Afghan security forces supported by the US and NATO forces (Bizhan 2016). As the Taliban and other non-state groups and warlords expanded their control over growing swathes of territory, parallel governance structures as well as the illicit economy, mainly controlled by these groups, flourished. The political, military and economic empowerment of insurgent groups and warlords and the weakening of the state's capacity to exert control over the territory, provide security and essential services acted as mutually reinforcing dynamics.

Towards the end of its second term, the Bush administration scaled down the new US troops to be stationed in Afghanistan. While the Obama administration decision to re-boost US troops in 2009 helped temporarily contain the Taliban within Afghanistan and mitigate deteriorating security, the Taliban's presence and organisation in Pakistan remained an unresolved issue. The cutting down of the coalition forces' troops that started in 2012 further aggravated the political and security situation. The number of US and NATO troops were cut from 140,000 in 2011 to 13,000 in 2014 (Bizhan 2016, 6). With the withdrawal of all NATO combat

troops at the end of 2014, the Afghan Security Forces assumed full responsibility for security, charging it with the bulk of the task of fighting the Taliban and other insurgent groups despite capacity challenges.

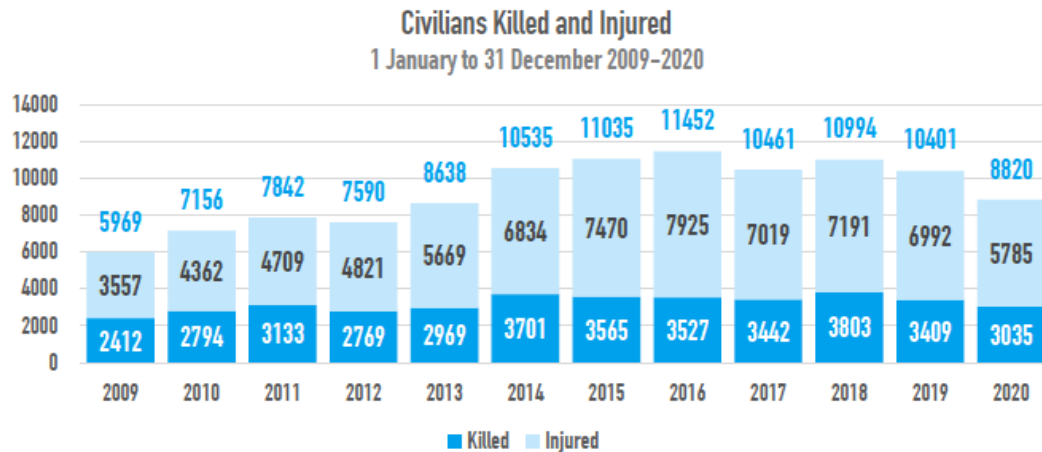
The post-2014 period witnessed a rapid deterioration of security, marked with rising insurgency and intensifying fighting between the insurgents and the Afghan Security Forces, heaving its heavy toll on local populations.²⁸ The period also saw further erosion of government control in territorial, political and economic terms. Benefiting from the power vacuum and widespread societal discontent, the Taliban initially reorganised in the South and gradually expanded its hold on other parts of the country, briefly gaining control of the northern city Kunduz in September 2015. The Afghanistan “branch” of the IS, namely, the ISIL-Khorasan was formed in 2014. Between the end of 2015 and early 2017, the districts under government control decreased from nearly 72 % to 57 % (ICG 2017). In 2019, only 54% of the districts were under government control, with 13 % being under insurgent control and 34 % contested (Nordland 2019).

Deteriorating security had its direct effects on the civilians. According to the UNAMA (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan), the number of civilians killed and injured considerably increased from 2014 onwards, exceeding the 11,000 mark in 2015 and 2016, and staying above 10,000 afterwards until 2020 (See Figure – 9). Civilians living in or near Taliban strongholds – particularly in remote areas – got also heavily affected by instances of indiscriminate bombing by the US and NATO forces (Gopal 2021). Further, the Taliban selectively targeted certain section of society: Afghans working for the government and the civil service, members of the security, defence and intelligence services, and those collaborating with the coalition forces were particularly affected and persecuted by the growing reach and power of the Taliban. This acted as a selective migration driver for those sections of society. It is thought to have also played a role in the

²⁸ While 2014 marks a turning point for aggravating insecurity, the security situation in Afghanistan was already fragile since 2001. The wider picture in the region in the 2001-2014 period gives an idea about the extent of insecurity and its effects on local populations in Afghanistan: according to US State Department data, “‘incidents of terrorism’ increased by 6,500 per cent” between 2001 and 2014, half of which being registered in Afghanistan and Iraq, and ‘casualties resulting from terror attacks’ rising by 4500 per cent (Kamel 2019a).

increasing share of Afghans arriving to Greece who had started their journey in Afghanistan after 2012 (Dimitriadi 2018a).

Figure – 9: The number of Civilians Killed and Injured in Afghanistan (2009-2020)



Reproduced from UNAMA and OHCHR (2021), “Afghanistan: Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict – Annual Report”, p. 12, available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/afghanistan_protection_of_civilians_report_2020_revs3.pdf

The complexities of the political transition following the end of Karzai’s term further contributed to political instability and the weakening of the government. The results of both presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, marked by the power struggle between the two candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah (and their supporters), were disputed. In both instances, the elections, with close involvement of the US, led to fragile power-sharing arrangements,²⁹ reflecting the deeper problem of factional fragmentation among political elites. Factionalisation that ran through the government, bureaucracy and the security apparatus contributed to political instability and weak state capacity.

Such internal fragmentation also weakened the Afghan government’s position vis-à-vis the Taliban in the framework of the so-called intra-Afghan peace talks, which was part of the process geared towards completing US and NATO forces’ withdrawal and striking a political transition and power sharing arrangement

²⁹ US Secretary of State John Kerry led the negotiations following the 2014 elections and leading to the formation of NUG with Ghani as President and Abdullah as the Chief Executive Officer – a position created to reach a power-sharing arrangement (Strand et. al 2017). In the crisis following the 2019 elections between the same contestants, the US pressured the two sides to come to an agreement using the stick of cutting 1 billion US dollars in aid, leading to a fragile power-sharing arrangement in May 2020 (Quie and Hakimi 2020).

between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The US-Taliban peace talks led to the signing of the Doha Agreement between the two parties on 29 February 2020 (Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan 2020), which foresaw the withdrawal of all US troops by 1 May 2021. The talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban kicked off in September 2020, without being capable of leading to a ceasefire or overcoming divergence (also within the Afghan government) on a number of sensitive issues, including: the release and reintegration of Taliban prisoners, the role of Sharia and the nature of the state, women and minorities, and power-sharing mechanisms (Quie and Hakimi 2020).

Besides political fragmentation and rivalry, widespread corruption and rent-seeking behaviour of elites, interlocked in complex ways with the inflow of aid (Bizhan 2017) as well as growing illicit economic activity (Quie and Hakimi 2020) further weakened the governments' legitimacy and governance capacity. Further, the predominant role of the US and NATO in the political transition process and the prioritisation of security concerns mainly linked to the war on terror implied that governance and democratisation as well as development goals were overshadowed (Strand et al. 2017). These priorities were also reflected in the channelling of funding: 2006 and 2010, 51 % of total aid was spent on security, while only 6 % was allocated to social protection (Bizhan 2016, 6).³⁰ US spending on Afghanistan also confirms this point: in the period between 2001 and 2019, the US spent 978 billion US dollars on security, compared to a spending of 36 billion US dollars on governance and development over the same period (Hakimi 2021). Despite economic and social gains in the achieved mainly in the 2000s, in overall there has been 'only a limited impact either on poverty reduction or social indicators' and the funding priorities favouring security over governance and development played an important role in this (Strand et al 2017, 39). Already by 2011, International Crisis Group concluded that international assistance has 'failed to significantly strengthen the state's capacity to provide security or basic services' (ICG 2011, i).

The sharp decline of international aid following 2012 had significant impact on the

³⁰ See, Bizhan 2017, for a more detailed discussion on this point.

Afghan economy, which is heavily aid dependent. International aid amounted to 40 % of the GDP in Afghanistan in 2017 (Quie and Hakimi 2020) and nearly 43 % in 2020 (World Bank 2021a). The drop in aid, acting together with the political and security context explained above led to the slowing down of the pace of economic growth and improvement against development indicators. While the average annual economic growth was 9.4% between 2003 and 2012, the Afghan economy grew at 2.5% in the period between 2015 and 2020, having significant impact on employment, livelihoods and income levels (World Bank 2021a, 4). GDP per capita, which was steadily increasing from about 180 US dollars in 2002 to a little over 640 US dollars in 2012, decreased to 508 US by 2020 (World Bank 2021d). Even if its Human Development Index value increased by almost 50 % between 2000 and 2019, Afghanistan lags way behind other developing countries and remains the poorest country in the Asia-Pacific region, with significant challenges in education (especially of girls), access to and quality of healthcare, food security, and women's rights (UNDP 2021).

In addition to the deterioration of conditions on political, security, social and economic fronts, shocks such as the drought that started in 2018 and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation. In an economy where '44 percent of the total workforce works in agriculture and 60 percent of households derive some income from agriculture', the effects of the drought on livelihoods, poverty and food security have been significant, particularly in rural areas (World Bank 2021a, 4). Beyond its effects on public health, the COVID-19 crisis further deepened vulnerabilities, leading to rising urban poverty, inflation and food insecurity (World Bank 2021a). The global economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis also led to a nearly 10 % reduction in remittances (World Bank 2021a), which provide a significant source for the economy and help households cope with crises and diversify risk. Finally, the heavy sanitary and economic impact of the pandemic in Iran and difficulties encountered by some to access healthcare drove an increase in the number of Afghan returnees from Iran (Mixed Migration Centre 2020). As it has generally been the case with sudden returnee intakes, this further compounded employment-related challenges and the problem of stretched capacity of infrastructure and essential services in urban contexts.

While the COVID-19 crisis made it even more difficult for Afghanistan to absorb returnees and provide them with sustainable reintegration opportunities, large-scale returns taking place in the second half of the last decade had contributed to the overall social, economic and political challenges Afghanistan was already facing in that period. Rapidly deteriorating economic conditions in Iran with the impact of the Trump Administration's withdrawal from JCPOA and imposition of heavy sanctions in 2018 played a significant role in the increasing number of returns. In addition, despite the manifold socioeconomic and political challenges in Afghanistan, repatriation of Afghan refugees and migrants continued to be the policy line pursued by Iran (heavily informed by the abovementioned economic crisis) and Pakistan, climbed further up in the EU policy agenda in the aftermath of the so-called migration crisis, and further prioritised by Turkey after the significant increase in the irregular entry of Afghans particularly in the post-2016 era (see subsections below). Based on the figures provided by the Afghan Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation to Quie and Hakimi (2020, 11), in the 2016-2019 period, a total of 10420 persons were returned from the EU. The same four-year period saw a total of 2,140,045 returns from Iran (peaking at 775,089 in 2018) and 850,785 from Pakistan (Quie and Hakimi 2020, 11). Returns from "other" countries, mainly comprising of returns from Turkey, saw a remarkable increase from 445 returns in 2016 to 32,954 in 2017, 43,334 in 2018, and 39,097 in 2019 (Quie and Hakimi 2020, 11). The rise in repatriations, both due to deteriorating economic conditions (as in the case of 2018 returns from Iran) and as a result of policy priorities of receiving countries, and the social and economic costs and challenges these incurred further strained already stretched state and societal capacities in Afghanistan.

Beyond the scale of returns and the absorption challenges that came with it, the Afghan government also had to channel considerable resources and energy into developing a policy framework on sustainable reintegration and migration management, as a result of the 'Joint Way Forward on migration issues between Afghanistan and the EU' (JWF), which was concluded in 2016 (European Commission and Government of Afghanistan 2016). Following the reinforcement

of the EU prevention-based policy approach after the so-called migration crisis, and in line with the EU policy line applied to countries of origin, the JWF foresaw the channelling of EU development aid to addressing the “root causes” of migration, while conditioning the amount and continued inflow of such aid on Afghanistan’s enhanced cooperation on return of Afghan nationals who have no right to legal residence in the EU and the fight against irregular migration.

The inherent power asymmetry between the two parties, which was further skewed in the case of heavily aid dependent Afghanistan, meant that the latter did not have much margin of manoeuvre and give into EU demands (Amnesty International 2017; Quie and Hakimi 2020). Afghanistan signed the JWF even if due to its insufficient absorption capacity and the significant economic contributions made by remittances, augmenting repatriation was not well aligned with Kabul’s interests, nor was it (and investing in migration management) among the top priorities of the Afghan government struggling to cope with a challenging security and economic situation (Quie and Hakimi 2020). Nevertheless, converging with EU priorities, the government developed the Comprehensive Migration Policy focusing on the main pillars of return and reintegration, legal migration, tackling irregular migration, and development, alongside investing in migration-focused institutionalisation, and programmatic initiatives mainstreaming IDPs, returnees and sustainable integration into its broader development strategy (Quie and Hakimi 2020, 11-17). The wider priorities of the EU foreign policy on Afghanistan focus on promoting peace and stability, strengthening governance, supporting human and economic development, and addressing migration related challenges (EEAS 2017). Paradoxically, the prioritisation of the latter within the JWF framework with a short-term focus on returns (and without sufficient consideration of the political and economic fragilities in Afghanistan), by feeding into exacerbating such fragilities, might have generated counterproductive results for these overarching strategic priorities (see also, Quie and Hakimi 2020).

In short, in the last decade, effects of deteriorating security and impoverishment of livelihoods in a broader context of dwindling social and economic development, both of which gained significant pace after 2012, and particularly with the security

transition following the withdrawal of US and NATO combat troops after 2014 set the broader context that had a bearing on migration decisions of an increasing number of Afghans. Besides internal elements such as political fragmentation, corruption, rent-seeking behaviour of elites, the prioritisation of security considerations by foreign donors, notably the US and NATO, principally geared towards their own geopolitical interests over governance and sustainable development contributed to this picture. Despite initial improvements, the capacity of the state to provide security, essential services and to generate livelihood opportunities remained weak, feeding into a general environment of insecurity and uncertainty. Certain sections of society were especially hit hard by the worsening security, such as members of government, civil service, security, defence and intelligence communities, and those collaborating with coalition forces. Others, such as minorities and women were particularly subjected to 'increased risks and threats to their lives and livelihoods' in the 'absence of rule of law, weak governance, abuse of power, re-emergence of warlordism and generalized unpredictability' (Donini et al. 2016, 3).³¹ Environmental shocks and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges, while large numbers of returns, partially driven by receiving and host countries' policy priorities added further strain to state and societal fragilities.

A brief look at the operation of drivers in real-life (gendered) migration processes

Accounts by those Afghans who made the journeys themselves demonstrate the intertwined nature of drivers, that is, how both deteriorating security and impoverished livelihoods combined in the decision to depart. The qualitative interviews conducted by REACH and Mixed Migration Platform (2017, 13) with Afghan returnees from Europe show that 'war and conflict ... were not reasons enough for them to leave their country, but the violence coupled with a lack of employment possibilities made it impossible to stay and maintain any type of

³¹ It should be noted that even if these different groups were exposed to a greater risk, those who were able to embark upon and complete migration journeys could be expected to have a greater set of social and economic resources. This arguably played an important role in growing numbers of Afghans who worked for the government or worked with the international community to arrive to Greece from 2012, whereas people in remote areas, women or members of minorities with limited resources have fewer chances to migrate, even if they have been exposed to greater risks and threats.

livelihood'. This was confirmed by MMC's later research, which found out that 'escaping conflict or violence in Afghanistan, seeking better employment opportunities abroad, or a combination of the two factors' acted as main drivers to leave the country (Mixed Migration Centre 2019, 19). Illustrating how the further deterioration of security conditions and intensification of conflict affected local populations lives and acted as a tipping point for taking the decision to migrate, REACH (2016, 3) found out that the reasons informing Afghan migration decisions 'shifted from "violence and insecurity" to "active armed conflict"' from December 2015 to May 2016. Similarly, the UNHCR profiling exercise conducted with Afghan migrants and asylum-seekers arriving in the Greek islands in the first months of 2016 shows that 71 %, 80 %, and 75 % of those arriving in January, February and March 2016 respectively reported conflict and violence as the main reason to leave Afghanistan (UNHCR 2016a; 2016b; 2016c). Showing the direct effects of the intensification of fighting and conflict, 55 % of the respondents in January and March, and 70% of the respondents in February were internally displaced due to conflict before leaving Afghanistan (Ibid.).

As also underlined by the Mixed Migration Centre (2018, 20), research focusing on drivers particularly influencing women's migration decisions is rather scarce. However, recent research based on qualitative interviews with Afghan migrant women by the Mixed Migration Centre (2018, 20) found out that the reasons informing migration decisions are diverse, while political insecurity is the main one. Insecurity of jobs as women, 'political instability and persecution by the Taliban', lack of access to essential services such as health and education (for them and/or for their children) were other frequently reported reasons, which are often intertwined. Besides overall insecurity (experienced in gendered ways by women), research by the Mixed Migration Centre (2018, 24) also shows that gender-based violence experienced in familial settings, facing the risk of forced or arranged marriages, and the need to escape a wider social environment that was perceived as repressive were among the major reasons feeding into the migration decision reported by Afghan women.

In overall terms, very little is known about how gender relates to, and intersects

with age, educational and professional background, marital status, ethnicity and religion in shaping Afghan women's migration-related decisions and experiences. This is partly related to the dearth of 'socially disaggregated data and analysis of the gendered experiences' of people on the move, including those involved in mixed migration flows arriving to Europe (Kofman 2019, 2186). Women (or men, boys and girls) from Afghanistan are no exception. However, qualitative research sheds some light on how drivers operate in particular (and gendered) ways at the intersection of multiple ascribed characteristics. For example, qualitative research as well as the Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi survey results show that ethnic discrimination is a major driver particularly for Afghan women to take the decision to migrate (Mixed Migration Centre 2018, 22). The interplay between gender, professional and marital status in informing migration decisions was captured by Kofman (2019, 2190): interviews with Afghan women in Greece showed that 'working as professionals' subjected them to attacks by the Taliban, including the threat of forced marriage, which acted as the main reason to embark on the migration journey.

Research suggest that trafficking as a specific form of exploitation targeting women (and to a lesser extent also men) has been particularly visible among the journeys along the Central Mediterranean Route – and those crossing through Libya – (see, among others, Crawley et al. 2016; Migration Centre 2018), while being less present – or recorded – when it comes to journeys along the EMR. While limited, there is evidence of trafficking involving Afghan women, men, girls and boys at the regional level. For instance, the IOM (2014, 107) points out the phenomenon of trafficking of female children mainly to Iran and Pakistan - and also to India - 'for the purposes of forced marriages, prostitution or domestic service', while underlining the need for more qualitative data and analysis on how gender-based violence and human trafficking interlink in shaping migration processes particularly involving Afghan women and girls (IOM 2014, 235). Trafficking of Afghan men, generally connected to 'forced labour and debt bondage', include destinations as Iran, Pakistan, the Gulf, Greece and Turkey (IOM 2014, 107).

Other forms of physical violence, sexual abuse or economic exploitation by smugglers and authorities were reported as recurring throughout journeys also along the EMR, including by Afghan women, particularly those who were travelling alone (Mixed Migration Centre 2018). While limited available data suggest that the share of single women (mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan,) travelling alone was much lower at the EMR relative to the journeys crossing the CMR in the 2015-16 period, research demonstrates that this group was particularly exposed to 'threatening situations and gender-based violence' during different stages of their journeys (Kofman 2019, 2193). It should be noted that experience of physical violence and sexual or other forms of exploitation throughout journeys is not specific to women, and similar accounts have been provided also by unaccompanied male minors and young male adults (Donini et al. 2016, 7).

As the UNHCR (2018a, 89) points out, '[g]iven the pervading social taboos related to same-sex relations, there is little information available on the treatment of individuals of diverse SOGI [Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity] in Afghanistan'. This is particularly the case for lesbians, bisexual, and transgender individuals (Ibid.). However, same-sex relations are criminalised by law, and discrimination and violence against individuals of diverse SOGI at the communal and institutional levels as well as by non-state armed groups have been reported (UNHCR 2018a, 88-90;). This led the UNHCR to regard such individuals as 'likely to be in need of international refugee protection on the basis of a well-founded fear of persecution at the hands of State or non-State actors for reasons of their membership of a particular social group' (UNHCR 2018a, 90).

While overall insecurity and conflict act as the main reason to leave the country for most Afghans on the move, they affect unaccompanied (male) minors and young adults in particular ways. For instance, Donini et al (2016, 6) have shown that young males 'from the southern and eastern countryside, who are caught between the government and the insurgency' constituted a specific group that came to the fore in the flows during 2015-16. The risk of forced recruitment by the Taliban or other insurgent groups as well as the government forces was also among the reasons reported by the unaccompanied and separated children in the UNHCR

study conducted in Sweden (UNHCR 2016d, 29-31). At the intersection of age and ethnicity, and against a background of a conflict with ethnic and sectarian undertones, discrimination acted as a specific – and additional – reason for unaccompanied minors who identified as ethnic Hazara (UNHCR 2016d, 31). Beyond the direct effects of the conflict on physical security and the risks faced, 21% of the unaccompanied minors in Sweden cited ‘lack of access to education’ as a factor that contributed to their decision to leave Afghanistan (UNHCR 2016d, 30). In active or protracted conflict situations, including that in Afghanistan, children are known to face great difficulties in accessing education due to ‘displacement, military attacks on schools, forced conscription and high education costs’, which acts as a significant factor informing the decision to leave and the intended destinations of both unaccompanied and accompanied minors - and their families (UNICEF and REACH 2017, 54).

As Donini et al. (2016) underline, in many cases, for unaccompanied minors and young men, the decision to leave is not a “purely individual” one, but significantly informed by their families, relatives and communities left behind, who also economically support the “migration projects” of these pioneering members. For this group, much more is therefore at stake than merely accessing safety, as a successful migration journey means ‘getting an official form of protection, an education and a job, and eventually marrying a girl from home and bringing her to Europe to build a family’ (Donini et al. 2016, 5). Thus, while conflict, fear of forced recruitment, lack of educational and professional prospects, social marginalisation, or discrimination act as main drivers to leave Afghanistan (or Iran and Pakistan, see below), as underlined by (Donini et al. 2016, 9): ‘[t]hese unaccompanied minors and young adults are invested in the double mission to prove their individual value and prepare a better future for their community’.

In short, deteriorating security conditions, increasingly precarious livelihoods, limited access to basic services shape the overarching context in Afghanistan and lead to overall uncertainty and bleak prospects for future for many. However, the particular ways in which such context operates at the intersection of one’s gender, age, ethnicity, religion, marital status, or educational and professional attainments,

socioeconomic background significantly shape the reasons, needs, expectations and strategies at the individual (and family) level underlying one's decision to leave, planned trajectory and intended destination.

Potential implications of the current context in Afghanistan for migration and displacement

As of 2021, the period leading up to the Taliban's takeover of the power brought further deterioration of security and widespread effects on local populations. After the 1 May deadline for US and NATO withdrawal had passed, the Taliban offensive gained momentum and fighting between the Taliban and the Afghan security forces intensified. This led to a sharp increase in the number of civilians killed and injured, while displacing more than half a million people within Afghanistan (Graham-Harrison 2021). The Taliban's takeover of Kabul and the hasty withdrawal of the US and the coalition forces marked by the dramatic scenes at the Kabul Airport – which contributed to augmenting panic – led to arrivals at the borders of Iran, Pakistan and Tajikistan (UNHCR 2021b).

The current context of political and economic uncertainty following the Taliban's takeover of power on 15 August 2021 and the full withdrawal of the US and NATO troops raises significant concerns about a severe humanitarian crisis looming in the horizon. The Afghan governments' foreign assets are frozen, if and how political and economic relations between the Taliban and the outside world could resume remains unknown, and uncertainty prevails regarding the future inflow of international assistance. The Afghan economy remains highly dependent on international aid; grants amounted to 42.9 % of GDP in 2020 (World Bank 2021a, 4). Against this backdrop, the possibility of economic collapse and a grave humanitarian crisis hangs in the air. The UNDP cautions about a 10-13 % reduction drop in GDP by mid-2022, which, in the worst-case scenario could imply a poverty rate of 97 per cent (UNDP 2021).

The questionable governing capacity of the Taliban, fragile security conditions, and worrying developments in terms of respect to basic human rights and fundamental freedoms under the Taliban regime, particularly affecting women and girls,

individuals of diverse SOGI, political opponents, journalists, ethnic and religious minorities, members of the former government and armed forces, adds a political layer to the gravity of the situation currently facing the Afghan population. Against such background, the UNHCR stated that it was preparing for a movement of up to 500,000 refugees in the region until the end of the year (UNHCR 2021f). The possibility of a dramatically deepening humanitarian crisis hangs in the air and legal channels for humanitarian admission so far remain sporadic and small-scale. If the international community fails to provide a timely and effective response to mitigate the humanitarian risks and mobilise progress towards a political process (Hakimi 2021), a new wave of risky and precarious mixed migration flows from Afghanistan in and beyond the region seems highly likely.

3.1.3.2 Conditions and policies in destination, host and transit countries: Iran, Pakistan, Turkey

As explained in Section 3.1.1, Iran and Pakistan have had a long-shared migration history with Afghanistan and have been hosting an overwhelming majority of Afghan refugees and migrants for over forty years. The protracted nature of displacement means that there are second and even third generation Afghan refugees in these two countries, for whom the concept of home country applies to Afghanistan mainly on paper. Besides the opportunity to finding refuge particularly until mid-late 1990s, economic differentials as well as the differences between the accessibility and quality of essential services (in addition to geographical proximity and social networks) played, and continues to play a role in making Iran and Pakistan destinations for Afghan nationals considering migration or for returnees planning re-migration. With the Syrian influx, Turkey has become the country that hosts the largest refugee population in the world. Syrian displacement now being in its tenth year, and against a background of deteriorating economic conditions in Turkey in the last years which impact on the society at large, livelihoods of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are increasingly precarious, policies as well as social and political context in Turkey is also becoming less welcoming. Loss of livelihoods during economic downturns as well as challenges to access secure residence rights, basic services and employment owing to host countries' policies, and the perception and experience

of a socially less welcoming environment also act as drivers for secondary movement, be it onward migration to another destination or repatriation to Afghanistan.

The restrictive turn in the admission, residence and protection policies of Iran and Pakistan after mid-1990s have played an important role in shaping the context in which Afghans make (secondary) migration and return decisions, also in the last decade. However, these policy changes should be considered in light of the disproportionate responsibility and costs they have shouldered for over four decades and the overall economic state of these host countries (experiencing periodic downturns), and the societal and political repercussions deriving from hosting large refugee and migrant populations with limited resources and capacities. The same largely applies also to the case of Turkey.

Iran

Iran is party to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, albeit maintaining reservations in the areas of employment, public welfare, labour legislation, social security, and freedom of movement (Zetter 2018). However, in the 1979-1993 period Afghan refugees were admitted as *mohajerin*, or 'involuntary religious migrants' (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2005, 16). This status entitled them to an indefinite permit of stay as well as extensive rights in terms of access to education, health and employment, while the latter was restricted to a number of sectors for manual labour.

With the 'asylum fatigue' setting in against a background of economic hardship and an altered geopolitical landscape after the Soviet withdrawal, limiting new arrivals and encouraging returns guided became the main objectives guiding Iran's post-1993 policy line.³² As Zetter (2018, 3-4) argued, 'prolonged financial and economic crisis, in this case precipitated by the international trade and investment embargo coincidentally commencing with the initial arrival of Afghan refugees in 1979, as well as the strains caused by the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, underpin its firm policy of

³² For more detailed discussions on Iran's policy towards Afghan refugees in these periods, see, Abbasi-Shavazi et al (2005; 2008); Ashrafi and Moghissi (2002); Saito (2009).

return'. For new arrivals, temporary permits replaced the permanent residence rights granted to pre-1993 refugees, while the possibility of applying for asylum and receiving refugee status was significantly limited after 1997. The range of rights and services Afghan refugees had benefitted from (e.g., equal access to education, subsidised healthcare) were gradually narrowed down in the 1990s. Policies discouraging new arrivals and encouraging returns gained further pace after 2001, including: further restriction of employment sectors accessible to Afghans and measures aimed at disincentivising employers from hiring Afghan workers, closure of Afghan schools and introduction of fees for Afghan children access to public schools (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2008; Saito 2009). In 2001, all refugees were required to re-register now to hold temporary residence rights and limited access to rights and services (including pre-1993 refugees) (Abbasi-Shavazi et al. 2008), documented through what is known as the *Amayesh* cards.

From early 2000s onwards, governing residence through temporary permits to be renewed, increasing the administrative hurdles and costs of acquiring legal documents, large-scale repatriation programmes constituted main policy pillars aimed at encouraging returns. Significantly limited access to asylum – and hence the right to legal residence and reinforced border controls aimed at limiting new arrivals. Restrictive admission, residence and protection policies led to a growth of the undocumented Afghan population (constituted by new arrivals and those who lost previously held legal statuses), implying greater degrees of precarity for this group (Dimitriadi 2013; Zetter 2018), including the risk of deportation (Human Rights Watch 2013).

As the undocumented population grew, repeated re-registration and regularisation schemes became repeated practice, as in the case of the 2010 Comprehensive Regularisation Plan (Dimitriadi 2013), or the registration exercise in 2017 that resulted in the registration of around 800,000 undocumented Afghans (Zetter 2018, 5). These schemes aim to take stock of the undocumented population and provide the opportunity for this group to regularise their status and access

temporary residence, education and employment rights.³³ However, periodic registration and regularisation programmes also act as an opportunity for the Iranian government to facilitate future repatriation and deportation (Dimitriadi 2013, 13; Zetter 2018, 5).

There are important differences in terms of the rights of registered refugees (holders of the *Amayesh* card) and undocumented Afghan migrants in Iran. Afghan refugees' are entitled to temporary work permits, but their access to employment continues to be restricted to particular sectors (Hugo et al. 2012; Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2016). Undocumented Afghan migrants' access to employment and livelihood opportunities is extremely restricted, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation (ACAPS 2021). There had been continued hurdles in front of access to public education, particularly for undocumented Afghan children, as a response of which, 'self-regulated' Afghan schools were established by the Afghan community (Hugo et al. 2012). A positive development in terms of access to public education was the 2015 edict by the Supreme Leader, which required all public schools to accept Afghan children both in regular and irregular situations (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2016; Zetter 2018). Since then, a steady increase has been recorded in school enrolment, and according to official figures, as of 2019 an estimated 480,000 Afghan refugee and undocumented children were enrolled in school (UNHCR 2019).

The overarching condition that affects the day-to-day lives and future plans of many Afghan refugees and a larger portion of undocumented migrants in Iran is insecurity of livelihoods. Most Afghans, particularly those who are undocumented work in the informal sector (IOM 2019c). Low-paid, precarious jobs and vulnerability to exploitation render their livelihoods particularly fragile and uncertain (Saleem 2019). Despite improvements in the measures regulating Afghan children's access to schools, poor livelihoods and lack of income-generating prospects continue to trigger negative coping strategies such as child labour and

³³ It should be noted that whether such rights would be extended to registered migrants and the scope of entitlements they would benefit from was not always clear. For instance, unlike earlier registrations, it was not clear what kind of legal status would be granted to the 800,000 migrants registered in 2017, while the registration exempted them from deportation (Zetter 2018, 5).

school drop-outs (UNHCR 2019). While second generation Afghan refugees have achieved significant progress in educational integration, their integration to the labour market remains limited, a specific challenge being upward mobility, which has been partially influenced by the employment restrictions Afghan refugees continue to face in Iran (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2016). Against such background, the 2018 economic downturn in Iran under heavy US sanctions, while having a major effect on the livelihoods of society at large, particularly hit hard Afghans. This was especially the case for the undocumented, as the demand for labour in the informal sector considerably shrank (IOM 2019c). As explained in the previous sub-section, this led large numbers of Afghans to return to Afghanistan despite the unfavourable conditions in the home country. Research indicates that this has also driven secondary movement of Afghans residing in Iran towards Turkey, which is considered to have added to the increasing number of arrivals by Afghans to Turkey in 2018 and 2019 (Buz et al. 2020).

While a growing number of civil society actors and Iranian citizens seem to organise as to provide assistance to Afghan refugees and migrants,³⁴ the perception and experience of a societal environment less welcoming towards Afghan refugees and migrants also form part of the factors informing onward movement to other destinations or return to Afghanistan. While such environment is also informed by the overarching economic hardship increasing competition for limited resources and the “asylum fatigue” at the societal level, xenophobia and discrimination towards Afghans contribute to unfavourable conditions influencing migration decisions. The perception and/or experience of a more hostile social environment has been reported by Afghan migrants who moved on to Europe or Turkey as being among the factors that informed their decision to leave Iran, which has particularly been the case for the ethnic Hazara (Crawley et al. 2016; Donini et al. 2016; Buz et al. 2020).³⁵ Maltreatment and violence by Iranian authorities, particularly the police and the border guards, constitute the institutional layer of the environment that has become increasingly hostile

³⁴ Authors’ conversation with an expert from Iran.

³⁵ According to the survey conducted in Greece by Crawley et al. (2016, 34), 65 % of Afghan respondents, who were residing in Iran, indicated having been subjected to racism and xenophobia in Iran as a reason for onward movement.

towards Afghans (Quie and Hakimi 2020, 24). For those in precarious situations such as the undocumented migrants, the fear of being apprehended and deported adds to the insecurity felt by Afghans in Iran (Human Rights Watch 2013; Saleem 2019).

Acute shocks such as the 2018 economic crisis in Iran or the COVID-19 outbreak have played a triggering effect and influence the timing of return or secondary migration. However, while such external shocks exacerbate existing challenges, uncertainty of legal statuses, restrictions and hurdles in front of access to education and (formal) work as well as a less welcoming environment in Iran constitute the main drivers reported by Afghan refugees and migrants to leave Iran and engage in return or secondary migration (for Turkey, see Buz et al. 2020; for returns to Afghanistan, see Mohammadi et al. 2018, for Europe, see Crawley et al. 2016; Dimitriadi 2018a). Undocumented Afghan migrants have been particularly exposed to insecure livelihoods and the effects of restrictions on rights. As UNHCR (2016d, 30) shows, the lack of a secure legal status and its wider implications have been reported among the major reasons for (predominantly Hazara) unaccompanied minors in Sweden for having left Iran, who cited 'discrimination, lack of documentation and education and other types of violence as the most common reasons'. The findings of Donini et al. (2016) confirm this.

EU assistance for improving the living conditions of Afghan refugees in Iran, forms part of its broader policy of supporting countries hosting refugee communities, which has gained increasing importance since 2015, an aspect included in the European Agenda on Migration (European Commission 2015), and was reiterated in the New Pact on Asylum and Migration (European Commission 2020). While this policy forms part of responsibility-sharing for refugees (in financial terms), it is closely linked to the EU's containment approach as well, as it also aims at addressing the secondary drivers of onward movement, in this case, of Afghans residing in Iran towards the EU. In this vein, the EU doubled its humanitarian aid to Iran in 2016, pledging 12.5 million euros per year, with a specific focus on supporting education and health services for Afghan refugee children (Baczynska 2016). In 2021 the EU allocated 16.5 million euros in humanitarian aid to Iran to

support Afghan refugees and host communities, with a particular focus on Afghan children's access on education and health. Between 2016 and 2021, the EU allocated to Iran a total of 77.5 million euros in humanitarian aid (European Commission 2021a). The EU also provided support for returns from Iran (and Pakistan) through the regional Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (Quie and Hakimi 2020).

Despite increased EU aid, fair responsibility-sharing on Afghan refugees has been a sticking point in the dialogue between neighbouring host countries and the EU, with the former underlining the disproportionately high responsibility and costs they have been bearing to host Afghan refugees (Quie and Hakimi 2020). Iran has also used the threat of mass deportation of Afghan refugees to retaliate US sanctions, while also sending a message to the EU (Motamedi 2019; Quie and Hakimi 2020). This forms part of broader dynamics developing between the EU and refugee hosting and (potential) transit countries since 2016: as the EU's emphasis on prevention and therefore its reliance on the latter has further grown, instrumentalisation of refugees and migrants by host countries along the EU-bound routes as part of their geopolitical posturing has also become common practice.

Pakistan

In Pakistan a similar, yet less systematic shift regarding the admission, residence and protection of Afghan refugees took place, distinguishing the 1979-2001 period from the post-2001 era, in which limiting new arrivals and encouraging repatriation of Afghan refugees has become the guiding principle. The 'asylum fatigue' brought by hosting a large population in an economically fragile context as well as decreasing international assistance to aid Pakistan with hosting Afghan refugees played important roles in the policy turn, while 'securitisation concerns and the 'War Against Terror' precipitated by the spill-over of four decades of Afghan conflict" (Zetter 2018, 3) has also shaped Pakistan's changing stance.

Pakistan is not party to the 1951 Convention, and therefore the legal framework applying to Afghan refugees has been the 1946 Foreigners' Act. In the absence of a

law regulating international protection, the UNHCR has been responsible for asylum processing and status determination since 1993 (UNHCR, no date). In the two decades following the initial arrivals in 1978, Afghan refugees were entitled to settle, work, access education and freely move within the country, and were hosted in more than 300 camps (Saito 2009, 4). This rather liberal protection regime was reversed after 2001: new arrivals were no longer recognized as refugees, on-off border closure policies were implemented, and repatriation of Afghan refugees became a clear policy priority. Systematic closure and demolition of refugee camps and restrictions to access to education have been the main instruments to encourage repatriation in this period (Turton and Marsden 2002; Monsutti 2006). As explained earlier, the first half of the 2000s also witnessed large-scale repatriation programmes.

Until 2006, Afghan refugees were not required to hold legal documentation (Zetter 2018), which rendered the group somewhat illegible for the state. Following an agreement between the government and the UNHCR in 2004 a census of Afghans arriving after 1979 was conducted in 2005 in order to ‘devise a strategy to regulate Afghans living in the country, and eventually to facilitate their repatriation to and reintegration in Afghanistan’ (Quie and Hakimi 2020, 21). This led to the requirement of a Proof of Registration (PoR) card in 2007, the main legal document certifying one’s status as a refugee in Pakistan.³⁶ Upon the PoR system’s launch, Afghan refugees with the PoR cards were asked to return through voluntary repatriation programmes or by their own by 2009, while those who did not register found themselves in an irregular situation with no right to obtain documents or work in the formal sector (Dimitriadi 2013). Despite having been extended six times since 2007, the temporary nature of the PoR cards, requiring frequent renewals, uncertainty about the prospects of the cards’ extension – which often follows the ups and downs of the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Siddiqui 2019) – continues to cause insecurity among Afghan refugees with regards to their stay and future in Pakistan (Zetter 2018).

³⁶ A smaller portion of Afghans who were granted protection following the UNHCR’s refugee status determination process were entitled to a Refugee Identity Card (RIC), which was replaced by a registration certificate issued by the UNHCR after 2016 (Zetter 2018, 7).

The launching of the PoR cards also implied that those arriving after 2007 did not have access to legal documentation. The undocumented Afghan migrants in Pakistan are therefore comprised by those refugees who did not register in 2007 and the post-2007 arrivals. This group, lacking safe legal statuses and rights, is particularly vulnerable to insecure livelihoods and exploitation as well as the risk of deportation. Indeed, Human Rights Watch (2017) reported that due to their precarious and insecure legal status, hundreds and thousands of undocumented Afghans were ‘coerced’ to return to Afghanistan as a result of ‘deportation threats and police abuses’ in 2016. The large-scale returns also follow the 2015 national action plan for counterterrorism, which foresaw the repatriation of *all* Afghans by the end of 2015 (Siddiqui 2019). However, in 2017, a registration and regularisation programme was launched and resulted in the registration of 800,000 undocumented Afghans, providing them with ‘some heavily qualified protection’ and what is called an ‘Afghan Citizen’s Card’ (Zetter 2018, 8). While the extent of rights this status would provide is not clear, as in Iran, there were indications that the Pakistani government also aimed at facilitating returns through the registration process (Zetter 2018).

In theory, PoR card-holders have the right to take up formal employment, but in the absence of national legislation, access to rights are often unclear. Regardless, the great majority of both registered refugees and undocumented Afghans work in the informal sector, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation (Zetter 2018). Registered refugee children’s access to public education is regulated at the subnational level, leading to differences depending on their place of residence (Siddiqui 2019), while for those who are entitled to enrol at public schools, high school fees make it difficult for many have access to education in practice (Zetter 2018). As in Iran, child labour is a rather widespread strategy to cope with poverty, leading to high drop-out rates among Afghan children.

The association of Afghan refugees with terrorism and as a threat to national security at the societal and particularly the political level augments their exposure to maltreatment by authorities (Siddiqui 2017). This was also considered to be one of the main factors behind (and justifying) growing police abuse in 2016 (Human

Rights Watch 2017). The increasing securitisation of the debate as well as the policies also had its implications for border control measures: in 2017, Pakistan started building a 2.5 kilometres barbed-wire fence at its border with Afghanistan in order to block militants (Reuters 2017), which would likely have implications also for the cross-border movement of refugees and migrants.

All in all, the protection landscape has significantly shifted also in Pakistan after the turn of the century. The shrinking space for protection, general insecurity of legal statuses and livelihoods, major hurdles to accessing education, and an increasingly securitised framing of Afghan refugees' presence in the country, together with the Pakistani government's focus on returning all Afghans (at least on paper) particularly in the second half of the last decade constitute the broad context in which Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants have found themselves in Pakistan. These factors have driven (voluntary and involuntary) returns to Afghanistan. The restrictive turn has arguably also made Pakistan a less preferred destination for Afghans considering (primary) migration, having possible effects on movement towards new destinations, while in the last decade such movements seem to have been redirected to a lesser extent towards Europe (and Turkey), when compared with the secondary movement of Afghans residing in Iran. However, as recent records of new arrivals in 2021 and particularly following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul on 15 August and the chaotic evacuation operation led by the US and NATO members indicate, Afghans (albeit so far in relatively smaller numbers) continue to arrive to Pakistan despite the picture depicted above.

Turkey

Since the Syrian war and displacement, Turkey has become the country that hosts the largest number of refugees. By the end of 2020, in addition to over 3.6 million Syrian refugees, it hosted over 320,000 international protection applicants from other nationalities (UNHCR, no date b). According to UNHCR data, there are a total of nearly 130,000 Afghan asylum seekers and refugees under UNHCR mandate in Turkey (UNHCR 2021e). The Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) of Turkey gave the number of Afghans who applied for international

protection in the year of 2020 at 22,606, placing them on top of the list of applications by nationality (DGMM, 2021b).

While Afghan migration to and through Turkey was marginal before the mid-1980s, as İçduygu and Karadağ (2018, 9) posit, the 1980s and the 1990s saw a small-scale but steady flow of Afghans joining the few Afghan communities in Turkey or transiting through Turkey on their way to Europe. Afghan transit movement began intensifying from the late 1990s on, as was demonstrated by the growing volume of apprehended migrants as opposed to the limited number of asylum applications filed in Turkey (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018, 11-12. From early 2010s on, and particularly with the effect of the large-scale movement towards the EU over 2015-16, both irregular arrivals and asylum applications considerably increased, and the stock of Afghan asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Turkey grew in this period. As explained earlier, the number of Afghans arriving to Turkey significantly increased after 2017, making them the largest group of irregular arrivals by nationality in 2018. Turkey is also increasingly becoming a preferred destination for Afghan refugees and migrants in the last years (IOM 2018), although information migrants have before departing for Turkey about living conditions, asylum procedures or the possibility of obtaining protection in Turkey seems to be rather limited (Buz et. al 2020).

Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 New York Protocol, but maintains the geographical limitation, reserving the refugee status only to European asylum seekers, while the protection granted to non-European beneficiaries fall short of full refugee status. Until the enactment of Turkey's Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2013, non-European beneficiaries were granted temporary residence rights pending their resettlement to a third country (Kirişçi 2001). The LFIP's creation of temporary protection (reserved for Syrian refugees), conditional refugee or subsidiary protection statuses implied that non-European and non-Syrian international protection claimants, e.g., Afghan nationals, are eligible to be granted conditional refugee or subsidiary protection. None of these protection statuses foresee permanent residence rights and integration in Turkey. Conditional refugee status, which is the

form of protection mostly granted to Afghan applicants, is given temporary residence rights until resettlement in a third country. Shrinking resettlement opportunities worldwide³⁷ decrease the likelihood of accessing a secure legal status, while long waiting periods for resettlement mean that most Afghan refugees in Turkey have to live for indeterminate period with the uncertainty and limited rights and services temporary protection brings with.

International protection applicants registered with the DGMM provincial offices are assigned to specific provinces (referred to as satellite cities in Turkey). Movement from outside satellite cities requires obtaining permission from authorities. Protection applicants can access services as health and education, and formal employment after six months of registration, conditional upon residence in their satellite cities. The conditioning of legal documents and access to formal employment and public services to residence in satellite cities implies that many looking for income-generating opportunities, social support networks or proximity to the points of departure towards Europe choose not to register. This results in their irregularisation and therefore lack of access to essential services, formal employment and humanitarian assistance as well as the risk of arrest and deportation, generating significant vulnerabilities and insecurities for this group (Buz et al. 2020, 47-54). Those who register or have conditional refugee status but have to move outside their satellite city for work opportunities risk losing their status if detected (Leghtas and Sullivan 2017), and the level of legal insecurity they face while being outside the satellite city is not that different from undocumented Afghans (GAR 2021).

Apart from the group composed of Afghans who had arrived earlier in the 1980s-1990s that have residence permits or citizenship, who generally own shops, most Afghans work in insecure jobs in the informal sector (GAR 2021). GAR's conclusion on the working conditions of the Afghan migrants in Istanbul summaries the level of the precarity they face: 'They get paid daily and extremely low wages at which

³⁷ In the period between 2016 and 2019, 15,433 Afghan cases were submitted for resettlement out of a global total of over 400,000, and 10,198 of those submitted cases actually departed for resettlement. In Turkey 8,421 out of a total of 79,686 cases submitted for resettlement in the same period, and only 2073 departed for resettlement (Buz et al. 2020, 21).

countless exploitative treatments of bosses and job owners take advantage of the lack of punishments' (GAR 2021, 31). Abovementioned problems with registration, residence in satellite cities and the fact that child labour continues to constitute a coping mechanism also imply that access to education is a significant problem. Confirming this, 53.2 % of the Afghan respondents in the survey conducted by Buz et al. (2020, 51) indicated their children did not have access to education.

Deteriorating economic conditions and rising unemployment in Turkey, besides rendering the livelihoods of Afghan refugees even more insecure, also feeds into increasing resentment by local populations towards migrants and refugees, including Afghans. In a context of growing economic hardship, competition over limited resources, and political instrumentalisation of migrants and refugees, the arrival of new Afghan migrants and refugees, and the particular ways these have been represented in the media and political spheres have led to a “fear of massive Afghan arrival”, and fed into escalating hostility (Sanderson 2021).

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further deepened migrants' and refugees' vulnerability, mainly by leading to the loss of (already insecure) jobs and (already low) incomes (Karadağ and Üstübcü (2021). Cramped housing situations imply that refugees and migrants are unable to observe prevention and social distancing measures. They have also been subjected to the health risks deriving from the pandemic at the workplace (often crowded and with poor sanitary conditions) to a greater extent (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021).

As for policies targeting cross-border mobility, the evolution of Turkey's governance of irregular migration has been important in enabling or impeding Afghan mixed flows towards the EU, which also had implications for Turkey's role as a transit, destination and host country for Afghan migrants and refugees. In light of growing mixed flows arriving at its borders (particularly in the last decade) and as part of its intensifying relations with the EU on migration management, Turkey has increasingly prioritised irregular migration governance and converged with

the prevention-oriented EU policy approach.³⁸ EU-Turkey cooperation on controlling transit movement at the EMR gained further momentum from the late 2000s, parallel to the growing EU action to limit spontaneous arrivals at its Eastern external borders, the combination of which generated effects on the crossing locations. The deployment of Frontex in the Aegean Sea in 2009 informed the diversion from the sea to the land route in early 2010s, while Greece's fencing of its land border with Turkey in 2012, intensified Greek-Turkish operational cooperation at the land border, and the adaptation of smuggling networks to these measures led to a re-diversion to the sea border from 2013-2014 onwards (see, Aksel et al. 2015; Dimitriadi 2013; Karaçay 2017).

While irregular crossings at the EMR, including those by Afghans were already picking up by 2014, the indirect effects of the large-scale Syrian refugee movement seem to have played a role in the peak observed in the crossings by Afghans in 2015-16. Even if Turkey gradually moved towards a restrictive border regime in the face of the Syrian conflict and the resulting refugee movement (Okay 2017), the initial phases of the Syrian influx witnessed a higher degree of border permeability, and 'Afghans also have taken advantage of this flexible Turkish border policy' (İçduygu and Karadağ 2018, 10). With what started as growing movement of Syrian refugees and later proliferated with other nationalities joining (see Section 3.1.3.3), increasing demand for smuggling services needed for crossing to Greece led to a proliferation of smuggling services and decreasing costs in the western coastal areas of Turkey (Dimitriadi 2018a, 172; REACH 2016, 20). This opportunity structure that existed at the initial phases of the movement in the summer and autumn of 2015 facilitated crossings.

However, as a result of these large-scale flows and the ensuing EU-Turkey

³⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this report, cooperation between the EU and Turkey on (irregular) migration, asylum, and border management goes back to the late 1990s and had been largely embedded in the framework of Turkey's accession process to the EU, which especially gained momentum in the 2000s. Migration management is considered to be one of the issue areas, where the EU impact on Turkey's legal and policy framework has been highest, which İçduygu (2007) coined as 'EU-ization' of Turkey's migration governance. At the same time, as a key transit point from the EU's perspective, Turkey has long been among the priority countries within the external migration governance architecture of the EU, mainly focusing on preventing irregular arrivals at EU borders (see, İçduygu 2011; İçduygu and Üstübcü 2014; İçduygu and Aksel 2014, among others).

Statement of 2016, which tasked Turkey primarily with reducing irregular crossings to the EU, led Ankara to heavily invest in managing irregular (transit) migration, both to deliver to its commitment and to prevent transforming into a country receiving massive irregular flows itself (Okyay 2019). Besides physically hardening external borders, internal bordering and mobility control practices proliferated as a result (İşleyen 2018a; 2018b), together with other measures aiming to deter new arrivals and increase returns. A number of implications derived from this shift for Afghan migrants and refugees.

First, Turkey accelerated taking direct deterrence measures in the form of physically hardening external as well as “internal” borders. As for the former, following the fencing of its border with Syria (Okyay 2017), Turkey started to fences also its border with Iran in 2017 (Özbek 2017). The barrier has been gradually extended, with a view to sealing all 560 kilometres of the border (Kucukgocmen 2021). As for the latter, as İşleyen (2018a, 27) posits, control over mobile people within Turkey through ‘practices of checkpoints’ and the ‘travel document’ has intensified following the summer of 2015 when ‘policing transit movement’ towards the EU became a clear priority. Complementing the mobility restrictions applied as part of the ‘satellite city’ system, police controls within Turkey to block movement between cities or to detect those that are outside their assigned city proliferated (GAR 2021). For those attempting to cross the border and continue their journey within Turkey these measures have made the journeys even more dangerous. For those in an irregular situation (documented or undocumented) it has implied ‘all-pervasive fear of deportation’ (GAR 2021, 46).

Second, as the arrivals of Afghan mixed flows dramatically increased in 2018 informed by the conditions in Afghanistan and Iran as well as the ‘substitution effect’ (de Haas 2011) generated by the significant limitation of access to EU territory, so did the rate of returns from Turkey to Afghanistan. While the DGMM does not provide return numbers and the data on returns tends to be patchy, in 2018 thousands of Afghan migrants were reported to be returned on charter flights on the basis of what seems to be an informal arrangement between the governments of Turkey and Afghanistan (Pitonak 2018). Recently, according to the

official news agency of Turkey, Suleyman Soylu, Minister of Interior, stated that Turkey returned 71,000 Afghan migrants only in 2019 (Gemici and Budak 2021).³⁹ Research suggests that these “voluntary” returns might be somewhere in the grey zone between being voluntary and forced (or at least coerced) in nature (GAR 2021).

Third, while the legal framework for international protection remains unchanged on paper, the possibility to access asylum or to get legal documentation seems to have been restricted in practice. Afghan migrants and refugees’ accounts indicate that registration with the DGMM has become more difficult since 2018, which is a manifestation of ‘the politics of deterrence in reaching legal access that tacitly reproduces illegalized Afghan population’ (GAR 2021, 43). Certain groups seem to be particularly targeted, which also points out the gendered nature of structural constraints stemming from policy decisions: since 2017, the DGMM does not take registrations (as an international protection applicant) from single Afghan men (GAR 2021, 42). The work by Buz et al. (2020, 48) confirms that single men have particular difficulties in obtaining documentation, as they ‘are considered as economic migrants and not as people who are in need of protection’.

The representation – and ensuing categorisation – of men, especially young, single men, as not fitting the notion of “legitimate refugee” or those “genuinely” in need of protection has gained particular ground during the so-called migration crisis in Europe, and is not specific to the case of Afghan men (Helms 2015). This is closely linked with the crystallisation of narratives of deserving refugees based on predominant gendered definitions of victimhood and vulnerability, understood as being reserved to those who are dependent, helpless, passive, and lack agency, power and resources; traits, which have often been associated with women and children (see, *inter alia*, Kofman 2019; Crawley 2021). In other words, increasing association of those in need and worthy of protection among states, in the ‘refugee sector’ (Crawley 2021, 364), as well as the humanitarian community catering to refugees (Turner 2019) with the notion of vulnerability, framed mainly through

³⁹ These figures should nonetheless be approached with caution, as the (feared) “massive arrival of Afghan refugees” has become a highly contentious issue both at the societal and political level.

powerlessness and dependence, which are (also problematically) understood and represented as largely being reserved to women and children, leads to the questioning of – or at least ambivalence about – men as deserving of protection or care. As the difficulties experienced by young, single Afghan men in accessing asylum in Turkey also demonstrates, this, in turn, leads to higher barriers to access rights, assistance and services for those that are regarded as not fitting the vulnerability criteria, and hence, contributes to ‘differentiating gendered experiences of mobility’ (Kofman 2019, 2188).

The policy reality particularly pushing young single men into irregularity and precarity arguably also implies that the drivers for secondary movement to Europe or another destination are stronger for this group. In fact, when in February 2020, Turkey, following the death of 28 Turkish soldiers in Northern Syria, announced that refugees and migrants were allowed to cross to the EU as part of a tactical move to harness support from the EU for its military presence and post-conflict reconstruction plans in Syria, a ‘disproportionately high number of Afghans’ made their way to Edirne to reach the Turkish-Greek border with the intention to cross to the EU (Hermann 2020). This was believed to be driven by the fact that most Afghans in Turkey are young, single men for whom moving on is easier than it is for families (Buz et al. 2020, 18). Equally importantly, the irregular and precarious situation Afghans in general, and young Afghan men in particular find themselves in Turkey implies that they have few to lose if they attempt to move on to Europe (Hermann 2020).

In short, irregularity, insecure livelihoods and dim prospects for building a future characterise the lives of Afghan migrants and refugees in Turkey. This is a condition, which seems to have exacerbated after 2018 with the proliferation of policies guided by deterrence targeting also, if not mainly Afghans – and among them the young and single men. Livelihoods have been further affected with the overall economic downturn the country has been experiencing and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the intensification of Turkey’s control over transit movement, which was heavily informed by the EU-Turkey Statement, affect both entry into, exit from and stay within Turkey. This implies a greater

degree of structural constraints for both those who intend to arrive to Turkey and those desiring onward movement towards the EU, while also affecting the living conditions particularly of those pushed into irregularity.

3.1.3.3 The EU as a destination

Several studies listening to the voices of Afghan migrants and asylum seekers who were planning to move onward to Europe (see, *inter alia*, Kuschminder 2017), who arrived to Europe (see, *inter alia*, REACH 2016; Crawley et al. 2016; Dimitriadi 2018a), and those who returned from Europe to Afghanistan (see, Mixed Migration Centre 2019; REACH and Mixed Migration Platform 2017) converge on the main factors making the EU a preferred destination: the expectation of and desire to reaching safety and a more secure life, finding employment to be able to support their families, and access to essential services, particularly education.

These are the kind of prospects that those who made the journey perceived that Europe would offer and ‘did not perceive to exist in Afghanistan’ (REACH and Mixed Migration Platform 2017, 17). Such prospects (especially livelihoods) were perceived to exist particularly in countries in Northern and Western Europe, the reason why Germany is often at the top of the list (Ibid.). Such perceptions about what a destination country would offer are mainly formed on the basis of trusted information and recommendations received from friends and family (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016). While in some cases the relative ease of being granted asylum in a specific country (which also speaks to the large variation among EU member states in terms of recognition rates for Afghan asylum seekers – see below) or the perception of a more welcoming attitude (relative to more hostile options) towards refugees seems to make a difference, it is the broader socioeconomic and political context of European countries, which, are seen as offering safety, livelihoods and access to essential services, that shapes the overall preference for destinations (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016). This points out the importance of the wider non-migration policies (and conditions) over the specific migration, asylum policies.

However, whether and how one can reach one's desired and intended destination depends on the structural constraints, emerging opportunities and how one can overcome the constraints and tap into the opportunities. The de facto opening of a temporary corridor linking Greek islands to the preferred EU destinations, where it seemed possible to access asylum, in the spring-summer of 2015 facilitated movement, and altered the perception of the possibility of movement for those considering migration or those already *en route* (Dimitriadi 2018a). The policy response to the de facto opening of such corridor, which came in various forms of deterrence, prevention and containment instruments within and outside the EU borders and at key points of transit, i.e. the Western Balkans and Turkey, led to another major shift in the structural constraints shaping mobility. These shifts in the opportunity-constraint structure enabling/impeding movement at the EMR and towards the preferred EU destinations, informing the rise and decrease of mixed flows between the summer of 2015 and early 2016 and the dramatic decrease afterwards.

The sheer volume and intensity of the Syrian refugee movement starting to significantly increase from May-June 2015 seems to have played a significant role in the opening of a transit corridor reaching up until north and west Europe. On the basis of his analysis of monthly sea arrivals in the period between January-November 2015, based on the apprehension figures by the Greek police, Fargues (2017, 11-12) concludes that 'Syrians initiated the movement and were followed a few months later by Afghans, then by Iraqis and a few other nationalities'. The combination of many factors, such as the escalation of violence in Syria, the proliferation of smuggling services in the coastal areas of Turkey, the not-yet-in-place bordering practices, the circulation of information on the possibility and means of crossing to Greece, and possibly even the good weather conditions likely informed this initial rise in the Syrian movement (see section 3.3).

From the Greek islands, the movement continued towards the Greek-North Macedonia border. As more Syrians took up the journey, others joined, and the scale of the movement grew, even if North Macedonia attempted blocking entry, 'it was the migrants that pushed their way through the borders and opened the

corridor', and the former did not have much of an option but pursue 'a policy of facilitation towards the EU and its member states' (Dimitriadi 2018a, 181). While Hungary erected fences and attempted to police and block the movement, Germany's decision of temporarily suspending Dublin returns, Austria and Germany's temporary opening of borders for those blocked in Hungary, or the possibility of moving towards other preferred destinations such as Sweden, albeit momentarily, significantly shifted the opportunity-constraint structure. Such shift is considered to have informed the timing of (onward) migration for some Afghans who were on the move and others who were considering migration (Dimitriadi 2018a). While not targeted to Afghan migrants and refugees, research on migrant's decision-making processes in the 2016-16 period also shows that policy changes in one country that 'incentivise movement and facilitate entry' relative to other alternatives that restrict movement and are perceived as less welcoming led 'some (but not all) migrants (re)directing themselves towards places deemed more welcoming' (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016, 37).

Unilateral member state actions as well as coordinated EU policy measures operating internally and externally put in place in the period between autumn 2015 and spring 2016 significantly elevated the hurdles in front of transit movement inside the EU as well as the Western Balkans and Turkey. Borders were hardened (physically as well as through intensified policing and control) along the different legs of the trajectory with a particular focus on the Turkey-Greece-Western Balkans corridor (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2017). Law enforcement activity on smuggling networks intensified, making the journey more dangerous and more costly (Mandic and Simpson 2017; Mandic 2017; REACH 2016). North Macedonia's decision to close its border with Greece to Afghans on 21 February 2016 came as a decisive point for Afghans' onward movement beyond Greece (Dimitriadi 2018a). Indeed, qualitative research with Afghan returnees who migrated to the EU and returned to Afghanistan in the 2014-17 period shows that only 43 % were able to reach the destination they intended, and closed borders and intensified controls, by affecting onward movement, played a major role in this (REACH and Mixed Migration Platform 2017, 17).

The closure of Greece-North Macedonia crossing was followed by the EU-Turkey Statement on 18 March 2016. As mentioned above, the implementation of the Statement made exiting (and entering) Turkey more difficult. On paper, it also increased the possibility for Afghans of being returned to Turkey, as it foresaw the return of all irregular migrants arriving after the cut-off point (and who do not apply for asylum, whose application is deemed inadmissible or rejected) back to Turkey. Further, the functioning of the hotspots in the Greek islands was linked to the EU-Turkey Statement, which shifted 'the work of the hotspots from identification and registration to admissibility and return' (Danish Refugee Council 2017), while turning them into detention facilities (Dimitriadi 2018b). With the exclusion of Afghan nationals from the EU relocation scheme in 2016, which set the eligibility criterion at a recognition rate above 75 per cent (EU average) (Danish Refugee Council 2017), the possibility for Afghans of moving onward from Greece and accessing asylum somewhere else in the EU got nearly eliminated. For those already in Greece, the prioritisation of nationality-based criteria and Afghans' exclusion from eligibility for relocation augmented the importance of falling under one of the categories regarded as vulnerable (e.g., pregnant women, single parents travelling with children, unaccompanied minors), as this has become the only venue through which one could potentially be relocated or reunified with family members resident in another member state (Kofman 2019, 2192-94). As single women or men above 18 years old do not fit the vulnerability criteria, this highlights and further contributes to 'gendered mobility' (Ibid.)

It is not only through physically hardening and policing the borders that EU and member state policies attempt to prevent and limit Afghan mixed flows arriving to Europe and those willing to file an asylum application to do so. The measures in the external dimension targeting origin, host and transit countries that were covered in the previous sub-sections also form part of the policy repertoire. In addition, the period since 2015-16 has witnessed policies aiming to dissuade Afghans from migrating to Europe, shrink the protection space (and quality) for Afghans, and increase the return of Afghans with no right to legal residence in the EU, which is intrinsically linked to the former point as the decision as to who is eligible for protection determines who falls in the second category. The conclusion

of the JWF was an example to the latter. Individual member states also concluded bilateral agreements for Assisted Voluntary Return with Afghanistan, despite the controversial nature of considering Afghanistan (or parts of it) as a safe country where returns can be enforced from an international refugee law perspective (Amnesty International 2017; ECRE 2017). Among them was Germany, that signed a bilateral agreement on the same day as the signing of the JWF, and played a leading role in pressuring the then Afghan government on the signing of the JWF (Ruttig 2017).

The same period also witnessed decreasing recognition rates for Afghan asylum seekers: from an EU average of 66.9 % in 2015 to 56.8 % in 2016, and 46.3 % in 2017 (Parusel 2018). This has been linked to and accompanied with the increasing crystallisation of the distinction being made in the European public and the political sphere between “real” or “genuine” refugees, and those who do not fall into that category, where Afghans increasingly found themselves placed in (Moore 2016). The questioning of the legitimacy of Afghan asylum-seekers’ claims had its implications for the policy sphere too, as, for instance in some federal states in Germany, they were excluded from integration courses or other assistance measures provided to asylum seekers from other nationalities (Ruttig 2017).

In a context of EU rising populism and heavily informed by insufficient capacity and willingness among member states to provide a coordinated and integrated response to migration and asylum, EU and member state policies aiming at prevention through dissuasion, deterrence, and containment have gained momentum. While these policies seem to have partially (re)shaped some of Afghan mixed migration dynamics (e.g., substitution effects), the Afghan case also shows that both the primary and secondary drivers of migration as well as the factors that contribute to the perception of EU countries as preferred destinations are beyond the reach of (restrictive) migration policies alone. Migration governance in the EU and the shared space of mobility connecting it to Afghanistan would benefit from investing in fair responsibility sharing and respecting the human rights of people on the move. It also needs better alignment with strategic and long-term policies on peacebuilding, good governance and sustainable development, and account for inequalities of human security and development.

Box-1: Key factors driving and shaping migration from Afghanistan**AFGHANISTAN**

Against this background, the main factors driving and shaping migration from Afghanistan at a regional level and towards the EU could be summarized as:

- Insecurity of lives and livelihoods in a context of protracted conflict, fragile governance and dwindling development
- Rapid deterioration of the security situation, empowerment of the Taliban and other insurgents, and further loss of livelihoods particularly after 2014 (marked by turbulent political and security transition processes following the 2014 elections, partial withdrawal of US and NATO troops, reduction of international aid)
- Risk-multiplying effects of cyclical crises (e.g., 2018 drought, COVID-19)
- Ethno-confessionally connoted and gender-specific discrimination and persecution; targeted persecution by the sides to the conflict
- The political, economic and humanitarian crisis currently unfolding after the Taliban's takeover of power and the full withdrawal of US and NATO forces
- Evolution of admission, reception and protection policies of host countries in the region (e.g., shift from welcoming to restrictive policies by Iran and Pakistan crystallising from 2001 on, Turkey's enhanced focus on preventing new arrivals, increasing returns and limiting access to protection from 2017/8 on)
- Insecurity of livelihoods, precarious legal statuses (or lack of documentation), difficulty in accessing employment and education in host countries (e.g., Iran, Pakistan, Turkey), exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19 pandemic and other crises (e.g., overall economic downturn, 2018 economic crisis in Iran)
- Reinforcement of EU policies geared towards prevention, rolled out both internally (e.g., shrinking protection space, limitation of family reunification), at the EU external border and externally (e.g., linking the functioning of hotspots in Greek islands to the EU-Turkey Statement, returns to Afghanistan and mainstreaming migration to development policies) particularly post-2016

3.2 Iraq

3.2.1 Migration Profile

Located at the heart of Western Asia, within the Tigris-Euphrates River system and between the Mediterranean Levant and the Persian Gulf, modern Iraq was founded in the early twentieth century. The geographically strategic area has historically been a cradle of civilisations and an important crossing point of human mobility well before Iraq's existence as a state. Present-day Iraq still represents a way station for thousands but, most importantly, a relevant origin country for more than 2 million migrants and refugees (UNDESA 2019) out of a population of approximately 40 million (UNDESA 2020).

Historically, since the second half of the 20th century, migration and displacement had led the country to experience a substantial growth of its population abroad. Before becoming predominantly a country of origin, Iraq represented a place of refuge for many: from Armenians fleeing persecution during the genocide, to Palestinians displaced in 1948 and Iranians seeking asylum after the revolution in 1979 (UNHCR 2021g). While these refugee inflows were being replaced by increasing outflows, the same period also witnessed the arrival in Iraq of labour migrants from the Arab region, who were attracted by the employment opportunities in the thriving, nationalised oil industry in the 1970s and 1980s (Chatelard 2010). In more recent times, following the Syrian conflict, Iraq has witnessed another episode of refugee inflow, with more than 250,000 Syrians – most of them of Kurdish origins - arriving in the country in the 2011-2017 period to seek protection, then settling in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Warda et al. 2020).

It was back in the 1970s that Iraq turned into a country of emigration (Batatu 1978). Forced displacement of Kurds, Turkomans and Assyrians in Northern Iraq has occurred since the 1930s, but it was in the 1960s and 1970s that Arabisation campaigns reached new levels of violence, massively displacing tens of thousands. This, together with waves of wars occurring from the 1980s onwards, helps to explain the shift of human mobility from (rather than to) Iraq. In the 1990-2007

period, Iraq had witnessed a threefold increase of its population living abroad (IOM 2019a) with the percentage of Iraqis being a migrant or a refugee in 2017 reaching a peak of 5,4% of the total population (Urso et al. 2019). This number still leaves aside many more living outside Iraq without authorisation and thus not figuring in official data.

Besides the phenomenon *per se*, also the main drivers of Iraqi emigration show a certain degree of continuity across time, with each one of them – to differing degrees and coming together in varying combinations throughout Iraq’s contemporary history – shaping volumes, forms, and directions of the flows. Iraqis’ mobility has long been marked by violence and insecurity, with fully-fledged conflicts, repression as well as ethno-confessionally connoted discrimination and persecution heavily impacting on the type of out-migration and migrants’ profiles from Iraq since its very existence as a state. In parallel, economic deprivation and uncertainty, mainly but not exclusively caused by years of conflicts, contributed to pushing also those Iraqis who had been spared from targeted violence to leave their home country since the 1990s, when the international embargo was adding further pressure to people struggling with the fragile, war-damaged Iraqi economy (Chatelard 2005). Thus, also in the case of Iraq, it is difficult to distinguish forced and voluntary migration. Independently from the final intended and actual destination, which may have been neighbouring or Western countries, most people leaving Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf war had to go through irregular channels, transiting Turkey, Syria and/or Jordan (Chatelard 2005). Migration predominantly driven by economic reasons and better livelihoods had become more prevalent also in post-2003 Iraq – due to the painful effects of liberalisation policies on the Iraqi society, and in the aftermath of the conflict against ISIS (IOM 2016b), ten years on. Furthermore, independently from wars, conflicts and their broader socioeconomic effects, the 1980s also witnessed long-term as well as circular migration from Iraq, linked to business and investment opportunities in the vibrant private sector of Jordan and some Gulf countries (Chatelard 2009).

War-induced displacement, however, has typically characterised migration movements both within (internal displacement) and outside Iraqi borders (asylum

migration), clearly prevailing in the last decades, to the point that it was defined as a 'near-constant feature of Iraq for at least the past 35 years' (Thibos 2014). Moreover, recurring episodes of violence and conflict acquiring or implying ethno-sectarian connotations have made an ethno-sectarian reading of Iraqi forced migration dynamics prevalent, if not exclusive. Starting from the Iran-Iraq war and going through the Gulf war, the US invasion in 2003, the explosion of violence in 2006-2007 up to the emergence of ISIS and the spill overs of the Syrian war, the recent history of Iraq has experienced painful sectarianisation processes led by state and non-state actors. An example is given by the shrinking over time of Christian and Mandeans communities of Iraq, with the percentage of the former over the overall population witnessing a dramatic drop of -65 per cent in the period 1980-2003 (from an estimated 8.7 per cent in 1980 to 3.1 per cent in 2003), and the vast majority of the latter (85%) being out of the country by 2009 (Oehring 2017). These figures have been partly reflected in the composition of migrant and refugee flows as well as in the directions and destinations of movement.

However, even if community-based belongings feature as a distinguishing trait not only of displacement and migration from Iraq but also of return migration, a purely ethno-sectarian reading of Iraqi migration dynamics proves to be simplistic. A number of political, social and economic considerations have been coexisting, intersecting and overlapping with identitarian ones, adding layers of complexity to the Iraqis' human mobility. The paragraphs below seek to shed some light on the main traits and evolution of out-migration from the country, as well as its relevance to Europe.

Since Iraq's independence in 1932, and even under the British mandate, the country's rich and diverse social fabric - which counts more than a dozen ethnic and religious groups - has been perceived as an obstacle towards the consolidation of the Iraqi modern state by the Sunni Arab-dominated ruling élite, leading to targeted discrimination, persecution and deportation of certain ethno-religious communities. Shiites, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Yazidis were the most hit communities both during the monarchy and the republican period. Many of them, together with political opponents with different ethno-religious belongings, were

forced to flee Iraq towards neighbouring countries - mainly Syria and Iran - from the early 1930s on (Ozaltin et al. 2020). A smaller scale movement by political opponents from the Iraqi royal family was later directed towards the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan, once the republic was established in 1958 (Chatelard 2009).

The republican period, however, did not mean the end of violence, persecution and forced migration. After an attempt to work on a more inclusive nation and state-building during the first years of the Republic, the politicisation and weaponisation of identities resumed, reaching a new height under the Ba'athist regime and, more specifically, under Saddam Hussein's rule. From the 1960s onwards, Arabisation campaigns, explicitly aimed at the expulsion and replacement of non-Arabs from northern provinces in Iraq, targeted all ethnic minorities, especially Kurds but also Yezidis, Assyrians, Shabaks, Armenians, Turkmen and Mandeans as well as political opponents, displacing half a million Iraqis (mainly Kurds and Shiites) in Iran between the 1960s and the 1980s (Chatelard 2009) and between 60,000 and 150,000 Kurds in Turkey due to the destruction of Kurdish villages in 1988-1990 (Ozaltin et al. 2020).

During the same period between the 1960s and the 1990s, through the Iran-Iraq war, Arabisation campaigns were complemented by the drainage of the marshlands in the south (HRW 2003), both of them intersecting with the effects of the war in driving displacement. At the beginning of the war, almost 200,000 Shi'ite families (Ozaltin et al., 2020) along with tens of thousands of Iraqi Christian families (AIJ and FIDH, 2003) were deported to Iran. About 100,000 Iraqi Kurds sought asylum in Turkey (Danış 2011) and some 40,000 marshland Arabs found refuge in Iran after the conflict (Chatelard 2009).

Only two years later, the Gulf War brought further violence adding on previous displacement situations, both internal and external. The war pushed an enormous number of Iraqis to seek safety in the neighbourhood: almost 200,000 Shiite Arabs (Chatelard 2009) and 1,5 million Iraqi Kurds fled towards Iran (Thibos 2014); 500,000 Iraqis entered Turkey (Danış 2011), 200,000 headed towards Jordan and some 40,000 crossed the Iraq-Syria border (Chatelard 2009 and Chatelard 2010).

In the aftermath of the conflict, the uprisings in northern and southern Iraq and the brutal repression that followed killed 200,000 Shi'ite Arabs in the south and several thousand Kurds in the north (AIJ and FIDH 2003). While the majority of the 2 million Kurds who had found refuge in Turkey and Iran was able to return to their land with the establishment of the no-fly zone, tens of thousands of Shiites were internally displaced to the marshlands in the South – before the area was targeted by a new wave of drainage and violence - and 1,2 million Iraqis fled to Iran (Rajaei 2000). The repression of the uprisings also resulted in the displacement of thousands in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait, Jordan or Lebanon (AIJ and FIDH 2003). Nevertheless, the closure of borders with Saudi Arabia, Syria and Kuwait during the Gulf war as well as a policy shift in Iran started to change migratory trajectories.

As a consequence of the massive influx of Afghani and Iraqi refugees in Iran in the aftermath of the Afghan and Gulf wars, Iran reversed its internationally lauded, open refugee policy in 1994. The decision, made during the Armenian-Azeri conflict to avoid a further influx of refugees in the country, consisted of not allowing any more refugees into the Iranian territory as a general rule, but rather assisting neighbouring countries facing the humanitarian crisis directly on their territory or at most on border areas (Rajaei 2000). In the Iraqi case, the shift in the Iranian refugee policy resulted in a 100 million dollar worth of assistance (jointly financed with international organisations) during the intra-Kurdish rivalry in northern Iraq in 1994-1996. Only a relatively low number of Kurds (75,000) was allowed to enter the country at border points, and almost all of them returned to Iraq once the violence ceased in 1996 (Rajaei 2000). At the end of the Gulf war, 2/3 of the Iraqis who had left their homeland were in neighbouring countries or other Arab states, while only 1/3 sought refuge in Europe (Chatelard 2009).

Being one of the only two signatories of the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol in the region, and the only one granting refugee status according to the Convention's regulations to people fleeing from within the neighbourhood,⁴⁰ Iran

⁴⁰ Turkey, despite being part to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, applies geographical limitations and only grants refugee status to Europeans.

remained the main hosting country for many Iraqis until 2003 (IOM 2019a), representing a safe place especially for persecuted Kurds and Shia fleeing in the early 1990s. However, as already outlined above, Iran's welcoming refugee policy started to change following the Gulf war. This policy shift, together with domestic concerns and a worsening domestic socio-economic situation, increasingly turned Iran into a transit country, for those belonging to the middle class and could therefore afford to continue their journey towards Europe or Australia for better living conditions and opportunities (Chatelard 2009) or excluded it from migration journeys of those who found themselves in the situation of opting for other neighbouring countries. These alternatives destination, however, were also becoming more and more difficult to be reached.

Among them, Jordan - a country, which had traditionally been a destination for economically-tied migration (Chatelard 2009) - witnessed an unprecedented increase in war-induced displacement from Iraq starting from the Gulf war. Even if unable to provide Iraqis with protection under domestic or international regulations, Jordan left its border with Iraq open throughout the period 1990-2003 while making it difficult for displaced Iraqis to stay (Chatelard 2009). In many cases, Iraqis in Jordan remained irregular once their residence or work permits expired, facing tough living conditions and a tangible possibility of being deported (Chatelard 2009).

Besides host country policies and living conditions, exit policies also played a major role in shaping migration flows from Iraq. The shift in Saddam Hussein's repressive policies against Shi'ites from expulsion to targeted 'imprisonment or physical elimination' in the period following the Gulf war, for instance, needs to be read in parallel with his concern with the possibility of a strong Shi'a political and armed opposition growing at Iraqi borders (Chatelard 2009). This led, for instance, to the sealing of Iran-Iraq border, with Iraqi Special Forces ordered to mine the area and so making even more dangerous for Iraqis to flee the country (Chatelard 2009). Even if differently motivated, a similar pattern can be identified in Saddam Hussein's control over the mobility of upper- and middle-class Iraqis towards Jordan. Amidst the economic collapse and international isolation, to limit capital

and entrepreneurs' outflows, Saddam Hussein introduced exit taxes and permits, educational requirements and a minimum bank deposit (Denis 2011).

Following the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, while many Iraqi refugees were planning their return Iraq, another 2.2 million Iraqis fled their country (IOM & UNHCR 2008). Jordan and Syria became the primary destinations (IOM 2019a) overtaking the role historically played by Iran, more and more 'intolerant of refugees and immigrants' and reported to have declined to register new arrivals from Afghanistan and Iraq and summarily deported many (USCRI 2003).

However, with the numbers of displaced Iraqis growing in early 2000 as a consequence of the outbreak of sectarian violence occurring in 2005-2006 and the related new wave of displacement, Jordan adopted a de facto closed-door policy vis-à-vis potential refugees (ICG 2008). An entry ban to single young men, repatriations, violation of the principle of non-refoulment, and requests for visa and travel documents difficult and costly to obtain prior to arrival were part of such a policy change in Jordan (ICG 2008). These measures were justified by the Hashemite Kingdom in terms of legitimate security concerns as a consequence of the terrorist attacks carried out in Amman in November 2005 by the Iraqi branch of al-Qaida. A similar restrictive approach was adopted also by Syria in 2007 when it established visa requirements for Iraqis and made it nearly impossible for those already in the country to work and obtain a residence permit. This represented a 'sharp and controversial break from its longstanding policy toward Arab nationals' (ICG 2008, 16).

Along with Syria and Jordan, Turkey also witnessed migration inflows from Iraq after 2003, mainly through irregular entry of those who wanted to escape the "new Iraq" benefitting from the easing of mobility restrictions. They were, however, not granted a refugee status in the country (Chatelard 2010). In these episodes of displacement, the choice of destination has been shaped by many factors, including changing entry, reception and settlement policies of countries in the region. The directions of movement by particular groups have intersected with ethno-

sectarian and social divides within Iraq and the links between communities in Iraq and host countries, while also being informed by social and economic resources owned by migrants.

Social and economic resources also played a central role in shaping forms and directions of migration as well as the choice of destination for different groups. As observed by Paasche (2018, 6-7) in relation to Kurdish migration from Iraq towards Europe, it 'was initiated [back in the 70s] by persecuted military and political elites' who 'tended to be well connected within a political party'. This was at a time when 'seeking asylum in Europe was generally prohibitively expensive', with migrant smuggling services needed to reach Europe costing between 11,000 and 12,000 US dollars (Paasche 2018, 7). While economic resources were fundamental for the first and second phases of Kurdish migration towards Europe, in the third phase, social as well as other intangible resources made the difference. Kurdish Iraqis directed towards Europe in 1999-2014, despite belonging to low socio-economic classes and having negative prospects for asylum, relatively fewer opportunities in EU host countries when compared to previous waves of migration, arrived in large numbers not only because of their connections with already established Kurdish communities but also due to what Paasche terms 'emulative migration' (Paasche 2018). Network effects, through which prospective migrants are given practical assistance by already settled communities, are understood as complementary to 'emulation' and 'herding' effects (Ibid.) which stem from the prospective migrants' positive perception of the elite migration outcomes and foster the desire and aspiration to follow similar destinations and migration patterns. This of course does not directly translate into effective migration but by increasing the likelihood of it - at least in the imagination who are in search of a better life in Europe - it is part of the picture.

Growing restrictions and worsening living conditions in neighbouring countries as well as the deterioration of the regional security environment pushed more and more Iraqis to see Europe as an alternative option. A destination that had been mostly accessed by the middle and upper-middle class was becoming the only viable option for many Iraqis in the early 2000s, even if the number of asylum

applications lodged by Iraqis in the EU was already growing since the 1980s (Thibos 2014).

From the 2000s on, despite worsening conditions for asylum seekers and increasing difficulties in being recognised as such in Europe, what earlier was an elite phenomenon turned into larger scale movement. Despite decreasing recognition rates for asylum seekers – in 18 European destinations it fell from approximately a third in 1997–2001 to a quarter in 2002–6 – (Paasche 2018), the number of Iraqis seeking refuge in Europe peaked over 2001–2002, to then significantly decrease until 2005, with growing hope for a new Iraq. Such drop proved to be temporary, since 2.2 million Iraqis left their country following the US-led invasion and 2.7 million became internally displaced by 2007 (IOM & UNHCR 2008).

A new height in asylum applications in the EU was reached in 2006–2007 when sectarian violence brutally erupted in the country bringing to ‘the largest displacement the Middle East had seen since 1948’, only to be surpassed by the Syrian crisis after 2011 (Thibos 2014, 6). After 2008, the volume of Iraqi emigration began to decrease again, in parallel with the ‘decline in violence [which] came at the cost of fragmentation of Iraqi society’ (Danış 2011, 203). However, such fragmentation further exacerbated, and Iraq witnessed further violence and displacement (both internal and international) in the last decade.

Torn by 40 years of almost permanent war and instability, with the last parenthesis of conflict and violence being (only formally) closed less than five years ago, post-conflict Iraq is now faced with overlapping social, economic, political and security challenges, which have been further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The already fragile oil-dependent economy of Iraq has been dramatically damaged by the oil price collapse induced by the pandemic. Together with a painful devaluation of the Iraqi dinar, this has led to a worsening in living standards and worrying increases in poverty and unemployment rates, now at 27–31% and 40% respectively (Alaaldin 2021), while exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. Socio-economic challenges, embedded within a volatile security

environment, with peripheral areas of Iraq witnessing the resurgence of sleeping ISIS cells and renewed tensions between the Popular Mobilisation Units and the US forces on the ground on the one hand, and the political crisis that pushed thousands to mobilise and protest on the streets in a new wave of contestation since October 2019 on the other, characterise the context shaping current outmigration from Iraq.

3.2.2 Irregular migration and asylum trends in the EU

Frontex data on irregular arrivals of Iraqi nationals in Europe show a decreasing trend in detections along the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR) in the period 2009-2013 at the aggregate level, with the number of Iraqis registered as crossing EU's borders irregularly diminished by over 87% in that timeframe (from 3,305 in 2009 to 429 in 2013). Numbers began to rise significantly from 2014, registering a more than 50% increase and subsequently reaching an unprecedented peak of 92,721 Iraqis in 2015. From that moment on numbers would have slowed down significantly each year with the only exception of 2018 (-69,83% from 2015 to 2016, - 74,26% from 2016 to 2017, -50,38% from 2018 to 2019 and -85,58% from 2019 to 2020). In 2018, while the decreasing trend has continued, even if more mildly, in sea detections (- 6,04% compared to the previous year), a slight increase from 7202 to 8970 detections (+ 24,55%) was registered due to a significant rise in land detections (from 785 up to 2941).

Table – 3: Crossings of Iraqis EMR (Sea, Land & Total), 2009-2020

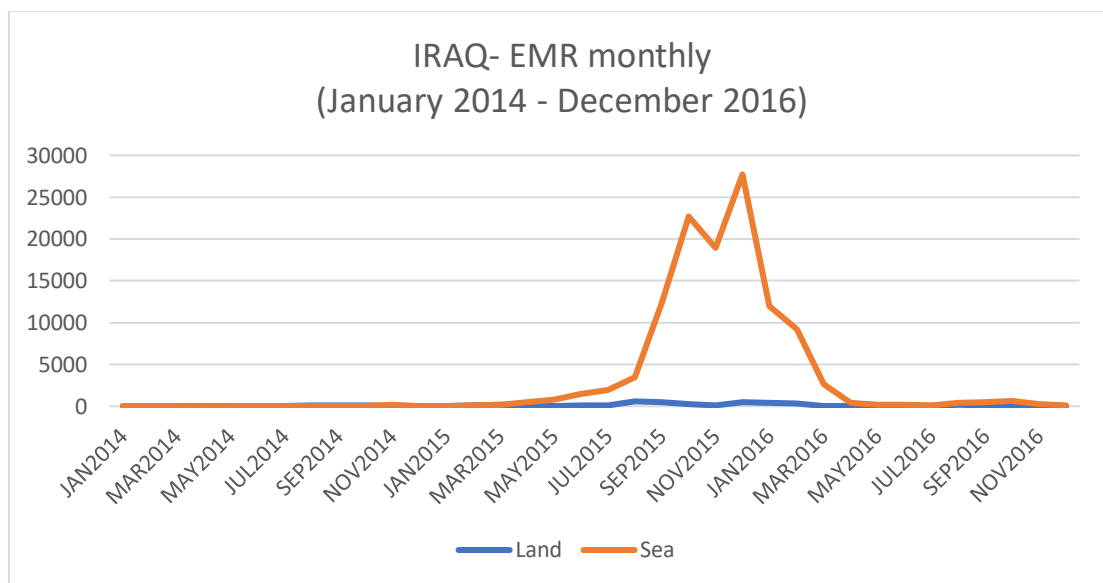
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Sea	631	176	76	47	57	382	90130	26573	6417	6029	3741	470
Land	2674	2704	1054	987	372	483	2591	1405	785	2941	710	172
Total	3305	2880	1130	1034	429	865	92721	27978	7202	8970	4451	642

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map". <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map>.

Looking at monthly data (Figure - 10) during the peak in the considered timeframe, the number of those leaving war-torn Iraq towards Europe constantly increased starting from March 2015 until December 2015, with the only

parenthesis of the slowdown registered in November 2015. More than 97% of the overall detections of Iraqi nationals in 2015 consisted in sea detections (90,130 over 92,721), something that signals a novelty destined to last in migration patterns from Iraq, which had traditionally been tied mainly to land routes. As can be seen in Table 3, until 2015 there was a predominance of land detections, while following the peak in 2015 the tendency reversed to be maintained until 2020, with sea detections surpassing by far land detections every year.

Figure - 10: Crossings of Iraqis – EMR – monthly breakdown January 2014 – December 2016

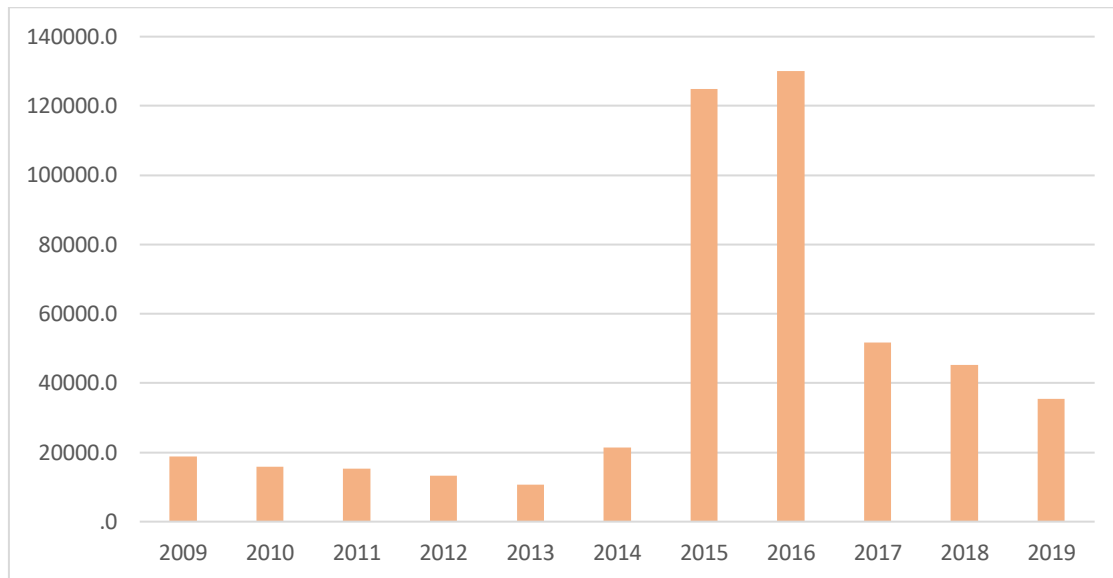


Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map". <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map>.

Notably, the mentioned slowdown in detections of Iraqis entering Europe irregularly from 2016 on was counterbalanced by an increase in asylum applications, that reached their peak that year, which can be explained by the lag between arrival and lodging an asylum application, also considering the overburdened asylum systems in the EU with the effect of the large-scale arrivals in 2015-2016. The number of Iraqis applying for asylum in the Union, however, had already substantially grown in 2015 (+82,90%) going up from 21,365 in 2014 to 124,970 in 2015 (Figure 11). 2016 witnessed the highest number of asylum applications of Iraqi citizens from 2009 with 130,000 requests in the then-28 EU member states. In line with the trends identified for Frontex detections, asylum

applications also began to decrease considerably and continuously from 2017, recording -60,19% compared to the previous year in 2017, a slighter -12,54% in 2018, and -21,79% in 2019.

Figure - 11: Asylum applications in the EU – 28 countries by Iraqi nationals (2009-2019)



Source: Authors' elaboration based on: Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded)[migr_asyappctza].
https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctzm&lang=en.

Excluding the UK and narrowing down the focus to the 27 EU member states only, the decreasing trend has continued, with a – 24,69% reduction registered in 2020 compared to 2019. In absolute terms, however, the number of Iraqis applying for asylum in Europe remains high, with the number of asylum applications in 2019 (31,320) being above and in 2020 (19,440) slightly below the numbers recorded in 2014 (20,420), the year in which they began to rise following a decreasing trend in 2009-2013 and reaching subsequently the peak in 2015-2016.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have contributed to a further reduction, with fewer Iraqis applying for asylum in February 2021 compared to the same period in 2020 (- 40%) (EASO, 2021). In the medium to longer run, however, it is likely to act as a factor leading more Iraqis to leave the country, due to the multiplier effect it has had on the existing fragilities of Iraqi socio-economic fabric informed by the security environment and the collapse in oil prices it has produced.

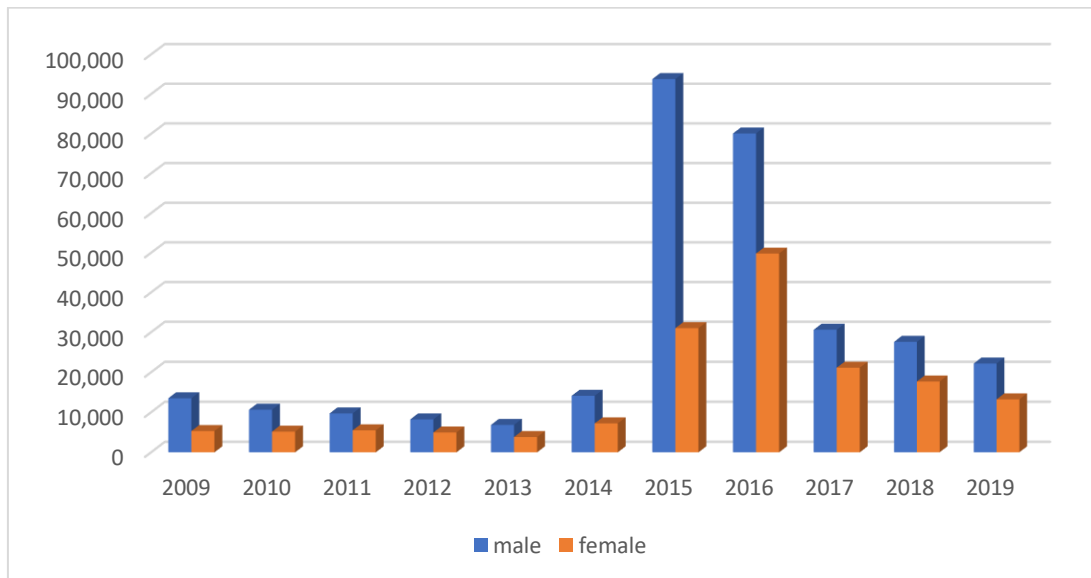
As of 2015 the stock of Iraqi migrants in Sweden and Germany was respectively 133,118 and 115,041 over a total international migrant stock of Iraqis equal to 1,479,966 and corresponding to the third and fifth top destinations overall. (UNDESA 2015). As for asylum seekers, Germany and Sweden also represented the first and second top destinations in 2015, with 31,380 and 20,780 Iraqis applying for protection respectively and accounting for 40% of the overall applications lodged in the EU by Iraqi nationals that year.

Considering the period 2009-2020, there have been over a total of 482,775 asylum applications from Iraqi nationals, almost half of them were lodged in Germany, followed by those made in Sweden (more than 40,505), Greece (over 32,655) and Finland (31,930). While Germany, Sweden and Finland have long represented countries of refuge for Iraqis, with Germany recording the highest number of asylum applications in the EU every year throughout the last decade, and Sweden and Finland always in the top 10 countries (with the exception of 2016 for Finland), many EU countries, saw the number of asylum applications from Iraqis peaking only in 2015. The most evident example is Greece, a country that went from the 13th ranking in 2015 to the 3rd in 2016, and subsequently remaining at the 2nd position until today. Despite occasional drops in the 2015-17 period, Sweden, Finland and Belgium ranked high among EU countries where Iraqis applied for asylum, subsequently being in the top five in the 2017-2020 period.

Disaggregating data and looking at the gender breakdown, male asylum seekers represent the vast majority of applicants throughout the last decade, reaching the height of 75,1% in 2015. However, the ratio of female asylum migrants firstly increased in 2010-2012 and then again in 2016 to 38,28% and in 2017 to 40,82% to subsequently decrease from 2018 on (Figure 12). Given time lags between actual migration and asylum applications, this largely corroborates Kofman's findings that there has been a shift towards more women, children and families arriving in Greece before late 2015/beginning of 2016, while 'following the EU-Turkey Statement concluded on 18 March 2016, a more male adult profile re-emerged' which is believed to be informed by the fact that the crossings have become more risky and difficult after the Statement (Kofman 2019, 2187). The

increase of women and children has been related to the belief that ‘they are more likely to be granted asylum (compared to male and/or adult asylum seekers) and can then pave the way for family reunification’ (Pickering and Powell 2019, 8).

Figure -12: Asylum applications in the EU – 28 countries by Iraqi nationals (2013-2019) – gender breakdown



Source: Authors' elaboration based on: Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]" https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

3.2.3 Analysis of drivers across origin, transit, host and destination contexts

3.2.3.1 Origin context

Deeply embedded in Iraq's recent history, enduring political and socio-economic insecurity have been shaping the context in which EU-bound mixed migration flows from the country has been occurring in last decade.

In the last ten years, the security environment of Iraq has constantly remained volatile and despite certain improvements in the security context, uncertainty has generally prevailed, with sudden or gradual escalations in violence taking place almost regularly. This violence also has a particularly gendered dimension. As Wankel has pointed out, it is 'characterized by extremely high levels of gender-based violence, including sexual violence perpetrated by the various militias controlling large parts of the country, a sharp rise in domestic violence and a dramatic increase in trafficking for sex work, atrocities from which the state and occupying forces remain unable to protect civilians' (Wankel 2009 19). Al-Ali (2016, 10) situates this gender-based violence, as well as the genocidal dimension with which it has been pursued by ISIS in a 'historical background of broader sexual and gender-based violence' pre- and post-invasion Iraq.

Even if it is difficult to establish a direct correlation between conflict and the decision of many – with differing degrees of exposure to direct and indirect effects of conflict, with varying backgrounds and social and economic resources – to leave Iraq, the two elements are certainly related and feed one another: conflict fuels uncertainty, human insecurity and political instability in Iraq, and it is in turn shaped by these factors. The complex situation has led many Iraqis to lose hope in the future,⁴¹ and a considerable number of them to take the life-changing decision of leaving their home country towards Europe at a certain point. As shown in the previous section, more men have been able to take this decision than women. This has been related to lower economic rights of women which gives them less 'access to and control over the resources needed to migrate' (Neumayer and Plümper

⁴¹ This was the very first reason to emigrate according to 80% of people interviewed in a study conducted by IOM back in 2015 (IOM 2016) at the same time when the proverbial "migration crisis" was taking place in Europe and Iraq represented the third top origin country of those coming to Europe.

2021, 2). Similarly, as Ullah (2017, 59) points out, women are at disadvantage to take such a decision 'due partly to the strong patriarchal tradition which often impinges the rights of women', while pointing out that 'left-behind' women can also be empowered by the 'freedom to make decisions'.

Following the peak of violence during the civil war in 2006-2008, tensions in 2009-2011, even if occurring at a slower pace, insecurity was far from having disappeared in Iraq. For example, after the US withdrawal from cities and towns in June 2009, a number of attacks were launched by armed groups in subsequent weeks and months. These episodes of violence affecting civilians are likely to have played a role in the relatively high numbers of people attempting to irregularly cross to the EU via the EMR in that period in absolute terms, despite showing a slowdown compared to the previous years.

By the time all US forces left Iraq in December 2011, the security context gradually deteriorated again. In January 2012 several suicide bombings in Baghdad, Basra and Nasiriyah killed more than a hundred civilians with levels of violence echoing the ones witnessed back in 2006-2008. In April-May 2013, more than 2000 people were violently killed in only two months (Markey 2013), and later in October the record number of 900 violent deaths were registered. While not having been immediately reflected in an increase in arrivals or asylum applications either at the EU external borders or in the region, confirming that intensification of conflict *per se* does not automatically translate into rising migration, the fragile security situation and episodes of localised violence continued to generate direct and indirect effects on the population, likely to have contributed to the perception of dim prospects for the future together with socio-economic insecurities and marginalisation. This was then followed by the rapid escalation of violence and insecurity from 2013-2014 with the spillover effects of the Syrian war, which played a major role in arrivals to Europe to peak in the 2015-2016 period.

Starting from the end of 2013 the armed group ISIS gradually expanded its activities in and its control over important areas of Iraq, seizing as much as a third of the country's territory. After the city of Falluja and parts of Ramadi fell under

the group control in December 2013, important towns in the Anbar, Sinjar and Zumar provinces, as well as the second largest city in the country, Mosul, were seized by ISIS throughout 2014, with brutal human rights abuses on civilians and minority groups, and massive displacement taking place in the country. More than 6 million people have been displaced in Iraq due to the conflict and over 1 million people are still unable to return to their homes.

As noted by Costantini and Palani (2020, 3) based on their field research in KRI, a relation between internal displacement and forced migration, both being ‘involuntary movements of people motivated by the incidence of violence that create conditions of vulnerability’, does exist. Despite being a non-linear, complex relation, the boundaries between the two phenomena have proved to be not necessarily clear-cut, and the phenomena are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, internal displacement has not infrequently turned into displacement beyond the borders of Iraq as a result of ‘the combination of multiple causes and circumstances constituting an environment, a perception, or a condition of diffused long-term insecurity’ (Costantini and Palani 2020, 15). Long-lasting and exhausting internal displacement, together with poor living conditions, have led the majority of Iraqis involved in the mentioned study to ‘desire to leave Iraq’ specifically while experiencing displacement within the country (Costantini and Palani, 6). Such desire has nonetheless hardly translated into effective migration, with some exceptions (Costantini and Palani 2020).

Experiences and perceptions of such insecurity differ and differently impact migration aspirations and patterns. Evidence from Costantini and Palani’s (2020) research shows that minority groups that have experienced persecution and internal displacement - such as the case of the Yazidis - were more willing to leave the country. This is not confined to IDPs’ decision to leave but applies also to people who left Iraq without experiencing life in the camps. This is echoed in the high proportion of Iraqis coming from specific governorates, particularly impacted by the crisis - namely the Anbar and Ninewa provinces - over the total population

of migrants and asylum seekers involved in an IOM survey conducted in 2015.⁴² Findings from another survey also conducted in the midst of 2015-16 flows, indicate, not surprisingly, targeted persecution by state and non-state groups and ISIS activities as major factors for the decision to leave for those Iraqi nationals included in the sample (Crawley et al. 2016).

Following the relative success of the military counter-offensive against ISIS, led by Iraq and backed by regional and international support in 2015-2016, the Iraqi prime minister al-Abadi declared the victory over ISIS in December 2017. Throughout this period a non-linear decrease in the level of violence in Iraq was registered (Uppsala Conflict Data Programme). Decreased levels of violence could partially explain an equally non-linear slowdown in the number of Frontex detections and asylum applications. The post-2017 period probably also reflects the restoration of some hope, albeit temporary, following the symbolic declaration of victory over ISIS by the Iraqi prime minister.

However, in 2018 Frontex detections increased by almost a quarter (+24,55%) – albeit remaining relatively low in absolute terms – pointing out that the security environment in the origin country is not necessarily the major, nor the only driver for migration. Once the armed conflict was over and the stabilisation efforts were bringing the first results, the inability and unwillingness of the Iraqi government and political class to face structural problems in Iraq became increasingly clear. The lack of infrastructure, basic public services as well as rampant corruption and high unemployment rates fed into 2018 protests in Basra, where people who demanded a functioning state were met by harsh repression. Despite decreased levels of violence, growing discontent with the political elites, re-emergence of socio-economic hardship and injustice continue to constitute the wider context in which the Iraqi society finds itself, feeding into the sentiment of ‘loss of hope in the future’, which was stated as the main reason for leaving Iraq towards Europe in search of a better future for a clear majority in 2015 (IOM 2016).

⁴² As emerges from disaggregated data from an IOM study conducted in 2015 (IOM 2016), most of them came from the Anbar and Ninewa provinces, two of the most hit by conflict-related violence.

Socio-economic drivers have always been part of the complex set of the factors informing migration outflows from Iraq. While understood not as the very first reason in 2015 (IOM 2016b), they have become increasingly important in the following years and will likely represent a major driver in the near future as a consequence of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which has added further pressure on the long-standing economic dysfunctionalities and corruption. This directly speaks to security-related drivers, which remain important in understanding migration patterns from Iraq even after the end of the conflict against ISIS and are inextricably linked with socio-economic marginalisation dynamics in the country, particularly in peripheral areas. This makes it extremely difficult to draw a sharp distinction between economic and security motivated migration, as economic and security reasons stem from the same uncertainty and reinforce each other. ISIS re-emergence is witnessed in remote areas where the process has been favoured by the existing fragmentation and animosities within the Iraqi security apparatus, political system and society, ultimately demonstrating the fragility of the “victory” claimed back in 2017. Furthermore, the spill over effects of the US-Iran geopolitical confrontation as well as its manifestation on the Iraqi soil, with recurrent attacks on US facilities and subsequent responses, add further strain to the country’s insecurity.

As shown before, the number of Iraqis applying for asylum in the EU has in fact decreased in the last years, but still remains considerable. More than 35,000 applied for asylum in 2019, a year in which the unsustainability of the status quo was also expressed in the massive street protests where thousands, exasperated by the current difunctional and corrupt political system, demanded a radical, revolutionary change, literally claiming a new country (Ali 2019). Recent waves of mobilisation are also in direct relation with migration outflows from Iraq. Despite being a phenomenon of relative magnitude, worth mentioning is the recent asylum migration of Iraqi activists towards Turkey. Following the targeted killings pursued by the armed groups in the country, many activists chose to flee Iraq fearing for their lives (Davison and Aboulenein 2019; Euronews 2021). While not constituting a trend in a narrow sense, this recent pattern in migration dynamics from Iraq adds on the previous wave of politically motivated out migration and

reiterate the sense of uncertainty still present in post-conflict Iraq.

On top of that, even if COVID-19 related border closures and travel restrictions (IOM 2020) have slowed down border-crossings and new arrivals, while seeming to have impacted also on the volume of asylum requests – with fewer Iraqis applying for asylum in February 2021 compared to the same period in 2020 (-40%) (EASO 2021), the multidimensional impact of the pandemic on the Iraqi society, economy and state, will likely feature among the factors leading more Iraqis to consider leaving the country.

At the policy level, Iraq has recently developed a number of instruments and measures by also improving cooperation with international organisations in the migration governance domain. This may affect migration dynamics from the country in their nature and directions in the future, specifically as concerns return migration and reintegration of returnees as well as anti-trafficking and anti-smuggling initiatives. More specifically, cooperation with IOM aims to reduce migration outflows from Iraq and improve returns, something which is also particularly relevant from an EU perspective. The EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) envisages a ‘comprehensive dialogue on all migration-related issues, including irregular migration, smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, as well as the inclusion of the migration concerns in the national strategies for economic and social development of the areas from which migrants originate’ (European Union 2012). This is complemented by additional cooperation agreements with Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Germany as well as informal arrangements with Syria and Turkey in the return migration domain (IOM 2020b). Regarding human trafficking, Iraq has both developed internal policy instruments and subscribed to international conventions and cooperation agreements (IOM 2020b) which is of particular importance also when considering that women from ethnic minorities such as the Yazidis have been subject to genocidal enslavement by ISIS (Marczak 2018).

After the territorial defeat of ISIS in December 2017 and with the gradual improvement in the security environment in the following years, smuggling

networks within Iraq have probably reduced their activities compared with conflict times, but still operate in the country (Adal 2021). Most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic-related border closures may well 'add to the drivers that fuel human smuggling, making migrants and refugees more vulnerable to exploitation and leading to potentially significant growth in the human smuggling market in the region post-COVID-19' (Adal 2021, 15).

3.2.3.2 Transit and non-EU destination and host contexts

For Iraqis willing or forced to leave their country in the last decade, Turkey has represented the gateway to Europe and, leaving aside flight routes, two are the main ways to enter Turkey from Iraq, both by land. The first is through the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the second through Syria. Thus, considering Turkey and Syria as the two main transit countries for Iraqis along their journey towards Europe, the present section will analyse how the context in these two countries has evolved throughout the last decade and how this might have had a bearing on EU-bound movement patterns of Iraqis.

As for Syria, it once was the top destination for Iraqis leaving their country. In 2011, by the time the Syrian conflict began, and the US troops completed their withdrawal from Iraq, the majority of Iraqis out of their home country - around 1 million people - were in Syria (Chatty and Mansour 2011) where they made up 93% of the total number of refugees in the country according to UNHCR. Despite the conflict escalation, Syria remained the top destination for Iraqi migrants, more than 250,000 (UNDESA 2015), and refugees by 2015. Therefore, many Iraqis belonging to previous waves of forced migration from Iraq witnessed the brutality of the war twice: firstly, outside their origin country where they believed they could find a safe place to stay and, subsequently, directly at home when ISIS gradually took control of as much as a third of Iraq (Waled 2012).

Thus, for those who had not already left Iraq, war-torn Syria was known as a transit country rather than a destination. The enduring 10 yearlong conflict made the journey for those who opted for crossing Syria to get to Turkey and then

Europe, extremely difficult, risky, and expensive. Many have been reported to have tried more than once (even up to 9-10 attempts) to enter Syria, while in 2016 smugglers became essential to move across the war-torn country and cross ISIS-controlled territories (IOM 2016). The above-mentioned IOM study estimated that the average cost for the journey was between 1200 and 1500 USD (IOM 2016), not to mention the security risks of moving across ISIS-controlled areas and being hit by attacks by either coalition forces either the Popular Mobilisation Units and ISIS itself.

Once having crossed Syria, or alternatively once passed borders control at the Turkish-Iraqi frontier, the subsequent section of the journey of Iraqis fleeing their country towards Europe, occurred in Turkey. Although part of the 1951 U.N. Convention on the Status of Refugees, Turkey retains a geographical limitation to “events occurring in Europe” as for its application, meaning that Iraqis cannot be granted protection according to its provisions but must rather refer to the Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection as a legal framework to seek protection in the country to, eventually, be offered conditional refugee status or subsidiary protection. Precarious immigration status combined with inadequate social services, exclusion from the labour market, or insufficient salary have pushed many Iraqis to refrain from settling in Turkey and to continue their journey towards Europe, therefore typically conceiving Turkey as a transit country (Crawley et al. 2016; Leghtas and Sullivan 2016).

As of February 2021, only 1000 Iraqis are refugees in Turkey according to the latest update available by UNHCR (UNHCR 2021j) but 173,250 more are seeking asylum in the country, making Iraq the first top nationality of asylum seekers in Turkey after Syrians. However, the length of procedures both for being resettled and obtaining protection has ended up extending the period of stay for many of those dealing with the asylum system in Turkey for years, turning it from transit to alternative, precarious and uncertain de facto country of settlement. Many Iraqis have indeed been reported to be stuck in Turkey waiting for years before being resettled in third countries (MacGregor 2019), or for a decision concerning their status to be made (Leghtas and Sullivan 2016).

While at the beginning of the Syrian war Turkey did not apply borders restrictions and was more inclined to provide protection to Syrians but also Iraqis fleeing war when the numbers peaked from 2015 onwards, refugees and asylum seekers' living conditions deteriorated in Turkey and a tougher approach vis-à-vis them was applied. As stated in a Working Paper of RESPOND H2020 Project, 'the "open-door" policy started to be replaced by a "closed door" policy in practice', which, despite the rhetoric from the Turkish government, was operative since 2012 and became even more visible from 2015 onwards also thanks to NGOs reporting (Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019, 18).

Pressures coming from the EU for more efficient border and migration management, embodied in the EU-Turkey Statement signed in March 2016, as well as domestic political and economic needs, were soon translated into material and immaterial barriers at entry and exit points for those willing to cross Turkey in search of a better future in Europe. Physical barriers to the external Turkish borders were indeed built, with the erection of a security wall along the border with Syria completed by December 2017, works in progress for the construction of a barrier at the Iranian border and rumours about the willingness of similar border management strategies for the Iraqi and Armenian borders (Gokalp Aras and Sahin Mencutek 2019).

Changes in visa policies also help to explain shifts in migration dynamics from Iraq. Before September 2016, Iraqis willing to enter Turkey from the KRI were able to obtain visas directly at the border, and, in fact, more than two thirds of those who entered Turkey in 2015-2016 seem to have done it through legal avenues (Crawley et al. 2016). The tightening of controls and requirements, among which the need to request a visa in advance (IOM 2016) has produced a shift in the routes followed and modalities used by Iraqis to enter and cross Turkey to get Europe. This visa policy change must be read in parallel with the EU-Turkey Statement which, paradoxically, while seeking to crack down on smuggling and create safe alternatives for migrants, 'has encouraged new practices among smugglers, such as changing prices and means of transport ... and increased violence against and

exploitation of migrants by the smugglers for some cases' (Yıldız 2021, 151). In this regard, the Black Sea route was emerging as an alternative route back in 2016, especially for those Iraqi nationals who turned to smugglers to get to Romania and then Europe from Iraq (Hilton and Cupolo 2017).

As a consequence of the EU-Turkey Statement, exiting Turkey also became increasingly difficult, due to stricter controls especially at the sea border. In addition, through EU pressure on and “cooperation” with the Western Balkan countries as well as Greece, the exits from Greece to these countries (Macedonia at the border), as well as border-crossings throughout the Western Balkans region was made more difficult, resulting in the Balkan route closure. With Greek islands turned into hotspots in 2015 as part of the European Agenda on Migration and the establishment of the geographical restriction prohibiting asylum seekers from leaving the island where they applied for protection in 2017 as a consequence of the EU-Turkey Statement, Greece was transformed into a *de facto* destination (Dimitriadi 2016). The ongoing alarming deterioration of living conditions (AIDA 2021) occurring even in more recent times despite the slowdown in arrivals, together with the impossibility of leaving the islands have made the continuation of the journey impossible or riskier and more dangerous.

Regarding the impact of COVID on the refugees, a study on Afghan, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees in Turkey during the pandemic in Spring 2020 found that refugees encountered difficulties in paying rents, bills etc. 63% of the participants in the survey had ‘difficulty in reaching food, 53% in ‘meeting their basic hygiene requirements’ (SGDD-ASAM 2020 13). Indeed, as Kirişci and Yavcan (2020) note, the pandemic created a ‘double emergency for refugees – in avoiding contracting the virus on the one hand, and continuing to access basic needs and livelihoods on the other’.

3.2.3.3 EU destination context

As mentioned above, Europe only became a top destination for Iraqis leaving their country in 2015. The reasons behind such a shift in migration outflows directions

from Iraq were many. While the perception of European countries as being generally safe, respectful of human rights, open, and implementing welcoming immigration policies has certainly played a role in Iraqis' decision to attempt a journey towards the EU, the very first reason has not directly to do with Europe itself but is rather tied to the lack of safe alternatives in the region (IOM 2016b).

Yet, the high expectations or even the idealisation of Europe were often not met by the reality experienced by many Iraqis once in the EU. Disappointment and frustration regarding the length and unpredictability of the asylum-seeking requests were common, with many reporting unsatisfactory living conditions (IOM 2016). Together with European and EU member states' migration governance, the lack or poor quality of information of those seeking to make it to Europe has certainly contributed to producing distorted images of the intended destination country for asylum seekers and migrants journeying to Europe who mainly get information via word of mouth and social networks and internet (IOM 2016b). Cognitive migration fed by the hope and dreams of those seeking a better future away from Iraq has also played a role in the production of an idealised, optimistic projection of European countries as safe, democratic heavens. Once in the desired destination countries, however, many found themselves in a completely different situation from that pre-experienced in their imaginary future, such as in the case of many Iraqis arriving in Finland in 2015 who, attracted by the idea of building a new life in a peaceful, democratic Nordic country, got their asylum request rejected (Koikkalainen et al. 2019).

LGBTQI refugees also experienced particular challenges. As Nasser-Eddin et al. (2018, 183) have pointed out, they are forced to fit themselves into Western-defined categories for receiving asylum: 'One refugee from Iraq, based in Berlin, reflected on how he needed to clearly demonstrate his 'gayness' in order to verify the veracity of his claim, often by playing up to gendered stereotypes of homosexuality'. This is particularly problematic, as not all non-normative genders identify with LGBTQI categories or as they might not want to come out. Coming out demands that 'sexuality is visibly performed and inscribed' and that 'an individual's sexual partcie is inscribed into a clearly visible and often gendered

identity' (Nasser-Edin et al. 2018, 183).

Also for women Europe is not a safe haven. The closing of legal routes of family reunification does not only leave mothers and children in precarious situations in origin, host and transit countries where they are more likely exposed to gender-based violence (Roupetz et al. 2020, 10), but the hardening of the EU's borders 'has rendered refugee women increasingly at risk of violence and exploitation' by smugglers, but also 'guards and volunteers in reception centers' (Reeves and Holvikivi 2020). The Common European Asylum System and existing asylum policies remain however gender-blind and insufficient to protect women from gender-based violence and trafficking (see Boland and Tschalaer 2021, 28-29; 40).

While Greece only became a top destination, mostly an unintended one, from 2016 onwards as a consequence of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, Germany and Nordic countries of Sweden and Finland, have long hosted Iraqi communities on their national territory. If it is true that Germany has long been receiving a relevant number of asylum applications from Iraqi nationals, it is also true that it was after Merkel's Willkommenspolitik announced in September 2015, that numbers of Iraqis' asylum applications, peaked in 2015 and 2016 to gradually decrease again from 2017 onwards. A survey conducted in 2016 among migrants who travelled along the Western Balkan route reveals that Germany was the preferred destination for 70% of them, while among respondents on the Aegeans island the reason why Germany was chosen as a destination for the relative majority of the sample (26%) was family reunification (REACH 2017).

As for Sweden, the rich and diverse community of Iraqis in the country is the result of past waves of immigration occurring from the 70s onwards, with those following the Gulf war and the US led occupation being the most relevant as for their magnitude. The presence of well-established Iraqi communities across the country and the possibility of benefitting from family reunifications, and/or the presence of friends or relatives able to provide information before and during the journey as well as support once in the country, has incentivised many Iraqis in choosing Sweden as their destination countries (Kadhun 2019).

Box – 2: Key factors driving and shaping migration from Iraq**IRAQ**

Against this background, the main factors driving and shaping migration from Iraq at a regional level and towards the EU could be summarized as:

- Episodes of war and violence (waxing particularly in 2006/7 when sectarian violence brutally erupted and in 2013/14 when the Syrian civil war spilled over),
- Ethno-confessionally connoted and gender-specific discrimination and persecution
- Economic deprivation and uncertainty heavily informed by cyclical conflict and political instability
- Evolution of admission, reception and protection policies of host countries in the region (e.g., shift from welcoming to restrictive policies by Iran post-2003, of Jordan and Turkey from 2015 on)
- The role played by social networks (e.g., established Iraqi communities in particular EU countries such as Sweden) in providing information and social and economic support
- Reinforcement of EU policies geared towards prevention, rolled out both internally (e.g., shrinking protection space, limitation of family reunification), at the EU external border and externally (e.g., linking the functioning of hotspots in Greek islands to the EU-Turkey Statement) particularly post-2016

3.3 Syria

3.3.1 Migration profile

Syria has historically been a 'place of refuge' (Chatty 2018) since the time period in which the Ottoman Empire began to disintegrate as Western powers and with them the idea of the "nation state" penetrated the region (Kamel 2019b). A time of enormous upheaval, dispossession and displacement set on in various waves, lasting until today. The first waves, driven out by ethnocentric violence of new nationalist projects, included the European Muslims from the Caucasus and the Balkans in the 19th and early 20th century, Greeks of Crete, Russians after the Bolshevik revolution, Armenians during World War I, and the Palestine refugees in 1948 (and in 1967). The war in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990 also generated a temporary but important wave of departure towards Syria. A next wave of refugees came with the end of the Cold War when the US established its military power on the Arabian Peninsula. There were various smaller waves such as refugees from Kuwait in 1990, but there has also been the significant refugee wave from Iraq, following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which constantly augmented the more the war became sectarianized, particularly in 2006/07.

Vis-à-vis all these waves, Syria upheld a long regional tradition which Dawn Chatty (2018) has described as 'local cosmopolitanism or conviviality', integrating successive waves of refugees into its societal fabric. Thus, on the eve of the Arab uprisings, Syria acted as a destination country, mainly for refugees from the region, hosting 552.000 Palestine refugees (UNRWA 2021b) and 500.000 Iraqi refugees in 2011 (De Bel-Air 2016, 4). About 1.5 million Iraqis 'have transited through Syria between 2003 and 2011' (De Bel-Air 2016, 4). Syria also represented a host and transit country from Asia and Africa, hosting refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Pakistan (Urso et al. 2018). Syria also received some inward economic migration for domestic work from Asian countries (75.000-100.000) (De Bel-Air 2016, 4).

In terms of being an "origin country", before the onset of the conflict, one can differentiate various waves. As Samir Aita has pointed out, the first wave happened

in the late 19th century and early 20th century to the Americas. ‘More than one quarter of the then Syrian population emigrated’ (Aita 2009, 47). A next wave emerged in 1958 with the founding of the United Arab Republic, the short-lived pan-Arabist Union between Egypt and Syria which led to the leaving of industrialists, bankers and businessmen to Lebanon. Another wave from 1960-1981 went to the Arab oil producing states, ‘reaching an average of 1.08% yearly in 1970-1981, after being around 0.31% in the 1960s [of the Syrian population]’. It was stopped by policies in those states to limit such migration. The third wave, between 1990 and 2004, has been ‘different in nature, as it was a circular non-permanent migration mainly to Lebanon and Jordan (non-qualified workers), but also to the Gulf countries (mostly qualified)’ (Aita 2009, 47).

After 2005, an increasingly complex picture has emerged in which individual migration decisions were taken in a context of a highly conflictual geopolitical context in the region, authoritarian restructuring and repression in Syria, as well as a deteriorating economic situation, which have all intensely impacted the daily life of Syrians. Regionally, the US-led invasion into Iraq caused a massive Iraqi refugee flow which put pressure on the Syrian labour market. Further to that, as Iraq was already imploding, the Bush administration also pushed Syria to withdraw its forces from Lebanon in 2005, followed in 2006 by a war between Hezbollah and Israel. Both events led to attacks on Syrian workers in Lebanon, a reduction of circular labour migration to Lebanon, as well as the inflow of refugees from Lebanon into Syria. Nonetheless, it is estimated that before the war in Syria, about half a million of Syrians worked in Lebanon (Mehchy and Doko 2011, 3), that is about one seventh of the Syrian labour force.

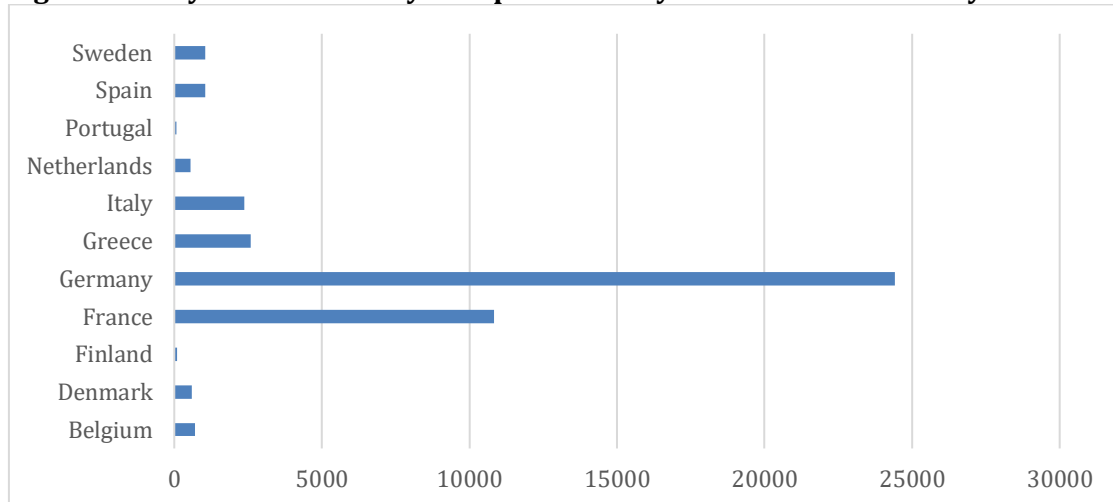
This happened at the same time as the country’s economy was aggressively liberalized, following IMF recommended structural adjustment policies which were combined with an “authoritarian upgrading” pursued by Bashar Al-Assad. Raymond Hinnebusch has described this as a transition from a populist form of authoritarianism to a neo-liberal version, in which authoritarian ‘power was now used to pursue economic liberalization and privatization, in the process shifting public assets to crony capitalist “networks of privilege”’ (Hinnebusch 2012, 95).

For ordinary Syrians, however, this has meant the loss of jobs in agriculture and industry and an increase of informal and precarious employment, while the social safety net was not expanded: the estimated unemployment rate was ‘at 22.6% in 2007 (14.5% for men, and 53% for women)’ while ‘41% of the working had informal jobs’ (Aita 2009, 6). Women, in particular, ‘have lost around 50% of their total jobs, and were pushed away from the labour force’ (Aita 2009, 3). Augmented by a devastating drought between 2006 and 2009, this has led to an internal migration from rural to urban areas,⁴³ increased reliance on non-state actors for social safety, and discontent, principally met by repression and torture through the feared mukhabarat.

As a result of all these overlapping factors, it is estimated that outward migration from Syria rose from a rate of 0.1% in the early 1990s, to 0.17% in 1995-2000, to what Aita estimated between 0.51% and 0.72% in 2009 (Aita 2009, 6). Besides circular labour migration with Lebanon, as of 2010 major destinations have been Saudi Arabia (700.000), Kuwait (500.000), and the United Arab Emirates (150.000) (Seeberg 2012, 3–4). Departure to the Gulf countries has been considered limited in time, contrary to migration to the US or Europe. The share of European countries has been rather low (see Figure - 13). Besides Syrians, member states such as Germany already hosted a substantial population of Palestinian and Kurdish refugees (see also Figure – 15 below).⁴⁴

⁴³ The UN estimated that migration from rural areas to cities increased by 20-30%, with about 40-60.000 people migrating (even though a direct link of this internal migration to the Arab uprisings in Syria cannot be established (Selby et al. 2017, 237)).

⁴⁴ Currently, estimates are that there are between 500.000 to 1 million Kurds in Germany, mainly from Turkey, but also Iran, Iraq and since 2011 Syria. In 2019, for example, Germany estimated that 30% of the asylum applications from Syria has been from Kurds (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge 2020). Regarding the Palestinian diaspora in Germany, there are no clear numbers either. In 2001, the Palestinian delegation/mission to Germany estimated them at 80.000, and in 2016 at 250.000 (Koch and Ragab 2018).

Figure – 13: Syrians citizens by European country of residence as of the year 2000

Source: Fargues (2004) (based on Council of Europe data)

While circular migration to Lebanon has been characterized by those sections of the society with lower educational attainments (working in construction, cleaning etc.), the Gulf, the US and Europe have received a high share of university-educated migrants. This has been the case even more since the 1990s, as the Gulf states have begun to look towards Asia rather than the Arab world for inward labour migration. Thus, already before the so-called refugee crisis, Syrian migration to Europe was more of an elite phenomenon, a tendency which continued also during the large-scale population movements of 2015-16 as we will see below.

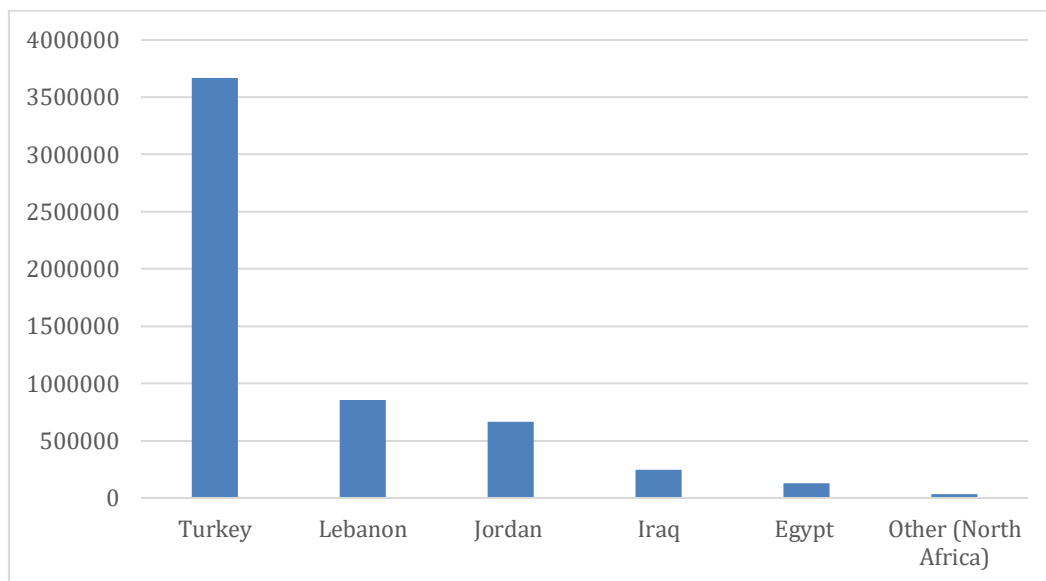
In short, while Syria has historically been a place of refuge for many migrants, migration from Syria was already growing before the revolution in 2011, mainly driven by the aggressive liberalization of the Syrian economy in combination with an authoritarian upgrading of Bashar Al-Assad and its extremely repressive policies, as well as mounting conflicts and tensions in Syria's neighbourhood (Iraq but also Lebanon) as a result of the Bush administration's geopolitics in the region. Thus, outward migration before 2011 can – as in other case studies of this report – not be neatly placed into either “voluntary” or “forced” migration, where the former is associated with economic motives, and the latter with political ones. Rather, individual decisions regarding migration also need to be seen in the context of the impact of Western geopolitical and economic policies, as well as an authoritarianism which has become increasingly repressive in Syria (but also in

Egypt or the Gulf states).

3.3.2 Syrian displacement and refuge in the Middle East and Europe

In 2011, the Syrian revolution set on, being squashed in a ravaging civil war. In early 2011, the population of Syria was about 22 million. At the time of writing (April-August 2021), there are 6.7 internally displaced Syrians and 6.6 million Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2021h). An estimated 362.266 Syrians were killed over the course of the war (Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research 2021).

As of today, 5.6 million Syrians have found refuge in the direct neighbourhood, that is, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan (as well as Iraq and Egypt). Of all Gulf States, it seems to be only Saudi Arabia which has seen an arrival of perhaps 420.000 Syrian nationals since 2011, as Francoise de Bel Air (2015, 8) has estimated, but it is difficult to access concrete data. Europe hosts over 1 million Syrian refugees, 59% of which in Germany and 11% in Sweden (UNHCR 2021i). Thus, Europe hosts only about 15% of Syrian refugees. These numbers are different for the Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS). Currently up to 280,000 PRS are displaced in Syria, and 120,000 have become refugees outside of Syria. Estimates are that 'between 2011 and 2016 nearly 85,000 PRS sought asylum in Europe' (Tucker 2018, 2). Concrete numbers are difficult to get since Palestine refugees register as "stateless", "unknown" or "Palestine" in Europe and so might also originate from Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Given that UNRWA estimates that about 31,000 PRS currently remain in Lebanon (UNRWA 2021a), it is likely that Europe hosts about 70% of the Palestine refugees from Syria.

Figure – 14: Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (as of 2021)

Source: UNHCR (2021h)

When looking at the “irregular” crossings of Syrian refugees into Europe in the last decade, data provided by Frontex (see Table - 4 below) suggest that the numbers slightly increased with the onset of the war. However, the majority of refugees in the initial phase of the conflict sought shelter in the direct neighbourhood of their country.

Table – 4. Crossings of Syrians EMR (Sea and Land Total), 2009-2020

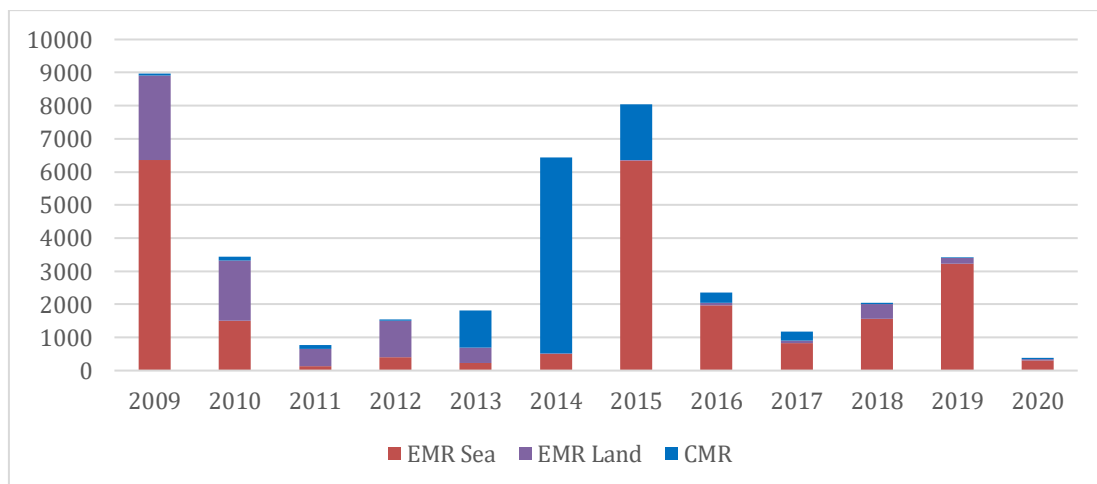
YEAR	Irregular crossings by Syrians	Total crossings	Syrians as % of total crossings
2009	538	39973	1,35
2010	634	55688	1,14
2011	1292	57025	2,27
2012	7122	37224	19,13
2013	12727	24798	51,32
2014	31673	50834	62,31
2015	496340	885386	56,06
2016	84585	182277	46,40
2017	16395	42319	38,74
2018	13906	56560	24,59
2019	19604	83333	23,52
2020	4696	20280	23,16
Total 2009-2020	689512	1535697	44,90

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on “Detections of illegal border-crossings”, available at Frontex, “Migratory Map”, <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

The summer periods of 2013 and 2014 saw more Syrian refugees coming through the CMR than through the EMR. This changed in 2015, which saw a massive increase of crossing into Europe, mainly through the sea border at the EMR, particularly from April 2015 through early 2016 when it decreased, with a further drop in 2017, and then in particular in 2020.

The curve is different for the Palestine refugees.⁴⁵ As evident in Figure - 15, one can note a marked increase of Palestine refugees in seeking refuge in Europe already happens in 2014 and the figure also shows a marked shift from the EMR to the CMR in 2013, and back to EMR particularly 2014 after which the crossings at the CMR ebb slowly off.

Figure – 15: Routes of Palestine refugees



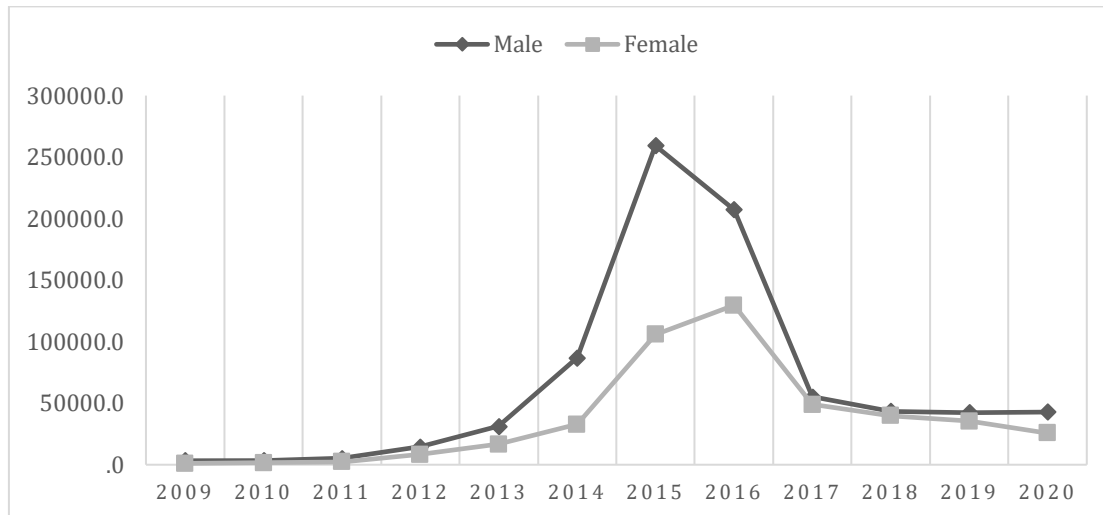
Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings", available at Frontex, "Migratory Map", <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

Statistics on asylum applications by Syrian nationals in the EU in the 2009-2020 period shows clear parallels to the timing and volume of detected irregular arrivals, illustrating the predominantly conflict-driven nature of the population movement from particularly 2013 onwards. Furthermore, it is notable that the

⁴⁵ It should be noted that Frontex data are not split by the country the Palestine refugees previously resided in; rather, they are registered as "Palestine" or "stateless". Thus, Palestine refugees could be from Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, or elsewhere, but the numbers still give an indication on their origin. For example, the arrival of Palestine refugees in 2009 is most likely connected to the 2009 Israeli war on Gaza and its blockade (other wars on Gaza happened in 2014 and 2021). In the 2013/14 period, it is likely the Palestine refugees from Syria, coming directly from Syria but also Lebanon (see section 3.3.3 below).

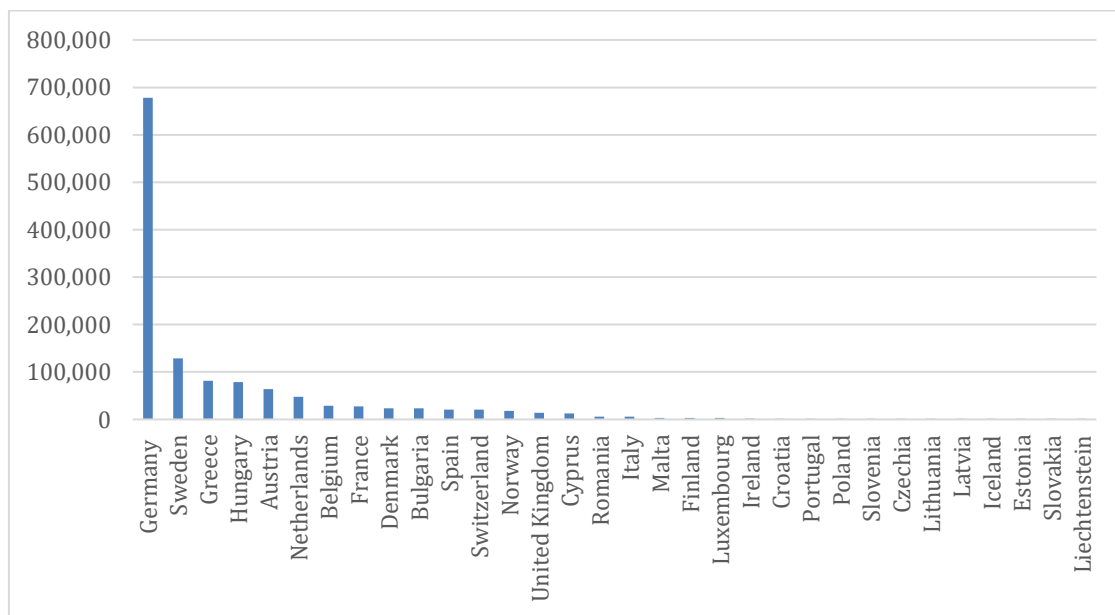
more the curve of Syrian asylum applications increases, the higher the male ratio becomes in the curve, as seen in Figure - 16. It should be noted here that while ‘women and girls make up half of the world’s refugees and half of global migrants’, when it comes to Europe, only around 32% of all asylum applicants are women (Passey 2017). For the Syrian refugees the ratio is higher, as Figure - 16 shows.

Figure - 16: Asylum applications by Syrian nationals by gender in EU-27



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]" https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

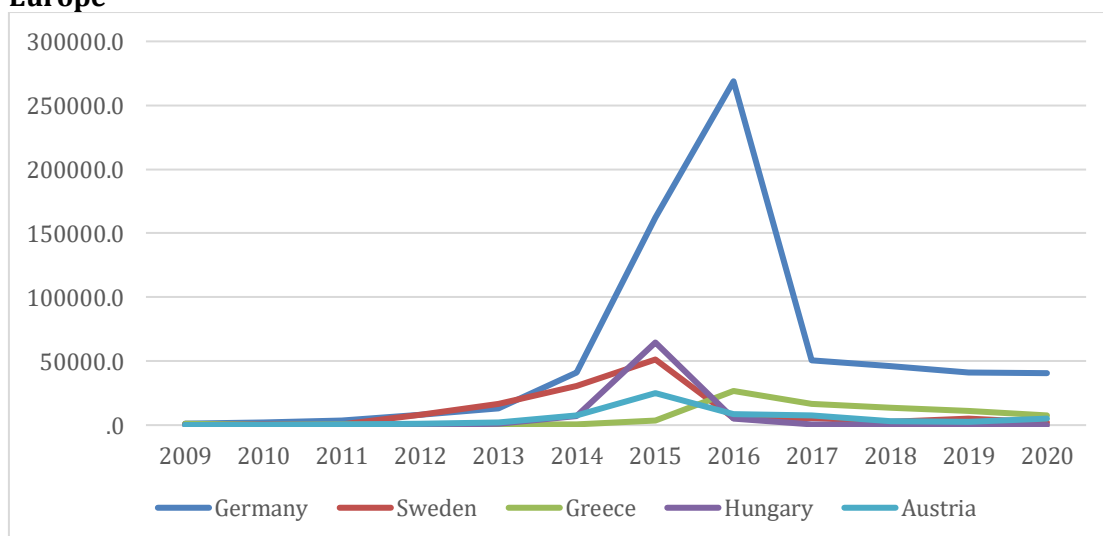
In terms of the overall number of asylum applications lodged by Syrian nationals in different EU member states in the period under consideration, Germany and Sweden top the list, followed by Greece, Hungary, Austria, and the Netherlands.

Figure – 17: Syrian asylum applications by country (2009-2020)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]"

https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

Whilst Germany (and to a lesser extent Sweden) has been the key asylum applications country for Syrian refugees, Hungary and Austria figured highly during 2015/16, but were then overtaken by Greece in 2016, which remains the second country until 2020. Also Cyprus sees continuing high numbers from 1020 in 2015, to 2665 in 2019 and 1760 in 2020.

Figure – 18: Syrian asylum applications over time in major destination countries in Europe

Source: Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat "Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asyappctza]"

https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=migr_asyappctza&lang=en

Summing up, the most notable trends are that the EU hosts only 15% of the Syrian refugees (and an estimate 70% of the PRS), chiefly in Germany and Sweden, as well as – particularly since 2016 - in Greece. The refugee flow from Syria augmented in the 2013/14 period (through the CMR), but the massive increase came in the EMR in 2015 through early 2016 when it decreased with notable drops in 2017 and in 2020.

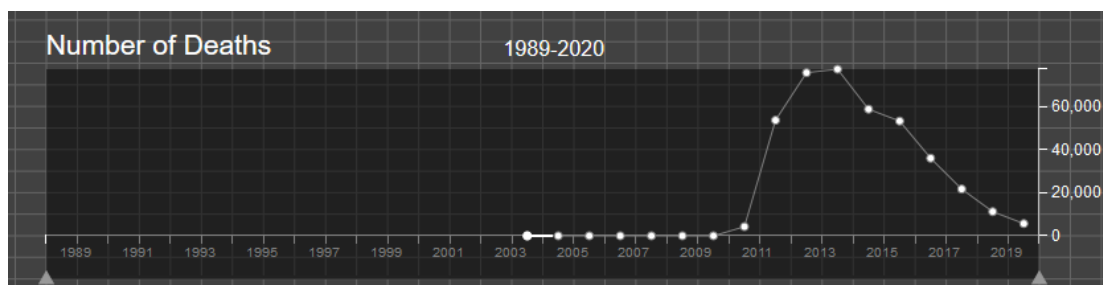
3.3.3 Analysis of drivers across origin, transit, host and destination contexts

3.3.3.1 The evolution of the war in Syria as the primary driver

In terms of Syria as an “origin country”, as seen in the first section of this paper, outward migration was already accelerating before the onset of the war, connected indeed to the very same dynamics which set a (geo)political and socio-economic context in which the war eventually evolved in different phases.

Almost immediately with the onset of the revolution in 2011, the government responded with violent force leading opposition groups to accept foreign funding and arms. From 2012 onwards, there was a rapid proliferation of armed non-state actors, the state lost control over various areas and Syria became territorially fractured. The rivalry between opposition forces and their external funders further aggravated violence (Hokayem 2013). As a result, numbers of deaths began to escalate from 2012 onwards, peaking in 2013/14 (see Figure – 17)

Figure – 17: Number of deaths during the Syrian war



Picture reproduced from UCDP (2021)

‘From mid- to late 2013 through to 2015, the Syrian Arab Republic’s territory was slowly segmented into distinct areas of control as smaller groups were defeated or

consolidated by bigger ones' (Dashti and Hinnebusch 2020, 17). 2014 was a changing moment, as the dramatic increase in foreign fighters and the rise of ISIL further escalated violence as it seized large swaths of Syrian territory. Both the US and Russia entered the war directly and the group has been defeated only in 2018. Turkey engaged in direct military interventions in Northern Syria from 2016 onwards. The Syrian government, supported by Russia and Iran, gradually recaptured territory and controls most of it today, while Russia and Iran remain militarily present. At the time of writing, two main areas in Syria are not under government control, that is Idlib and the Turkish-occupied area in Northern Syria, as well as the Kurdish Democratic Autonomous Administration in the North East which also features a US presence.

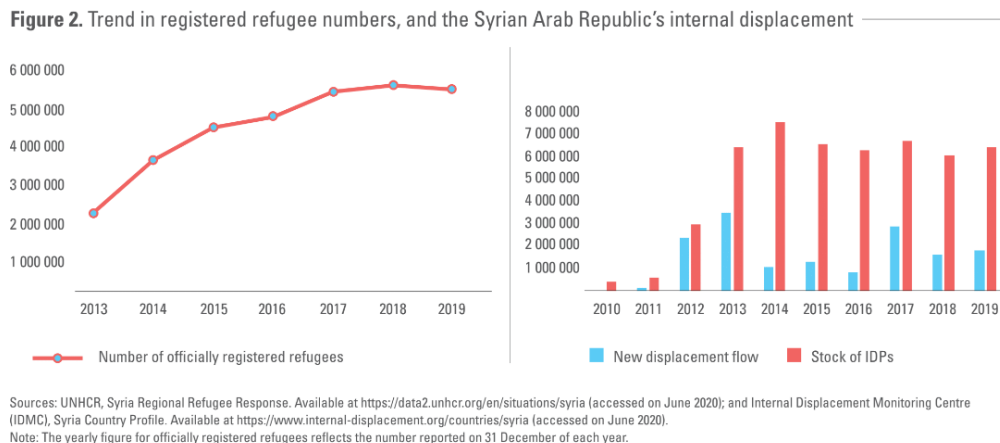
From the very beginning, civilians were deliberately targeted by the Assad regime, one of the most horrific examples being the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus in 2013 (United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic 2013). During the course of the war, war crimes including forced displacement attest to wide-spread demographic engineering policies, particularly around what President Bashar Al Assad framed 'useful Syria', 'which included the most important and connected governorates under the regime control' (Alijla 2020, 161). All non-state actors, including Kurdish militias, also enforced demographic change.

Furthermore, some population groups such as the PRS were also particularly exposed to violence, three of the twelve UNRWA refugee camps (Yarmouk, Dera'a and Ein el-Tal) in Syria have been almost completely destroyed (MacCloskey 2020). Also, some people were specifically targeted or particularly exposed, such as political activists, men who feared being conscripted to state or non-state military forces, or wealthier Syrians who are more at risk of becoming kidnapped for ransom (Crawley et al. 2016, 41). LGBTQI communities have been persecuted in the war in Syria particularly by the Islamic State (Kivilcim 2019, 26). Whilst there is no sufficient research on the situation of women in Syria and on gender discrimination as a factor driving migration from Syria, Nour Abu-Assab has pointed out that women challenged patriarchy in the Syrian revolution, but:

‘while shifts in gender dynamics have occurred, and took place in the case of Syria post- 2011, these shifts are limited in nature and will not necessarily have a long-lasting impact. ... when circumstances changed women were pushed back into the private sphere again, due to security concerns’ (Abu-Assab 2019, 25).

Beyond the direct threat to physical safety, the conflict has also led to a massive destruction of infrastructure (housing, schools, hospitals, factories, power, water, sanitation, transport, communication). Hinnebusch and Dashti point out that by ‘the end of 2018, damage to physical capital was estimated at \$117.7 billion’ (Dashti and Hinnebusch 2020, 48). Generally speaking, some regions such as Aleppo and Idlib have been heavily affected and others less, such as Damascus center, Tartus or Lattkia (Dashti and Hinnebusch 2020, 51). The impact on the economy has been massive, and the jobless rate has risen from 8% in 2010 to 55% in 2017 (75% among youth) (Dashti and Hinnebusch 2020, 65). The COVID pandemic has thus hit a country in conflict with few economic resources and whose health system has also been largely destroyed as health structures have been deliberately attacked. Particularly at risk of being affected by COVID-19 have been the internally displaced, as well as detainees in prisons, camps and detention facilities, whilst ‘interventions by international humanitarian actors have been severely hampered by the lack of access to territories outside the control of Damascus’ (Asseburg et al. 2020, 2).

As a result of all these factors and developments, internal displacement and refugees have been exponentially growing in the Syrian conflict, between 2013-2017 in particular.

Figure – 18: Refugees and internal displacement during the Syrian war

Picture reproduced from Dashti and Hinnebusch (2020, 28)

Initially, people sought refuge in the neighbouring countries, assuming the conflict might still cease. When, instead, it became increasingly violent and also clear that it would not cease soon, refugees attempted to reach Europe directly. Crawley et al (2016, 25) highlighted that a considerably big portion of people who arrived to Greece in 2015 (45% of their sample) arrived in less than one month after leaving Syria, indicating that many in that period had left Syria with reaching the EU in mind and only crossed through other countries on the way. This has also been confirmed by De Bel-Air who has pointed out:

A survey conducted by UNHCR of 1,245 Syrian refugees who arrived in Greece between April and September 2015 provided interesting results here. The majority (63 percent) were first migrants, having fled directly from Syria during 2015 and only transited through a third country before migrating to Europe.
 (De Bel-Air 2016, 7)

However, the refugee flow to Europe also increased in the 2013-15 period due to secondary drivers, that is due to the conditions in hosting countries which will be examined next.

Concluding this section, the evolution of the Syrian conflict clearly has been a primary driver to which the international community has failed to respond as Russia has blocked the UN Security Council, while the EU has engaged in humanitarian policies, but has diplomatically/politically largely ignored the conflict, including after the so-called “refugee crisis” in 2015. While the integration

of refugees in non-EU host countries in Syria's direct neighbourhood takes priority for the EU now as will be examined next, it should also be mentioned here that from the perspective of the Syrian refugees and also of the future stability of the whole region, the issue of comprehensive peace-building in Syria, protecting the rights of all Syrians and the country's territorial integrity, remains one of utmost urgency. The needs of the internally displaced (Costantini and Palani 2020) and refugee voices need to be taken account of in such a process, as well. In this respect, research has outlined major conditions for their return, that is a political transition that assures 'their *safety* and *security*, access to *justice*, and *right of return* to areas of origin' (Yahya, Kassir, and el-Hariri 2018, 1 italics added).

3.3.3.2 The situation in host countries in Syria's neighbourhood

At the dawn of the Syrian civil war Lebanon and Jordan were already major refugee hosting countries. Lebanon and Jordan host a large number of Palestine refugees (475,075 and 2,307,011 respectively (UNRWA 2021b)). Since the NATO wars in Afghanistan and Iraq since the early 2000s, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon also host an increasing number of Afghan and Iraqi refugees. With the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey has become the country that hosts the largest refugee population in the world, while Lebanon holds the largest refugee population per capita in the world. Lebanon and Jordan have never signed the Refugee Convention (due to the Palestine refugee issue), while Turkey has signed it but limits its geographical application to Europe. Nonetheless, it should be noted that all of them are evidencing a relatively high degree of societal hospitality as compared to European states which have signed the refugee convention.

Furthermore, all the serious policy shortcomings, which will be evidenced in the following, also need to be seen in light of challenging economic contexts evolving in Turkey, Jordan, and particularly Lebanon. Turkey is a newly industrialised country whose GDP per capita in 2019 was at USD 21,312 (International Monetary Fund 2021). Thus, Turkey is economically far better placed than Jordan or Lebanon, and it also has strong state capacities to respond to a refugee emergency in which it does not necessarily need the support of UNHCR and Ankara did indeed prefer to

lead the response itself (including controlling the NGOs which are part of the response) (Anholt and Sinatti 2020). The Turkish government estimated in 2016 that it has spent about 7 billion Euros since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis (European Commission 2016). Since 2018, Turkey has entered into a currency and debt crisis with high inflation and rising unemployment. Augmented by COVID, poverty 'is estimated to have risen from 10.2 percent in 2019 to 12.2 percent in 2020' (World Bank 2021f).

Jordan is an emerging market economy with a GDP per capita of USD 4,424 in 2019. Since the onset of the war in Syria, economic growth in Jordan has significantly slowed down. In 2016, the World Bank has estimated that the Syrian refugees cost Jordan about USD2.5 billion a year (Malkawi 2016). Jordan's foreign debt has risen from 60% of its GDP in 2011 to 93.4% in 2016 (Sowell 2016). It has also been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic as its economy further contracted and unemployment has grown (among youth to 50%) (World Bank 2021e).

Lebanon is a lower-middle income economy which had a GDP per capita of USD 7,668 in 2019. Already in 2013, the World Bank assumed that the war in Syria will cost 'Lebanon \$7.5 billion in cumulative economic losses' (Evans 2013) by 2014. Since 2019, Lebanon is facing an existential crisis in the wake of currency devaluation, the breakdown of a financial Ponzi scheme that was engineered over decades by its central bank (Halabi and Boswall 2019), Covid-19 and the devastating explosion in the port of Beirut in August 2020. GDP per capita dropped to 2,802 in 2020 (no data are available for 2021 at the time of writing but the situation is extremely deteriorating).

Admission policies

At the beginning of the war in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey adopted *an open-border* attitude towards refugees from Syria. Lebanon initially adopted a non-policy towards the refugees, referring to them as displaced persons, rather than refugees, and adopting a "no camp policy". As a result, refugees from the very beginning had to stay with families or friends, pay for housing (often families share apartments to be able to pay for the prices), live in informal camps such as tent

settlements in the Beeka valley, or the Palestine refugee camps. Jordan has provided recognition of the Syrian refugees based on a 1998 Memorandum of Understanding with UNHCR in which it recognized the refugee definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention (including the principle of non-refoulment). It has set up three camps (plus two temporary camps) which host about 18% of the refugee population (Dashti and Hinnebusch 2020, 27). The effects of the refugee inflow on the local economies in both countries have been significant. For example, in border zones in Jordan rental prices tripled or quadrupled (Achilli, Yassin, and Erdogan 2017, 14), in some parts of Lebanon they rose 'by more than 200 per cent in a period of six months' (International Labour Organisation 2014, 38).

As explained before, due to its geographical limitation to the Geneva Convention, non-European beneficiaries of international protection, including Syrians, do not benefit from full refugee status in Turkey (Okay 2019, 8). Turkey initially referred to the Syrian refugees as "guest" who only enjoy temporary protection', so granting no legal rights and assuming a short stay (İçduygu and Millet 2016, 2–4). In 2013, Ankara enacted the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which introduced the temporary protection status for the Syrian refugees (Okay 2019, 8). The status was further specified in the Temporary Protection Regulation of October 2014. As İçduygu and Millet (İçduygu and Millet 2016, 4) have pointed out, this approach 'keeps Syrians under "temporary protection" and therefore hinders their ability to integrate and acquire permanent settlement in Turkey'. At first, a bigger share was provided shelter in camps; gradually camps were closed and refugees have spread across Turkey, with no comprehensive housing assistance.

With the intensification of the war in Syria, all three countries began to realize that the refugees would not be temporary, while the impact of the war and the refugee crisis on the neighbouring host countries was increasingly felt. The rise of ISIS, in particular, was also perceived as a threat in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. A new phase set on in which all countries became more restrictive to deter and thwart new arrivals, and in the case of Lebanon also to incentivize returns or departures to other destinations.

In 2013 Lebanon began to tighten border control, particularly restricting Palestine refugees from Syria, which further intensified in May 2014 when the entry of all PRS was prohibited. Also Jordan introduced restrictions in 2013, specifically against unaccompanied men without family ties, people without documentation, Palestine refugees or Iraqi refugees in Syria which led to a drop ‘from an average of 60,000 at the start of the year to just 10,000 in September’ (De Bel-Air 2016, 1). While Syrian refugees in the region fall under the UNHCR’s protection mandate, this does not apply to the PRS who – in Jordan and Lebanon (but not in Turkey) – fall under UNRWA’s mandate. As opposed to UNHCR, however, UNRWA does not have a protection mandate. Thus, there is a protection gap of Palestinians in secondary forced displacement (Erakat 2014). Basic services are denied to PRS, who are in continuous danger of deportation. They are also more vulnerable as they do not have the same labour networks and rights as Syrian refugees (in terms of employment and property ownership). These conditions and restrictive policies specifically targeting PRS are likely to have played a role in the fact that a higher percentage of PRS have attempted to cross directly to Europe already in 2013/14. In 2014, Lebanon introduced additional restrictions for all refugees from Syria. ‘Syrians now needed a visa to enter Lebanon, and it became difficult for them to obtain permission to stay in Lebanon, especially work permits’ (Andersen 2016, 16). Also, the discourse vis-a-vis the refugees changed to representing the refugees as a national economic and security burden (Rahme 2020b, 16; Fakhoury 2017). In May 2015, the government asked the UNHCR to stop registering refugees. Most of the Syrian refugees now reside “illegally” in Lebanon, which makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation, arrest and detention. From 2016 onwards, political elites also started to call for the return of Syrians and while there is no official policy frame on this, Lebanon’s security agencies and non-state actors (such as Hezbollah or the Free Patriotic Movement) are providing ‘logistics for return’ (Fakhoury 2021). Rahme reports that 27.000 refugees returned to Syria, stating that ‘their returns are motivated by the harshness of policies, deteriorating livelihood and security conditions in Lebanon, not because they believe Syria is safe’ (Rahme 2020b, 26). Indeed, the set of Lebanese policies and non-policies - increasing bureaucratic hurdles and costs which make it harder to find work and

sustain life, increasing entry barriers, and deteriorating conditions in all of Lebanon – seem to have pushed some refugees to either return or move on to another destination, such as Turkey and then Europe.

Indeed, besides the policies of Lebanon and Jordan elaborated here, also other states such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia ‘imposed harsher visa restrictions on Syrian nationals, and increasingly policed their informal border crossings. By the spring of 2015, this restriction on possible exits out of Syria left Turkey as the main route to escape’ (Crawley et al. 2016, 32). Thus, from the perspective of the Syrian refugees, the constraints on their movement increased on all fronts. In 2015 also Turkey closed down the border, but informal crossings continued (Crawley et al 2016 p. 32). Turkey cracked down on smugglers, while Syrians have been reportedly imprisoned or pushed back (Hoffmann and Samuk 2016). In 2016, Turkey introduced visa requirements for Syrians and built a 900km wall at its Syrian border. These policies also need to be seen in the context of the EU-Turkey deal (see below). Turkey also became directly involved militarily in the conflict. It has become engaged in Idlib to prevent a renewed refugee flow to Turkey, and also began to create a buffer zone to which it seeks to return Syrian migrants and where it also engages in demographic engineering (Adar 2020). Furthermore, in 2018 several provinces in Turkey have de facto stopped registering new refugees which leads to ‘unlawful deportations, coerced returns to Syria, and the denial of health care and education’ (Yassin and Khodor 2019, 24).

In conclusion, from 2014 onwards, it became much more difficult for refugees from Syria to access the hosting states in the neighbourhood which made it necessary for some of them to seek alternative destinations. This applies in particular to most vulnerable refugees such as the PRS, who have been in particular and earlier on targeted by restrictive policies, but also male refugees in general who are more likely to be represented as a security threat and more likely exposed to hostilities than female refugees.

Insecure livelihoods

In all three hosting states, Syrian refugees have access to public health and

schooling. A majority of Syrian refugees are children or youth.⁴⁶ They can attend public school,⁴⁷ but the older Syrian refugee kids become, the more likely they drop out of school. Correspondingly, child labour is rather high, particularly for boys. Early marriage for girls is another coping mechanism of refugees for which no concrete data could be found. Child labour and early marriage indicate high levels of poverty. UNHCR has estimated poverty of the Syrian refugees at 85% in Jordan (UNHCR 2018b), comparing to a poverty rate of 67% of Syrian refugees in Turkey (UNICEF 2017). In Lebanon, poverty has skyrocket, from 55% of Syrian refugees' households living under the extreme poverty line in 2019, to 89% in 2020 according to UNHCR (ReliefWeb 2020). It should be noted that access to education is one of the most important factors 'influencing the decision to travel to Europe both for those with children and those without' (Mixed Migration Center 2016, 4). Similarly, also Hagen-Zanker and Malett found that 'education and employment are the two most important factors influencing people's thinking about where to go' (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016, 35).

The humanitarian response to the crisis has been extremely gender-biased. As Lewis Turner has pointed out regarding the experience of Syrian refugee men in Jordan, whilst 'women and children are understood as objects of humanitarian care', 'men are imagined as power holders who operate in the public, political (i.e., non-humanitarian) sphere' (Turner 2019, 598). This obscures men's actual experiences, for example in terms of exploitation, while at the same time controlling women's experiences through humanitarian governance.

Most refugees work informally in all three countries which makes them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. In none of the three hosting states have refugees been able to escape this trap. In Lebanon informal work has been estimated at 92% (International Labour Organisation 2014, 29), in Jordan at 99 per cent (Stave and Hillesund 2015, 63), in Turkey at 91.6 per cent (Caro 2020, 12). Most informal work happens in low-skilled positions in sectors such as agriculture, domestic

⁴⁶ In Lebanon more than half of Syrian refugees are below the age of 18 (International Labour Organisation 2014, 13), in Jordan 45% are under 15 (Stave and Hillesund 2015, 33), in Turkey 54.2% are children and adolescents under 18 (Achilli, Yassin, and Erdogan 2017, 38).

⁴⁷ In Lebanon the enrolment rate is estimated at 60% (Rahme 2020a, 28), in Jordan at 65% (Stave and Hillesund 2015, 5), and in Turkey at 60% (Aydin-Düzgit, Keyman, and Biehl 2019, 6).

services construction, textile and clothing, wholesale/ retail trade/ repair, accommodation and food. While those with lower education found work in the informal sector often in profession in which they have worked before, those with higher education had difficulties to have their degrees accepted and thus to find work in the respective sectors (see for the case of Turkey: Caro (2020)), even informally, which has likely influenced decisions to move to Europe.

Furthermore, the sudden increase in the offer of informal work has impacted labour markets in all host countries. Jordanians have particularly been crowded out of construction and wholesale/retail trade. Unemployment has also increased for Jordanians from 14.5 to 22.1 between 2011 and 2014 (Stave and Hillesund 2015, 6), particularly for the younger (Jordanians from 19 to 35 per cent in age group of 15–24 years), lower-educated and poorer sectors of Jordanian society. In Turkey, the effect on the labour market has been multiple, but there has particularly been a displacement ‘from the informal sector due to the arrival of the refugee population’, as well as a ‘net displacement of women and the low educated away from the labour market’ (Caro 2020, 2). Employers benefit from a situation in which refugees are forced to accept lower wages and longer working hours, while employers do not pay social benefits.

While employers profit, in a context of the larger macro-economic challenges outlined above, hostilities between the refugee and host communities increase (ICG 2018), with hostilities typically hitting men harder than women.⁴⁸ In Turkey, refugees were initially welcomed by a larger share of the public, but this attitude has gradually declined (Kirisci 2021). Increasingly, the country witnesses – so far singular but growing – incidents of community hostility and even xenophobic violence against Syrian refugees (ICG 2018; Bellut 2021). As Narli et al (2019, 13) point out, in Turkish media outlets, both Syrian men and women were portrayed as criminal for prostitution, fake marriage/second wife, stealing (Syrian women) and links to terrorism or harassing women (Syrian men). Particularly exposed to

⁴⁸ Karen Rahme has pointed out for Lebanon that men generally report more fears to pass checkpoints or be arrested/detained. “Indeed, male refugees are generally demonised and criminalised in public discourses, a narrative linked to the history between Lebanon and Syria where Syrian men were perceived either as soldiers or as menial workers prone to criminality” (Rahme 2020a, 33).

discrimination are also LGBTQI refugees, both in host and refugee communities (Odlum 2019). As Kivilicim (2019, 38) has pointed out, this puts them in a particularly vulnerable situation where they need to hide their sexuality while their access to resettlement necessitates an exposure of it: thus, 'Syrian LGBTs facing violence and discrimination in Turkey consider resettlement in third countries as the only option for a decent future' (Kivilicim 2019, 38). At the same time, it should also be highlighted that the decision to leave needs to be seen in the broader complex context where discrimination interlinks with 'conflict, economic necessity, lack of services as well as prospects of opportunity in destination countries' (Odlum 2019, 89).

The COVID pandemic has further impacted precarious livelihoods, intersecting with other crises, as particularly evident in Lebanon hit by multiple crises, but also in Turkey: Karadağ and Üstübici (2021, 91) have for example spoken of the Edirne-COVID nexus (on the Edirne events see below). Refugees often live in housing situation of high density, making social distancing difficult. Furthermore, as Karadağ and Üstübici point out refugees often 'risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus in packed workplaces' (Karadağ and Üstübici 2021, 93). Access to health services has also become more difficult, particularly in the context of Lebanon where hospital services and medication became unaffordable or even unavailable (Trovato, Al-Akl, and Ali 2021, 42). Furthermore, Syrian refugee women are already 'at heightened risks of SGBV in their host communities' (Roupetz et al 2020, 10), and during the pandemic incidences of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) have reportedly also increased in Syrian refugee camps (Diab 2020, 93). Seen in the larger context of the structural violence women refugees are exposed to in host contexts, few 'exit strategies' remain for them: leaving for Europe or surviving 'under solutions suggested by cultural essentialism and local hierarchies' (Baklacioğlu 2019, 56). As the pandemic led to an economic downturn (Turkey/Jordan) or happened in an outright economic descent (Lebanon), refugees also lost access to jobs in all countries. In Lebanon in particular, the intersecting crises 'pushed almost the entire refugee population below the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB)' (Trovato, Al-Akl, and Ali 2021, 26). This has clearly impacted their economic ability to make independent mobility decisions.

From a humanitarian towards a development approach

As the refugee crisis in the region has been continuing over a sustained period of time, there has been a shift from a humanitarian towards a development approach in host states which has actively been driven by the EU as a containment strategy. Since the publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2015, the EU has principally attempted to make hosting states “resilient” (while hardening borders, the ones of hosting states included, see more detail below). To promote “resilience”, Europe has engaged in a significant amount of funding.⁴⁹ In the case of Turkey, the EU-Turkey deal was agreed in 2016 to stop irregular migration to Europe, facilitate the return of those irregular migrants who did not apply for asylum, whose asylum claims were found inadmissible or rejected to Turkey, and link such return to resettlement of Syrian refugees from Turkey in the EU, accelerate visa liberalization for Turkey, and support Turkey in its integration of refugees through the Facility for Refugees in Turkey endowed with 3 billion Euros for 2016/17 and 3 billion for 2018/19. Achilli et al have pointed out that this financial assistance ‘is likely to only cover a modest percentage of the required costs’ for Turkey (Achilli, Yassin, and Erdogan 2017, 42).

From 2015 onwards, Jordan has also gradually shifted from a humanitarian to a developmental approach. The 2015 Jordan Response Plan (JRP) for the Syria crisis ‘represented a paradigm shift’ and from 2016 onwards the JRP focused on the role of the labour market in the integration process (Seeberg 2020, 9). Under the 2016 EU-Jordan Compact, the Jordanian government committed to opening up the labour market to 200.000 Syrian refugees in exchange for more EU aid and a relaxation of EU rules of origin for Jordanian products. However, as Peter Seeberg has pointed out, ‘the Jordan-EU cooperation at the practical level represents solutions which are far from satisfactory’ (Seeberg 2020, 15).

As opposed to Jordan, Lebanon has resisted the EU’s “resilience” approach which

⁴⁹ As the Commission points out, since 2011, it has spent 24 billion Euros (European Commission 2021b). There have been five Brussels Conferences on the Future of Syria which have mainly focused on humanitarian and development aid (in the framework of UNSC Res 2254 as the political anchor).

aims at normalizing the presence of the refugees (Anholt and Sinatti 2020). The 2016 EU-Lebanon Compact does not commit the Lebanese government to open up the labour market to Syrian refugees, and ‘focuses on job creation and business development for the Lebanese’ (Anholt and Sinatti 2020, 325). In Lebanon, there has not been a larger political attempt towards the integration of refugees and policies have remained ad-hoc, which is also related to the multiple shocks the country has been going through.

Indeed, as the previous section has highlighted, the life of refugees has remained extremely vulnerable particularly in Lebanon, but also in Turkey and Jordan, despite their shift to a “development approach”, and might so act as a potential driver for secondary movements in the near future. Thus, there is a necessity for the EU to move from the idea of “containing refugees” to “responsibility-sharing” beyond financial assistance, and from “developing others” to a “multilevel partnership”.

Regarding the first, the EU-Turkey deal is more advanced in this respect compared to the compacts with Jordan and Lebanon even though also the former has tended towards “responsibility-shifting” as resettlement has insufficiently translated into practice. Responsibility sharing also implies that refugees are not instrumentalized by the EU’s partners at the expense of already fragile livelihoods of refugees. The events in Edirne during the pandemic are an example of how migrants are used between Turkey and the EU as a ‘political bargaining tool’ (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021, 14). In February 2020, Turkey announced the opening of the land border, and about 13.000 migrants arrived at the border crossing of the Turkish city of Edirne at the land border to Greece which reacted with a further militarisation of the border, creating ‘major protection gaps’ in a pandemic context (Karadağ and Üstübcü 2021, 16). Such an instrumentalisation should be prevented through clear normative commitments by all sides involved.

Regarding the second, the steering committee of the Refugee Facility includes Turkey in an advisory function, but this could be further enlarged by bringing in municipalities and civil society (Aydin-Düzgit, Keyman, and Biehl 2019), in

particular also representatives of the refugees. Furthermore, as Aydin-Düzgit et al (2019, 15) have also suggested, there needs to be more of an exchange on best practices of integration between major hosting states, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, Sweden, and Greece.

3.3.3.3 Opportunities and constraints in the trajectory towards the EU

Europe offers a particular socio-economic model that has been of interest particularly for university-educated migrants from Syria. This trend continued in the refugee flow, including because of the labour context for the educated in host countries in the region where they have difficulties in having their degrees accepted and find work in the appropriate sector. Hoffmann and Samuk found that 'it was primarily the more educated Syrians who sought to travel to Europe, due to lacking work opportunities in Turkey' (Hoffmann and Samuk 2016, 9). As De Bel-Air has pointed out, of those refugees in 2015 who came directly to Europe, the

'largest groups were students and working professionals, including teachers, lawyers, doctors, bakers, designers, hairdressers and IT specialists. Forty-three percent of the interviewees had a university level education, and another 43 percent had secondary level education. Half of them were single with no children, and 58 percent were planning to bring their family over to Europe once settled.'
(De Bel-Air 2016, 7)

Furthermore, as Cummings et al (2015, 35) claim, Syrians were relatively wealthier than other migrant groups (having greater capacity/resources) to migrate or make it to Europe.

Furthermore, the cases of the Palestine refugees from Syria also highlights a very diverse opportunity-constraint structure in terms of how existing networks and experience/knowledge about their particular status in Europe, combined with their extreme vulnerability in Syria itself, as well as in hosting states such as Lebanon and Jordan, made them more likely to directly attempt going to Europe. For the PRS, Germany and Sweden have been preferred destinations, since both countries have an 'institutional memory' (Tucker 2018, 3) of how to deal with these stateless refugees who already arrived in the wake of the Lebanese civil war or the waves of war in Iraq. Furthermore, as Dimitriadi pointed out, Syrians in

general were very well informed on best destination countries through social networks and Germany increasingly dominated the narrative of the refugees, which she finds is ‘partly a result of events in 2015, the Syrian influx and the de facto humanitarian corridor that opened through the Western Balkans and the German “Willkommen”’ (Dimitriadi 2018, 53). Germany also dominated the narrative, as alternatives were experienced as hostile (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016, 37). Refugees shared knowledge via social media groups on their experiences in Greece, Hungary and Germany for example (Al Yousouf 2021) which underlines the importance of looking into what happens in one context and how this combines with what happens in another context into patterns in decision-making in a particular opportunity-constraint structure.

In terms of diverse opportunity-constraint structures for women and men, revolution and war in Syria, as well as the experience in host states has also impacted gender roles as women often took over the role of breadwinners (Mixed Migration Center 2016, 4). Nonetheless, sons or brothers may take over for the family patriarch and make decisions about education, household responsibilities and marriage negotiations (Lokot 2018). Furthermore, women and men faced diverse threats at ‘different moments of their migration’ (Passey 2017): men were more directly exposed to the direct violence of war, as well as to hostilities in host states. Along the journey to Europe, they actually ‘face greater risk of assault, theft, physical violence, detention, kidnap and forced labour’ (Mixed Migration Center 2016, 5), but women are at higher risk of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, while this risk also applies to men who might be more reluctant to speak about it (Fleifel 2014). Furthermore, the ‘temporary separation of families’ with men moving first, and the impact of a growing network on female migration also needs to be considered (Mixed Migration Center 2016, 3). Furthermore, women are not more likely to have their asylum claim accepted. In contrast, according ‘to figures from Eurostat, 51% of female asylum applicants were rejected by EU states in 2015, compared to 49% of male applicants’ (Passey 2017).

Finally, the risks for both women and men increased significantly as Europe fortified its borders. This happened already before the so-called “refugee crisis” in

2015 which did not stop the movement of people, but lead to shift in routes, or make it more dangerous to move, and thus fed into the growth of smuggling/facilitation services. For example, in 2014, the Mare Nostrum Operation of the Italian government focused on Search and Rescue was replaced by the EU-Operation Sophia in 2015-2020 (mainly focused on cracking-down on smugglers) and Irini in 2020/21 (mainly focused on enforcing the UN-arms embargo in Libya vis-à-vis Turkey). As Libya also became more dangerous around 2014 and other MENA states closed their borders as well, Turkey might have become the only option and smuggling networks adapted fast (Crawley et al. 2016, 32). As Okayay has pointed out, ‘migrant smuggling practices adapt to restrictive measures, rather than being eradicated as a result of them’ (Okayay 2019, 7).

Smuggling networks consist of a ‘system of flexible and independent organizations that enter into partnerships with one another for short periods’ which lack centralized and hierarchical structures (Achilli 2018, 83). Refugees and migrants are often included at mid-level (Mandić and Simpson 2017, 6; see also Crawley et al. 2016). This also explains how the network could expand rather quickly in 2015. ‘In the Aegean Sea alone, it is estimated that 1 million migrants left Turkey for Greek shores, and more than 3,771 migrants, including small children, lost their lives or reported missing in such perilous journeys’ (Icduygu and Akcapar 2016, 142–43). In these dangerous journeys, the role of smugglers has been essential to save lives, but they are also costly so only a certain sector of the refugees can actually afford paying them. It should be pointed out that this also has a particular gendered dimension because ‘when women face environmentally hazardous conditions ... they are more likely to succumb to physical difficulties including drownings and exhaustion’ (Pickering and Powell 2019, 120).

In response to the “refugee crisis”, the EU began to fiercen its borders through three principal practices. Firstly, the building of various walls and/or fences proliferated on the Balkans, Greece/Turkey, and Turkey/Syria (Zaragoza-Cristiani 2017), while crack-downs on smuggling networks increased on all borders which makes the journey extremely dangerous. The harder borders became and the more states moved against smugglers, the more dangerous and fatal the journey became

as smugglers let refugees travel by themselves. 'Border crossings where smuggler repression was highest (e.g. Serbia-Hungary) accounted for deadlier risks than crossings where repression was relatively weaker (e.g. pre-border closure Syria-Jordan)' (Mandić and Simpson 2017, 8). Furthermore, the journey has become more costly for families with children or elderly than for single men (Mandic 2017, 33). This might also explain a higher share of men in the overall arrivals.

Secondly, illegal push-backs and violence against refugees now constitute a de facto border policy of Greece (Amnesty International 2021), as well as of Cyprus in the case of which they have also led to chain refoulements as Syrian refugees were first denied entry to Cyprus, pushed back to Lebanon where they have been detained, while some have then been deported back to Syria (EuroMed Rights 2021). Pallister-Wilkins et al have also highlighted how 'the pandemic and the general ban on travelling', as well as the 'highly controversial practice of "pushbacks" in the Aegean' have beyond doubt 'contributed to the considerable reduction of irregular entries to the islands' (Pallister-Wilkins et al. 2021, 26).

Thirdly, the change to the hotspot approach and the effects of the EU-Turkey deal led to the transformation of Greece from a transit to a de facto destination (Okuy 2019, 11; Dimitriadi 2016). In a fenced-in Greece, the detention of refugees in extremely inhumane conditions in refugee camps has become normality. Repeatedly, the UN General Rapporteur had to remind EU of the 'catastrophic humanitarian standards' on its own territory (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly 2019) to which, however, the EU and Greece have hardly reacted over a sustained period of time which indicates that this is a policy of choice.

Box - 3: Key factors driving and shaping migration from Syria**SYRIA**

Against this background, the main factors driving and shaping migration from Syria at a regional level and towards the EU could be summarized as:

- The effects of a highly conflictual geopolitical context in the region, authoritarian restructuring and repression in Syria, an aggressive liberalization of the Syrian economy in the 2005-2011 period
- Escalation of generalized and targeted violence both by the Assad regime and ISIS particularly between 2013-2015.
- Loss of livelihoods, infrastructure, provision of basic services, heavily informed by the large-scale destruction of the country
- Evolution of admission, reception and protection policies of host countries in the region (e.g., shift from welcoming to restrictive policies by Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan from 2014 on), with particular effects on vulnerable refugees such as PRS or male refugees)
- Insecurity of livelihoods in host countries in Syria's immediate region, exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19 pandemic and other crises (e.g., overall economic downturn, Beirut blast)
- Reinforcement of EU policies geared towards prevention, rolled out both internally (e.g., shrinking protection space, limitation of family reunification, limitation of family reunification), at the EU external border and externally (e.g., linking the functioning of hotspots in Greek islands to the EU-Turkey Statement; humanitarian and development assistance to refugee-hosting countries) particularly post-2016

4. Synthesis and concluding remarks

While being of interest to the EU already since late 1990s, irregular migration from the Middle East and Asia and through the Eastern Mediterranean Route has become a major policy concern in the last decade, in particular, following the so-called “migration crisis” of 2015-16. Building on the policy repertoire that has already been in the making since the late 1990s, the EU’s policy response to the intensification of irregular crossings mainly of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis was a reinforcement of the approach oriented at preventing spontaneous arrivals at its external borders and containing migrants, asylum seekers and refugees outside Europe. Besides hardening its own borders, externalising the management of cross-border mobility along the route and supporting the hosting of protection claimants and refugees in non-EU countries have constituted the main policy instruments. Addressing the drivers of irregular migration has become the main policy objective vis-à-vis source countries, with a view to preventing departures already in the origin contexts.

As underlined in the literature, this policy approach – and the toolbox that accompanies it – is based on a number of flawed or simplistic assumptions. Among these is the focus on addressing migration drivers in the countries of origin, based on a straightforward, linear understanding of migration journeys from the source context to the EU external border (Crawley *et al.* 2016). The same also holds true for accounts of migration as a ‘direct movement from A to B’, driven and shaped by push factors in A and the pull factors in B, which have been particularly dominant in the economic literature on migration (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016; Schapendonk 2013). Such approach attributes little importance to what happens *en route* or during the journey – or consecutive, multiple journeys – or to how changing conditions in transit or alternative destination contexts (in this case alternative to the EU) inform migration processes and patterns as well as the timing and directions of movement.

At the same time, EU policies pay increasing attention to supporting refugee-hosting countries along the major migration routes mainly through financial assistance. As the case studies showed (particularly in relation to the Syrian displacement), this policy

approach, closely linked to the objective of delegating protection responsibilities to third countries and containing refugees and asylum seekers outside of the EU, finds its expression in the channeling of humanitarian aid and development assistance to refugee-hosting countries. More recently, building resilience in these countries through a shift from a humanitarian to a developmental approach has been promoted by the EU. This approach in fact acknowledges the importance of secondary drivers: the channeling of aid and the mainstreaming of migration into these countries' development policies mainly aims to address such drivers (mainly those that are related to livelihoods) so as to limit potential secondary movement from these countries towards the EU. The prioritisation of the latter objective implies that this approach forms part of the EU's broader prevention strategy, which is geared to shifting responsibility for refugee protection to third countries, rather than sharing it – beyond financial assistance, which in most cases remains limited in the face of the challenge faced by refugee-hosting countries. The lack of quantitatively and qualitatively meaningful resettlement and humanitarian admission schemes on the side of the EU highlights the disproportionate nature of current responsibility sharing mechanisms, which becomes particularly problematic in terms of the sustainability of current policy approaches. As the case studies show, the lives of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have remained extremely vulnerable in most of these countries. Considering that economic and socio-political capacities have already been increasingly over-stretched, there is a necessity for the EU to move from the idea of “prevention through containment” to “sustainable responsibility-sharing”, and from “developing others” to a “multilevel partnership”.

Another assumption on which policies and policy categories are increasingly based relates to the distinction between “legitimate refugees” versus “economic migrants”. This has been accompanied with making a hierarchy of nationalities that fit into the “legitimate refugee” category, and a distinction between “refugee-producing” countries versus those that cannot be labelled as such. This tendency has been increasingly underpinning EU (and member state) migration and asylum policies and becoming more widespread also globally. The assumption is that what motivates

migration should be neatly categorisable into either politically or economically motivated factors, while the former is (at least in public and political discourses) increasingly equated with situations of all-out war and active conflict.

The drivers, patterns and trajectories of human mobility from the Middle East and South-Central Asia at a regional level and towards Europe via the EMR in the last decade, at which this report attempted to look at through the lens of three case studies, suggest a different account. Conflict, war, and violence, often heavily informed by foreign interventions and geopolitical rivalries, and their direct effects on physical safety are clearly present in the contexts that have shaped migration movements within and from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, in the latter two cases for more than a decade. However, it is also the indirect effects of war on physical infrastructure, livelihoods and income-generating opportunities, access to basic services (or lack thereof) that inform the decisions of many that might not be directly affected by physical violence. The indirect effects of the conflict had immediate implications for the day-to-day survival, as in all cases. And as the conflict gets protracted as in Afghanistan and Syria, or acquires a cyclical nature as in Iraq, the governance structures erode and struggle to recover, feeding into (and fed by) corruption, contested legitimacy and authority of the state, or lack rule of law, implying an almost permanent experience of insecurity for the populations in terms of livelihoods, fundamental rights, or access to education, health, justice, affecting not only the day-to-day, but also the ability to imagine and build a future. Hence, in many cases the motivations for leaving the country of origin were multi-layered and intermeshed, defying either/or categorisations of politically (and “purely conflict-driven”) versus economically motivated migration.

The cases also demonstrate that when translating into migration decisions, drivers act in different ways depending on one’s ethnic, religious, cultural belonging (e.g., as particularly accentuated in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan – especially of the Hazara, and largely relevant for the Palestinian refugees in Syria); political affiliation (e.g., targeted persecution of political opponents in all cases), gender (e.g., women in Afghanistan – especially working professionals – facing greater degree of risk due to

the empowerment and the rule of the Taliban, men in civil war situations in all countries facing greater risk in terms of forced recruitment to armed groups); socioeconomic background (e.g., those with a well-off economic standing facing a greater risk of kidnapping, ransom during the Syrian war); and place of residence (e.g., rural versus urban settings) and that these different traits often intersect. While the capability to migrate (and migrate to Europe) largely depends also on the social and economic resources at one's disposal, the "selectivity" of the effects of conflict informs *who* migrates, beyond a simple headcount of irregular arrivals. This also underlines the importance of an individual assessment of protection claims, and the flawed nature of the thinking behind linking "legitimate" claims of protection to particular nationalities and countries of origin.

In relation to women and LGBTQI/SOGI refugees, the case studies show that it is important to see their complex decision-making at different phases of their migration trajectory from an intersectional perspective. Whilst both women and LGBTQI are taking decision to leave in a context of discrimination, one needs to take into account how this discrimination intersects with the outbreak of conflict, economic rights and needs of the self/family, considerations on security on the journey, as well as (beliefs about) the opportunity structure in origin, host, transit, and destination countries. The interlinkages between these factors are complex. For example, once conflict erupts, discrimination has accelerated for both women and LGBTQI in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. At the same time, the revolution in Syria has also empowered women in their agency and their opportunity structure also changed once they became sole breadwinners of the family. Once on the migration trajectory, women and mothers are at heightened risk of SGBV in host, transit and destination contexts (i.e. also in Europe) which leaves them with virtually no exit strategy as long as the EU does not change its gender-blind asylum system. Furthermore, the case study on Iraq has also highlighted how Western-defined categories such as LGBTQI/SOGI and the necessity to perform them visibly in order to be granted asylum can be highly problematic.

While research suggests that '[v]ictims of trafficking constitute a particularly gendered group, which increasingly includes minor girls' (Boland and Tschaler 2021,

14), existing data and analyses on trafficking at the EMR and in Europe are unfortunately insufficient which makes it difficult to reach definite conclusions on the representation of women/men/boys/girls among victims of trafficking. However, as the case studies demonstrate, migrant women/girls from the three countries face greater risks and are particularly subjected to SGBV and other forms of violence and exploitation during their risky and precarious migration journeys. Yet the case studies also suggest that unequal power relations between undocumented (and hence unprotected) people moving under precarious conditions and the smugglers, authorities, bandits or militias they relate to during their journeys, subjects all - women, men, boys and girls - to experience some form of violence and exploitation at some points of their journeys.

Individual differences and social divisions also play a significant role in the choice of destinations, while far from being the main, let alone the only factor. In addition, ethnic, religious, cultural links as well as proximity with potential destinations inform the destination choices. Such links (and geopolitical considerations) also influence the welcoming attitude of host countries, which, however, has its limits particularly when displacement gets protracted and when political and economic capacities are strained, as all the cases show. Beyond the search for basic safety and employment, individual and social differences are also reflected in one's deprivation from access to, for example, educational or professional opportunities and expectations to be able to access these opportunities in certain countries (e.g., particularly women and families with children in Afghanistan or highly educated Syrians in Turkey perceiving Europe as a destination that could provide such opportunities), which play a role informing destination choices.

The fragmented nature of journeys, or in some cases several journeys, i.e., 'serial migration of consecutive movements separated by periods spent in one or more different locations' (Crawley et al. 2016, 28) characterise particularly Afghan mixed migration towards the EU in the last decade (particularly Afghans in Iran, including second generation, engaging in secondary movement). Conditions and experiences in Lebanon or Turkey, which were initially intended as destinations, also seem to have

played a considerable role in secondary movement in the case of Syrian refugees. Challenging the assumption of a direct movement from the origin country to the EU external borders, and calling for a refinement of the idea that what drives mixed migration to the EU are almost exclusively the conditions, i.e., the root causes, in countries of origin, the importance of secondary drivers “in-between” or *en route* in informing migration decisions and outcomes clearly emerges from the cases. It should be noted however, that migration from Iraq during the 2015-16 peak seems to suggest a slightly different picture, with shorter and more direct journeys briefly transiting through Turkey possibly accounting for a larger share.

Yet, this does not mean that countries like Iran and Pakistan ceased to host Afghans (as demonstrated by the sheer number of Afghan refugees and undocumented migrants these countries continues to host) or they are no longer destination countries (as the continuing arrivals in 2021 shows). Neither does it mean that most of the migrants and refugees in Turkey intend to move on to Europe. In fact, a 2018 IOM Flow Monitoring survey suggested that of the 3,173 migrants and refugees interviewed in Turkey between December 2017 and February 2018, 86 % of Syrian respondents, 68 % of Iraqi respondents, and 64 % of Afghan respondents indicated Turkey as their intended destination at the time of departure (IOM 2018). However, as suggested by the notion of secondary drivers, intentions change and decisions are re-made in light of deteriorating conditions (e.g., the effects of the 2018 economic crisis in Iran on growing movement towards Turkey or on increased returns to Afghanistan). As all the cases demonstrate, factors like legal uncertainty, persistent temporariness, irregularisation, risk of deportation, mainly shaped by – shifting – policies in these host countries have significant implications for access to formal employment, education or healthcare, reproducing insecure livelihoods and depriving people from the ability to have future prospects beyond day-to-day survival. However, these policy shifts should also take into account that these countries – most of which have already been facing mounting economic challenges – have been shouldering a disproportionate share of responsibility in the face of protracted displacement situations. With regards to EU policies, this underlines the importance of moving

towards responsibility sharing mechanisms (beyond limited financial assistance) from a containment-oriented approach, if sustainability in refugee protection in the wider region, including Europe, is to be achieved.

While the main expectations from a new destination include accessing physical safety, livelihoods, a secure legal status, and access to basic services, in particular education, the analysis demonstrates that whether one can reach the intended destination depends on the structural constraints, emerging opportunities and whether and how one can overcome the constraints and tap into the opportunities. The analysis suggests that this has been the case not only at the final crossing from Turkey to the EU and during onward movement within Europe, but also in the previous phases of the journeys. While the movement in itself can lead to generating opportunities for mobility, policy shifts seem to play a significant role in changing opportunity-constraint structures that facilitate, impede, affect the timing or change the pathways of cross-border mobility.

The opening of a transit mobility corridor in 2015 enabling movement up until preferred destinations in Europe that are perceived as meeting the abovementioned expectations presented an opportunity, contributing to shaping the timing and intensity of the movement by those considering migration or those already *en route*. The sheer intensity of the Syrian refugee movement in 2015 seems to have radically shifted the opportunity-constraint structure, contributing to opening up a pathway of mobility to and within Europe, to which Afghans, Iraqis and others considering migration have also joined.

The EU's (gender-blind) policy response that came in the form of enhanced mobility control at its borders and beyond; augmented political and financial investments in instruments geared to preventing and dissuading departures from countries of origin (most notably Afghanistan) and from host and transit countries (most notably Turkey); and intra-EU measures oriented to limiting access to and quality of protection from early 2016 onwards has contributed to elevating the constraints. While showing variation in terms of their timing, a shift from more open to restrictive

policy frameworks aiming to limit new arrivals and encourage returns of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from all three countries has been visible in all host countries in the region, narrowing down and changing available destination alternatives.

The analysis shows that the combined effects of these policy shifts might imply that some countries primarily acting as transit contexts transform into de facto destination and host contexts for some people (e.g., Turkey, Greece), while others that were initially intended destinations turn into transit contexts (e.g., Iran for Afghan migrants and refugees). Other major implications stemming from an increasingly generalised restrictive turn are enhanced risks faced by people on the move throughout their journeys, limited access to protection for those in need, and deepening social marginalisation experienced in various contexts *en route* (including in the EU), which play out in particularly gendered ways.

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III Analysis on migration drivers and trajectories along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes and the Western Africa Route (North, West, and the Horn of Africa)

Luca Barana, Colleen Elizabeth Boland, Silvia Colombo, Daniel Morente, Jacopo Resti

Executive Summary

The **Central Mediterranean Route (CMR)** identifies one of the major corridors chosen by irregular migrants directed in Europe from multiple areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, especially the Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel. The route transits through Libya or Tunisia and finally reaches European countries like Malta and Italy, after crossing the Mediterranean Sea. While usually framed as a linear trajectory, the CMR should be better understood as the result of multiple migratory flows converging at certain transit points on the Mediterranean coast of Africa. Moreover, flows occurring on the CMR unfold within complex migratory patterns at regional level.

The CMR has experienced a significant increase in irregular arrivals over the last decade: a first wave was detected in 2011. After some years of relative calm, in 2014 the number of irregular arrivals surged to record heights (170,664 detections). The arrivals declined to some extent in 2015, but then bounced back in 2016, the peak year in terms of unauthorized arrivals for Italy, with more than 181,000 irregular crossings. After 2017, a sudden and decisive decline occurred. The numbers have returned to grow in 2020.

The **Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)** refers to the journeys that migrants choose in entering Europe via travel from North Africa into Spain, either via sea or land. The number of detections on the WMR significantly increased in 2017, and doubled yet again to reach a drastic peak in 2018. While detections have decreased from 2018 until 2020, the volume has remained much greater than years 2009-2016.

More recently, the **Western African Route (WAR)** has served as an alternative to the more traditional WMR for migrants from North, West and Central Africa. This route includes a multitude of points of departure on the West Coast of Africa, while the ultimate destination is the Canary Islands, Spain. This route has experienced less volume than the WMR in 2009-2020. However, it has become more popular in recent years, displaying a substantial increase from 2018 forward: the final months of 2020 saw a significant rise in migratory flows to the Canary Islands.

Eritrea

Eritrea is primarily a country of origin and is mostly characterised by asylum-related migration. Eritreans have been the main nationality travelling through the CMR in 2009-2020 (119,128 on aggregate). Unauthorized arrivals from the country in Europe through the CMR have risen steadily since 2010 and peaked in 2015 (38,791). Since 2016, the number has declined steeply, reaching its lowest in 2019 and then rising again in 2020 (909). Data on Eritrean asylum applicants report the highest numbers between 2014-2016.

Several drivers have contributed to shaping such trends.

- Eritrea is characterized by deeply rooted and long-standing migration drivers, like the national services and restrictive visa policies, for the most part linked to the authoritarian and militarised nature of the state.
- Reception conditions in countries of transit have been generally poor over the last decade, while governments' efforts have been directed to tackle irregular migration.
- Eritrean migrants have to face protection risks related to exploitative smuggling networks in Sudan and Libya.
- EU policies and national measures countering smuggling and trafficking activities in countries of transit have seemingly been successful in contributing to reducing Eritrean arrivals since 2017.
- Structural drivers in countries of destination, such as the deeply-rooted role of

the diaspora and the high rate of recognition of asylum applications filed by Eritreans, remain significant.

Mali

Mali has suffered from growing political instability and insecurity in the last decade, with widespread consequences on internal displacement and international mobility. EU-bound irregular migration has unfolded along different corridors. The major shifts on the CMR can be identified in a first wave of arrivals in 2011; the sudden intensification of irregular crossings in 2014-2017, with a momentary reduction in 2015; and the significant drop starting in 2018. In Spain, the most significant turning points have been the momentary surge in asylum applications in 2013; their new, gradual increase since 2017; and the spike in irregular arrivals registered in 2018 on the WMR. Meanwhile, the WAR has experienced rising detections of Malians from 2018 to 2020.

Several drivers have contributed to shaping such trends.

- Together with economic and environmental factors, the conflict and instability cycle in certain regions of the country, especially the North and the Liptako-Gourma area, stands out, especially when it comes to its effects on forced displacement, but also on the activities of smuggling/mobility facilitation networks.
- Migratory corridors from Mali to key countries of transit such as Niger and Algeria proved resilient to restrictive national policies (as the Anti-Trafficking Law in Niger or enhanced border controls at the Algerian frontier).
- The conflict in Libya has had a multifaceted effect in terms of secondary drivers, at times enhancing irregular movements through the country or hindering the activities of smuggling networks.
- Border policies of the EU and Italy in the Mediterranean Sea have also potentially diverged the flow towards the WMR and WAR after 2017.

Nigeria

Nigeria is both a context of origin and a country of destination. In terms of EU-bound movements, Nigerian nationals constituted the second largest group at the CMR between 2009 and 2020. In cumulative terms, 99,056 Nigerian migrants reached Italy. Trends in arrivals have experienced some key turning points during this period: a seemingly isolated first increase in 2011; the gradual rise of 2013-2014 becoming much sharper in 2015-2016 at the peak of the ‘migration crisis’; and the sudden decline starting in 2017, confirmed in the following years. In terms of asylum applications, the trend has been similar.

Several drivers have contributed to shaping such trends.

- Conflict and instability in certain regions of the country, especially in the North-East, have played an important role, alongside other unfolding causes of internal displacement (kidnapping networks), but Nigerians’ emigration appears to be mainly driven by economic motivations, in the light of the “jobless growth” affecting the country even before the 2016 recession and looking at the potential consequences of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.
- Migratory choices and behaviours have been largely affected by shifting conditions in transit countries and the developments of smuggling/mobility facilitation activities between Nigeria and key countries such as Niger and Libya; policy evolutions at the national level (Anti-Trafficking Law in Niger) and the impact of EU border policies in the Mediterranean Sea played also a role.
- The conflict in Libya has, in different moments of the decade, enhanced irregular movements through the country; partially reduced its economic attractiveness for Nigerian workers; or hindered the activities of smuggling networks.

Tunisia

Tunisia plays an important role in migration dynamics along the CMR, especially as country of origin, but increasingly as a departure point for movements towards Italy. Two major peaks were registered over 2009-2020 in terms of irregular arrivals of Tunisians in Italy: a major upsurge in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, when almost 28,000 Tunisians left the country; a second ongoing increase which has started in the second half of 2017 and has continued in the following years with an increase to 12,985 arrivals in 2020. Since 2017, Tunisians have represented the largest cohort of arrivals. Data on asylum applications paint a similar picture: over the last decade, most Tunisian asylum-seekers in Europe filed their request in Italy.

Several drivers have contributed to shaping such trends.

- The marginalization of large sections of Tunisian society - looking in particular at some peripheral geographical areas and the youth - has had widespread effects on migratory patterns, culminating a first time during the 2011 Revolution.
- Shifting political conditions in the country in recent years have also affected migratory attitudes.
- The flow of Tunisians heading to Europe through irregular channels has been impacted by EU border policies in the Mediterranean Sea and the evolutions of the conflict in Libya, which have again made Tunisia a key departure point towards Italy.

Morocco

At the same time an origin, transit and sometimes destination country, Morocco serves as the departure point for Europe on the WMR. Among the main shifts over 2009-2020, the most significant are the increasing trend of detections of Moroccans on the WMR from 2013 to 2018; a greater number of Moroccan arrivals in Spain via the WMR starting in late 2016; a shift in volume between the WMR and CMR in 2018 significant for Morocco as a transit country; and increased detections of Moroccans on

the WAR from 2018 onwards. Germany has initially been the most requested destination by Moroccan asylum seekers in Europe. However, since 2016, the number of requests has started to decrease, while those in Spain began to grow.

Several drivers have contributed to shaping such trends.

- Migration policies adopted in Morocco, especially the 2013 National Immigration and Asylum Strategy, have profoundly shaped the context for Moroccan and Sub-Saharan migrants transiting through the country, despite – or rather because of – a gap between stated policy goals and more restrictive implementation practices.
- Other drivers more connected to Morocco’s social and economic framework have been the rise of social tensions at the local level in the Rif region and, more recently, the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods, which has produced important reflections on the WAR.
- Border policies enacted along the CMR, especially in Libya, and European actions at the EU external border in the Mediterranean Sea played a role in affecting Moroccans migratory attitudes both on the CMR and the WMR.
- National policies on asylum in Europe, especially in Germany, may have shaped the preferences of asylum-seekers about their final destination.

Conclusions and future prospects

Adopting a ‘whole-of-route’ perspective, the main takeaways drawn from the analysis of the case studies are as follows.

On the **Central Mediterranean Route**:

- Local developments and migratory social practices, also referring to the gender dimension, in countries of origin and transit do not necessarily translate into EU-bound irregular movements on the CMR, but play a key role in shaping the context within which migratory choices are adopted.
- Diverging drivers in countries of origin for the CMR in the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and West Africa cannot fully explain the similar trends of irregular

arrivals from these regions at the EU external border in the Mediterranean Sea, as these areas present stark differences in terms of political arrangements, economic trends, conflict dynamics and smuggling and/or mobility facilitation activities.

- The influence of secondary drivers in countries of transit on the mobility patterns of Eritreans, Nigerians and Malians towards Europe is a key element. Such factors range from policy developments in countries like Niger and Algeria to the influence of the various phases of the Libyan conflict on the role of the country as a suitable destination for foreign workers and on the activities of smuggling networks there.
- European policies have intervened at all levels of the route – in countries of origin (Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria and Tunisia), of transit (Mali, Niger, Tunisia and Libya) and at the EU external border in the Mediterranean Sea, deepening the collaboration of the EU on migration management with national and local authorities and contributing after 2017 to partially reduce the flow on the route. However, migratory corridors in Africa have shown a certain measure of resilience.
- Despite the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy-bound flows through the Mediterranean Sea have actually increased in 2020, mainly fuelled by Tunisians, despite the widespread recourse by national governments in countries of origin, transit and destination to containment measures.
- Future prospects of irregular flows on the CMR depend on the persisting complexity of its multi-leg trajectory and by the interplay among multiple drivers in countries of origin (for instance, prolonged insecurity and economic hardships in Mali, Nigeria and Tunisia; political repression in Eritrea), transit (policy developments and evolution of smuggling networks in Niger and Libya) and destination (EU policies in the Mediterranean Sea). The long-lasting socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration are not fully clear yet.

On the **Western Mediterranean Route** and the **Western African Route**

- Emerging and shifting regional migration patterns on the route through Morocco or West Africa to Spain may produce aggregate effects in acting concurrently across various stages and contexts of migrant journeys;
- Structural drivers at the point of origin appear increasingly global in nature, from international security and development interventions to climate effects, for instance in the case of Mali. Local factors like Mali's 2018 election or Morocco's 2016 Rif struggle have played a role as well.
- Fragmented or non-robust migration regimes (as in the case of the uneven implementation of the ECOWAS free circulation regime) affects the activities of smuggling or informal networks that exercise significant influence on the manner and direction of migratory movements.
- Morocco has become an increasingly crucial player at the regional level, especially in recent years. The country's geopolitical standing interacts with its geographical location at the crux of the WMR, which frames it as the key country of transit on the route.
- The lack of true opportunity for socioeconomic integration for migrants transiting in Morocco and the disputed implementation of its migration policies affect the migratory context in the country.
- EU and Member State policies seem to continue to largely reflect security interests that do little to protect or even dismantle migrant protections.
- Future prospects on the WMR and WAR will be mainly affected by factors as the COVID-19 pandemic and future consequences on local livelihoods; the development of current border practices; and the potential consequences of the securitized narrative, also along gendered lines, about migration.

1. Introduction⁵⁰

This report on the drivers and trajectories shaping Europe-bound irregular migration on the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and the Western African Route (WAR) has been developed in the framework of the project ITFLOWS – IT Tools and Methods for Managing Migration Flows. The aim of this project is to shed light on the likelihood of future mixed migration flows to feed into the prediction and modelling of irregular arrivals at the European Union (EU). The routes analysed in this report have gained a key role in EU's policy-making due to the sudden and significant increase in the number of irregular arrivals detected in Italy, Malta and Spain over the last decade. The report covers patterns of irregular migration along the three routes from 2009 to 2020, in order to have a comprehensive perspective on the shifting migratory trends unfolding in different locations at the European external border over this period.

The EU and its Member States have been particularly challenged by the so-called 'migration crisis'. The 'crisis' has constituted a European-wide phenomenon, developing along different routes reaching the EU from Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia. However, its impact has been asymmetric, depending on the European country of first arrival. While Italy overall has experienced an increase in irregular arrivals over the entire decade, irregular border crossings intensified particularly between 2014 and 2017. Conversely, irregular arrivals in Spain have followed a different pattern, intensifying between 2017 and 2019 on the WMR and spiking in 2020 on the WAR.

The report thus aims to develop a better understanding of how contextual conditions in the countries of origin and destination as well as along the CMR, the WMR and the WAR have interacted with individual determinants and agency to shape such shifting

⁵⁰ This section, the introduction on the Central Mediterranean Route, the case study on Nigeria, and the conclusions on the CMR have been authored by Luca Barana. The introduction to the Western Mediterranean Route and the Western African Route, the case study on Morocco and the conclusions on the WMR and the WAR have been developed by Colleen Elizabeth Boland and Daniel Morente González. The case study on Eritrea has been written by Jacopo Resti, the one on Tunisia by Silvia Colombo. The case study on Mali has been co-authored by Luca Barana, Colleen Elizabeth Boland and Daniel Morente González.

volumes and directions of EU-bound mixed migration flows in different moments in time between 2009 and 2020. It focuses on structural factors in the contexts of origin and destination, as well as along the journeys (i.e., contexts of transit), while accounting for the effects of relevant EU policies and integrating a gender perspective.

Acknowledging that the individual dimension is as essential as the structural dimension to have a more complete understanding of migration as a social process, and that the two dimensions cannot be neatly disaggregated in conceptual terms when looking into migration processes, given the scope and analytical purposes of this report, we follow the definition of *drivers* proposed by Van Hear et al. (2018) as: “the array of factors that may make up the external structural elements shaping the decision space for those considering migration”. Drivers are therefore understood as those structural/contextual factors that “shape the broader context within which aspirations and desires to migrate are formed and in which people make their migration decisions – whether to move or not” (Ibid.). As such, the study does not aim to comprehensively explain how migratory decisions and behaviours are adopted by potential migrants, but it rather deconstructs the political, social, economic, and environmental elements that contribute to shaping and influencing such choices.

Another key objective of this work is to gain a better grasp of the multi-leg and fragmented nature of migratory trajectories occurring along the three routes. This implies that most of these journeys are characterised by multiple decision-making processes (as to move or to stay put, where to move, and how to move) across several contexts and in the face of changing conditions, dynamics, policies and constraints. In some cases, periods spent in different locations are considerably lengthy and intentions regarding settlement or onward movement change compared to one’s initial plans

The insights provided by the report will be complemented at a later stage of the research by a set of interviews with migrants that have reached Italy and Spain during the period under analysis, as an extensive focus on migrants’ decision-making processes is beyond the scope and aims of this analysis and the data sources used for

this report. The interviews will seek to have a better understanding of how individuals, who have themselves completed such journeys, perceive and interact with structural factors and drivers in making decisions about where, when, and how to move. The two tasks – the report on broader drivers and the interviews - are closely linked and complement one another.

To better comprehend the factors and conditions that inform the decisions, strategies, and experiences of those migrants and asylum seekers that irregularly arrive at the EU external borders, the report proposes some in-depth case studies focusing on particular countries of origin on the CMR, the WMR and the WAR, namely Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Due to the selection of a limited set of case studies, the research does not aim to extensively cover migratory processes taking place on these routes in their entirety. However, a combination of relevant factors has guided the choice of these countries of origin to facilitate a deeper comprehension of the internal workings of EU-bound migratory corridors. In some cases, especially Eritrea and Nigeria, these are countries from which a large share of migrants and asylum seekers that have irregularly entered the EU territory in the last decade originate. On the other hand, Mali constitutes a relevant country of origin for both the CMR and the WMR, with flows departing from the country shifting between the two routes.

Most countries are also contexts of departure for mixed migration flows and shows differences in terms of structural drivers and how they operate in leading up to migration, shedding some light on the interaction between socio-economic factors and forced displacement. For instance, in some cases protracted and/or localised conflict situations or prolonged political repression act in tandem with socioeconomic challenges (e.g., Mali, Nigeria and Eritrea). In other cases, a combination of social, political, economic drivers sustains EU-bound out-migration (e.g., Morocco and Tunisia). The case studies will also look at how these drivers in countries of origin interact with social, economic and political developments in contexts of transit (e.g., Niger, Algeria, Libya and Morocco) and destination (e.g., Italy and Spain), and how factors in countries of transit can shape EU-bound secondary migratory flows independently from the drivers operating in the home countries of migrants and

asylum-seekers. Developments in countries of transit and destination (such as Niger, Libya or Italy) could be relevant for more than one origin country among those identified as case studies for this report: this is due to the above-mentioned complex geography and fragmented nature of EU-bound routes.

Policies also play a role, amongst other factors, in influencing the broader structural context in which migration decisions are made in countries of origin and transit, even if it proves challenging to establish clear causal mechanisms between one factor, i.e., policy framework and the complex process of migration that is shaped by the interaction between many factors.

The analysis of trends of irregular arrivals in Europe at the CMR, the WMR and the WAR is based on statistics provided by Frontex on detections of illegal border-crossing. Such data provide a comprehensive vision on the situation of arrivals at the external border on regular basis and help shed light on shifts in the trends unfolding over time between 2009 and 2020. However, they do not identify the actual number of persons transiting through the border, as the same person may cross several times. It should also be noted that sometimes data collected by Frontex signal a large number of migrants detected at the external border with unspecified Sub-Saharan nationality, which may cloud our understanding of migratory trends. The report thus looks also into figures communicated by Eurostat on first-time asylum applications in Italy and Spain by individuals coming from the countries identified as case studies to complement the analysis based on unauthorized border crossings detections with a sharper focus on asylum-related patterns. Whenever possible, the analysis of migratory drivers and trends has been complemented with insights from other databases and scholarship more suitable to grasp individual drivers, aspirations and needs. We pay attention to the individual dimension through incorporating secondary sources giving a voice to the decisions, preferences, experiences and accounts of people on the move to the extent possible.

The report first introduces a **general overview on the three routes** in **section 2** – CMR, WMR and WAR, highlighting the fragmented, non-linear and multi-leg nature of

migratory trajectories unfolding along their complex geographies. General trends in irregular arrivals at the EU's external borders at these routes are also discussed, together with some elements of historical background.

In **section 3**, the report proposes an in-depth **analysis of the national case studies** identified for this research on Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Each case study discusses the **migratory profile** of the country, in terms of historical background, migratory patterns beyond EU-bound movements and institutional framework on migration, and then describes the **main shifts in trends of irregular border crossings** of nationals of that country at the concluding ends of the CMR, WMR and WAR in Italy and Spain. These sections are also integrated by a breakdown of data on first-time asylum applications in Italy and Spain submitted by asylum-seekers from these countries of origin. The case studies are completed by a comprehensive **analysis of drivers** acting in each origin country and along the route. Beyond the attention to structural drivers and individual motives in contexts of origin, an enhanced focus is dedicated to secondary drivers and local developments in countries of transit like Niger, Libya or Morocco, depending on the peculiar migratory patterns developing from each origin country. Cross-cutting reflections on the gendered dimension of migratory flows and the impact of EU policies at different stages of the migratory process are also included. Each section includes also a brief **summary of key takeaways** providing an indication on which drivers should be prioritized when considering model design and development

The conclusions of the report in **section 4** take a step back from the study of peculiar developments in each case study and, by adopting a more comprehensive view on the whole routes, reflect on the main findings on drivers and patterns of EU-bound irregular migration flows, devoting particular attention to the **complex interaction of factors in countries of origin, transit and destination**. Finally, the report proposes some reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migratory trajectories over the last two years and ponders on future prospects of EU-bound migration patterns on the three routes.

2. Preliminary discussion of major routes towards Europe

2.1. Introduction to the Central Mediterranean Route

Conventionally, the **Central Mediterranean Route (CMR)** identifies one of the major corridors chosen by irregular migrants directed in Europe. Its course tracks down migrants' journeys that originate in multiple areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, especially the **Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Sahel**, mainly transit in **Libya** or **Tunisia** and finally reach European countries like Malta and, above all, **Italy**, after crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Common understandings of the route have been framed by media coverage that describe it as a "linear, uninterrupted flow of people heading toward Europe, most commonly represented by straight arrows on a map linking two distinct areas" (Crawley, *et al.* 2016). Such representations oversimplify a much more complex reality on the ground. The CMR should be better understood as the result of multiple migratory flows converging at certain transit points, namely Libya and Tunisia. As pointed out by the literature, "the pathways connecting (these) embarkation sites to Africa's hinterland amount less to a single identifiable 'route' than to a collection of trails that are subject to constant negotiation and change" (Raineri 2018).

Moreover, the CMR has not always been the key corridor of entry in Italy for irregular migrants, as its development into a 'route' is relatively recent and mainly coincides with the period under analysis in this study. Irregular immigration across the Mediterranean Sea towards Italy and Europe emerged in the 1970s as a consequence of the introduction of restrictive visa policies in several European countries. However, for at least two decades the Strait of Sicily – the sea trait between Italy and the African continent – was not the privileged way in for migrants: the main point of entry was the Channel of Otranto, a narrower sea portion dividing Italy from the Balkan peninsula. In the 1990s this was the most travelled route, until criminal organizations active on that corridor were dismantled in 2001-02 (Pastore, *et al.* 2006). That was the moment when the CMR grew in importance and the composition of flows changed, as the national groups previously using the Channel of Otranto, mainly Albanians, scarcely appeared on the new route. Migratory patterns to Italy shifted. The small isles of Lampedusa and Pantelleria, but also Sicily, became the preferred points of

entry in Italy by boat for irregular migrants coming from the Mediterranean neighbourhood and beyond. From 2003 to 2010, around 280,000 migrants have reached Italy through this passage, mainly departing from Tunisia, while Libya under the Qaddhafi regime started to use its status as a country of transit to extract concessions from Italy and the EU (Paoletti and Pastore 2010). Irregular immigration had captured the top of the political agenda in Italy by then and Italian governments pursued forms of cooperation with Libya that anticipated the current approach of externalising European borders. Cooperation between Libya and Italy culminated with the signing of a Treaty of Friendship in 2008, nominally aimed at reimbursing Libya for Italian colonial past, but then concretely translating in enhanced cooperation in the Mediterranean Sea to stem immigration to Italy.

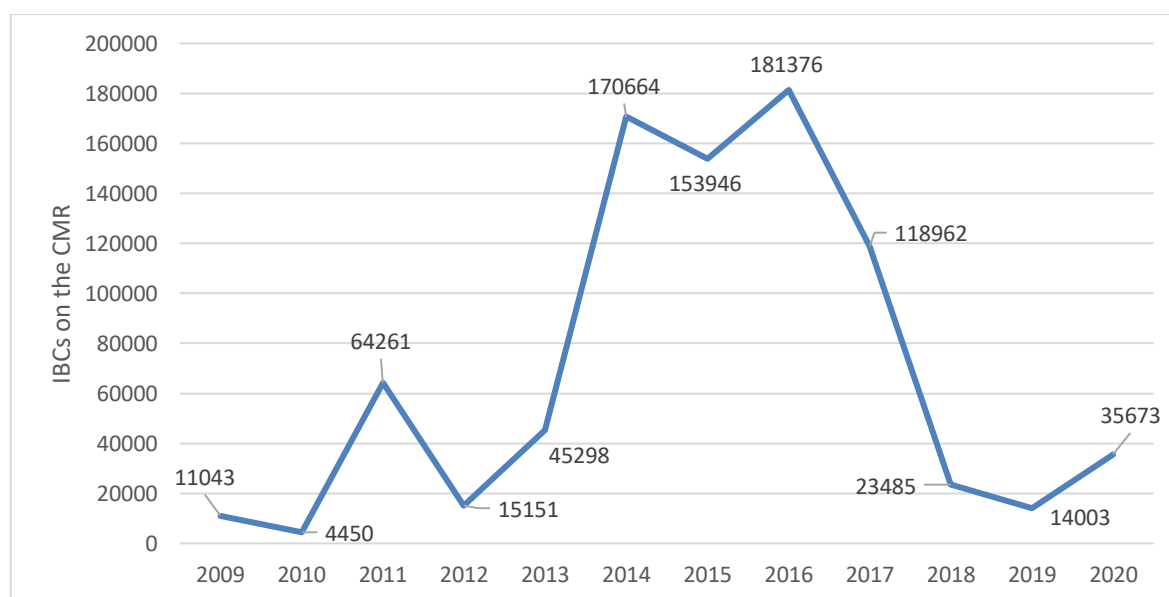
The CMR then decisively took centre-stage in European policy-making due to the sudden and significant increase in irregular arrivals over the last decade. During this period, the passage of the Mediterranean Sea has been labelled as **the “deadliest journey in the world”** (UN News 2017), underlining the deadly risks faced by migrants not only on the sea trait to Europe, but also on the previous corridors crossing the Sahara Desert, which have been denounced also by international organizations and civil society.

While at first Italy showed some resolve in tackling the humanitarian costs of the CMR, for instance by deploying the naval mission Mare Nostrum in 2013, the agenda of many European governments and institutions has then shifted even more towards the priority of stemming irregular arrivals, especially as presences along the CMR intensified over the years. **A first, significant wave of irregular border crossings was detected by Frontex in 2011**, when 64,212 migrants reached Italy, up from 11,043 in 2009 and 4,450 in 2010. After subsiding in 2012, migratory pressure on Italy started to grow again in 2013, but the key shift on the route occurred during the following year: suddenly, **in 2014 the number of irregular arrivals surged to record heights** (170,664 detections). It was the beginning of the ‘migration crisis’ for Italy.

Irregular flows clearly intensified in 2014-2017, but their trend has not been linear. After the first spike in 2014, the numbers declined to some extent in 2015, dropping to around 153,000, but then bounced back again. **2016 has been the peak year in terms of arrivals for Italy: more than 181,000 unauthorized crossings were detected.** The next year, this trend was initially reiterated: projections after the first six months of 2017 seemed to confirm that a new record level of arrivals would be reached at the end of the year.

However, a new significant shift occurred in **mid-2017**: during the summer, **the numbers of irregular migrants reaching Italy started to plummet** and the yearly figure for irregular border crossings dropped to 119,000. This declining trend has characterized the following years as well. In 2018 and 2019 the arrivals kept on decreasing, reaching their lowest level in 2019 (14,003 detections). More recently, the numbers have returned to grow in 2020 to over 30,000.

Figure 1. Total detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) on the CMR, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

The most prominent nationalities of migrants heading irregularly towards Italy through the CMR in 2009-2020 have been by far Eritreans (119,128 arrivals, 14.21% of the total) and Nigerians (99,056 arrivals, 11.82%), followed by Tunisians (64,390

arrivals, 7.68%). Although conventional wisdom has depicted the CMR as a linear trajectory from African countries of origin to destinations in Europe, large numbers of non-African migrants have also appeared on the route: for instance, Syrians have been the fourth national group on the CMR (63,651 arrivals, 7.59%). Another relevant non-African flow originates in Bangladesh. The other top 10 nationalities all come from the African continent (Somalia, Mali, Gambia, Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire).

Different national groups, even from outside Africa, have driven the flow on the CMR in different moments of the decade. For instance, the 2011 wave was mainly led by arrivals from Tunisia (43.54% of the total). Syrians were the most significant presence on the CMR in 2013 and 2014 (25.39% and 23.23% respectively). However, during the 'migration crisis' of 2014-2017, migrants from Eritrea and Nigeria have been the most significant national groups. During the following years of gradual reduction of the flow (2018-20), Tunisians returned to be the main nationality reaching Italy.

The functioning of the CMR – and of the various legs composing it – has also presented a gendered dimension: gender can have significant consequences for the migratory experience of migrants from many African countries, as migrant women report a high vulnerability to abuses in countries of origin, transit and destination (IOD PARC 2018). Such risks are also reflected in the higher travel costs faced on average by women compared to men: it has been estimated that migrant women pay 31% more than men on the same trajectory. Gender thus is understood as a “statistically significant determinant of the cost of the journey” (UNDP Africa 2019).

Available datasets from UNHCR for the timeframe of our analysis indicate that the proportion of male migrants arriving by sea in Italy along the CMR has consistently remained above 70% since 2016, when the flow was at its peak. Women's presence on the route reached the highest point in 2016, when 13% of registered migrants reaching Italy through the Mediterranean Sea were females (UNHCR 2016). Children have also been traveling along this dangerous route – 20% of the total flow in 2019, the most significant proportion over the last few years (UNHCR 2019b).

While the CMR has grown in visibility for European observers over the last decade because of these trends, it should be noted in this preliminary discussion that EU-bound movements on the trails composing the CMR are just a component of much more complex migratory patterns characterizing regions like West Africa, the Sahel or the Horn of Africa. Moreover, despite the widespread focus dedicated by politics and media to Europe as the supposed ultimate destination of African asylum-seekers and refugees, many States sitting along the CMR host a significant share of displaced people from neighbouring countries, for instance in the Sahel or in Eastern Africa.

Broadening the scope of our analysis beyond the narrow view on asylum-related emigration, many corridors of the CMR are also traditionally used for regional movements that **do not automatically translate into emigration to Europe**, but rather reiterate established regional migratory patterns, as the case studies on Nigeria and Mali in this report will show. Migratory trajectories are often fragmented in time and space, and the status of migrants can significantly change along the journey. Moreover, entrenched migratory behaviours are sometimes reinforced by institutional arrangements, such as the ECOWAS (Economic Community of African States) regime on free circulation or bilateral agreements on visa-free entry between African countries. These policy factors underline once more the complexity of labelling all migratory movements to the EU as ‘illegal’, an assumption often laying the foundation for many EU policy interventions. They also differentiate the regions of origin of the CMR from each other: the Horn of Africa presents diverging conditions in terms of border policies from ECOWAS.

The implementation of circulation arrangements and, more broadly, the consolidation of local migratory patterns also call for a more nuanced perspective on the complex relationship between migrants and smugglers. However, **recent European policies focusing on border controls and anti-smuggling operations** are often based on a politically-charged view of the role of smugglers, whose complex interaction with migrants’ individual decisions, especially in countries like Niger or Libya, is often disregarded. Actually, “migrants *do* possess agency: they collect information and make decisions” when it comes to their relations with facilitators and smugglers (Campana

2020). As shown by the analysis of drivers for each case study, the dichotomy between migrants and smugglers or facilitators is much more complex than it first appears.

Furthermore, it must also be emphasized that recent EU policy measures aiming at enhancing cooperation on migration management with countries of origin and transit along the different legs of the CMR follow a decades-long history of European engagement with the African Continent, which is rooted in the colonial past of many EU's member states. For instance, European policies on trade and EU's development cooperation have long contributed to shaping the context within which migratory decisions are adopted by potential migrants. Institutional arrangements like the Cotonou Partnership Agreement between the EU and the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States - and the agreements that predated it since the 1960s - have played a key role in influencing the structures of many African economies. The deepening relation between the EU and the African Union also ranges from economic issues to peace and security cooperation and political dialogue. The EU has also launched several peace operations in the Sahel or the Horn of Africa, regions that more recently have been framed mainly as areas of origin for EU-bound irregular migratory flows.

While it is not possible here to detail the consequences of European actions on the political, economic and social framework of several African countries, two general aspects need to be emphasized to further contextualize the analysis on migratory drivers in this report. First, the structures influencing individuals' migratory decisions have been impacted to varying degrees by the policy initiatives of European actors over the decades in multiple fields (trade, investment, development, peace and security etc.). Second, the deepening **cooperation on migration management between the EU and a number of African countries** is grafted onto an established – and often imbalanced – relationship, which provides also many policy tools currently adopted by the EU to leverage its position on migration vis-à-vis its African partners. For instance, conditionality on returns and readmission can make use of a long history of transactional negotiations adopted by the EU on trade and investment. Also, one of

the main financial instruments developed by the EU since the ‘migration crisis’, namely the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, has been funded through resources of the European Commission previously allocated in the framework of the Cotonou agreement.

All these elements – including reflections on the gendered dimension of the migratory process and the cross-cutting impact of EU policies in contexts of origin and transit - must thus be factored in when analysing the EU-bound irregular migratory trends from the countries identified as case studies for this study.

2.2. Introduction to the Western Mediterranean Route and the Western Africa Route

The **Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)** refers to the journeys that migrants choose in entering Europe via travel from **North Africa** into **Spain**, either in a sea passage via the Strait of Gibraltar from **Morocco’s** Tangier to Spain’s Tarifa, or crossing the Moroccan land border into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. The WMR inherits a history of broader mobility between North Africa and Europe related to colonial ties, geographical proximity and political, economic and social conditions; between the 1960s and 1990s, this mobility was even viewed favorably as mutually beneficial for both regions (Lahlou 2018a).

However, the WMR specifically reflects a more recent trajectory of several decades of North and Sub-Saharan African mixed migration flows, which attracted the concern of various actors linked to the region’s migration management, from local to international level. While these flows can include refugees and asylum-seekers, **migration along this route can also be economically motivated**. Factors influencing decisions to move can range from weak governance and civil unrest to climate change and environmental degradation impacting livelihoods and food security, all of which may not meet the requisites for international protection (Bolay 2021; Vecsey 2020), as well as the desire to change economic and social status or feelings of hopelessness at home.

In terms of migrants' countries of origin along this route, literature from the early 1990s primarily addressed how annually thousands of Algerian, Moroccan, Tunisian nationals entered primarily irregularly into Spain, either to remain there or continue on to another EU Member State (Idemudia and Boehnke 2021). However, as of the late 1990s, Sub-Saharan migration from West and Central Africa became prominent, surpassing North African flows to Europe. In particular, the flows from Sub-Saharan Africa increased in parallel with **stricter migration controls** on air and seaports of entry in the 1990s, as well as increasingly restrictive EU visa requirements operating paradoxically with EU labor demands (De Haas 2008a; Alioua 2014).

In recent years, from 2009 to 2020, apart from nationals from Morocco and Algeria, Sub-Saharan countries of origin that regularly rank in the top ten nationalities engaging in unauthorized border crossings on the WMR include Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Gambia (Frontex 2021). Out of these nationalities, some periodically fall out of the top ten (Cameroon in 2019 and 2020, Nigeria in 2012 and 2013, Burkina Faso from 2011-2013, and Gambia in 2013, 2014 and 2020) (Ibid.).

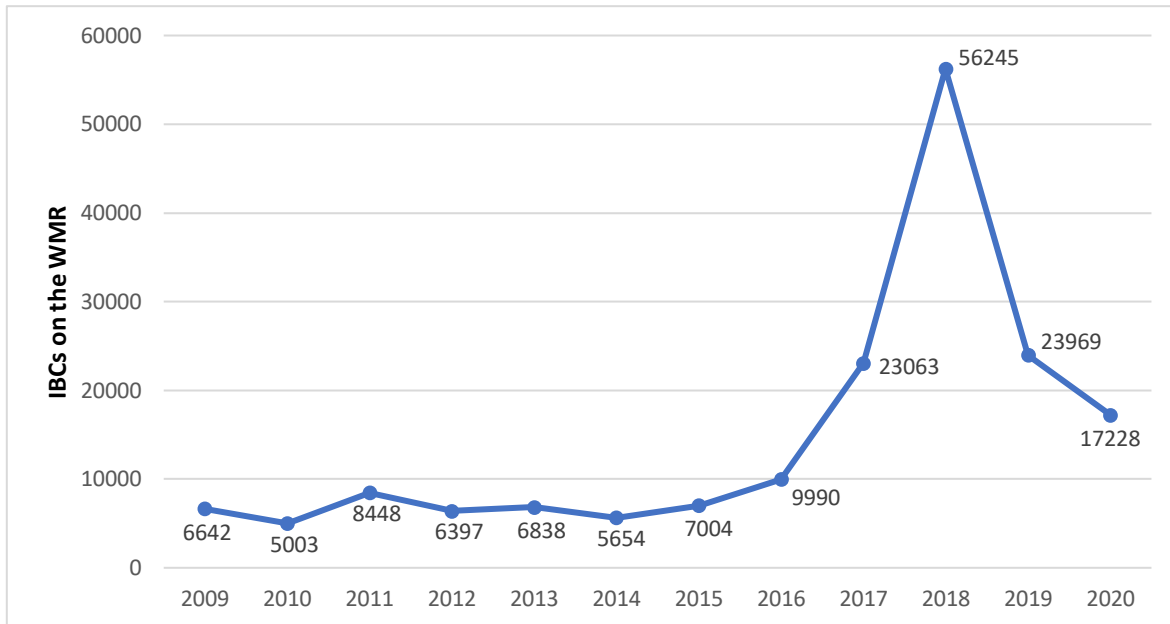
Of course, in the past few decades, the route's volume and pathways have varied in tandem with shifting migratory patterns, and it has become popular with migrants from increasingly diverse origin countries. In terms of North Africa, interregional cooperation including political disputes between Morocco and Algeria often translate to fragmented migration management. Within West Africa, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) underpins interregional cooperation and migration regulation to some extent, with most countries in the region engaging in or working on their own migration policy (Devillard, *et al.* 2015).

Spanish and EU border-control initiatives including securitization and externalization policies, as well as international political and humanitarian interventions, can affect all stages of the route. The EU and its Member States have employed militarization and deportation at land and sea borders as forms of migration control on the WMR (Topak and Vives 2018). Apart from these serving as attempts to manage irregular

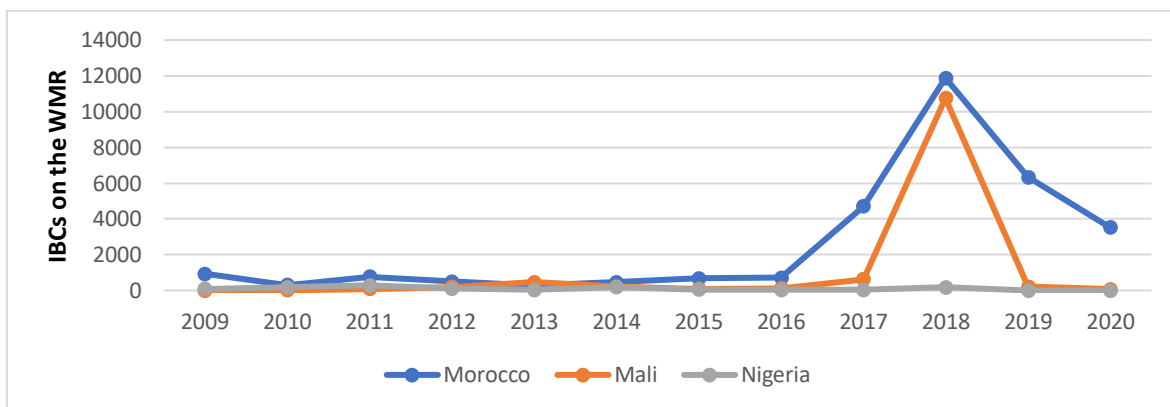
migration from Africa, in a post-9/11 context mobility can also be conflated with Islam and terrorism (Lahlou 2018a). Such **securitization discourses, often gendered**, may not only be directed at flows coming from North Africa to Europe, but can also shape North African perceptions of Sub-Saharan migration (Natter 2014).

At the same time, on the other hand, the EU has increasingly targeted the origins of the WMR in its migration policies, engaging in partnerships with Sub-Saharan countries pivotal to the route like **Mali** (currently engaged in 2020-2024 joint programming), and offering funding and resources for migration management (Andersson and Keen 2019). Simultaneously, the United Nations and other international actors, also with security and development agendas, engage in missions and programs in West Africa as well. Meanwhile, all of these measures, in addition to affecting the WMR flows, have effects on informal economies of transit migration in these countries' cities, as well as repercussions in terms of political and societal conflict (Moretti 2020).

In the 10-year time frame under study, these diverse actors have been especially attentive to the WMR and what it means for their interests, particularly with reference to a peak in flows in 2018. As demonstrated in the graph below, the number of Frontex detections on the WMR more than doubles in 2017, and doubles yet again to reach **a drastic peak in the year 2018** (Frontex 2021a). While detections decrease from 2018 until 2020, the volume remains much greater than years 2009-2016. In parallel with this overall trend, the route registers detections of nationals from the country identified as case studies for this report in similar patterns, as illustrated on the graph. The causes and implications of these trends are further examined at the country level.

Figure 2. Total detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) on the WMR, 2009-2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Figure 3. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) by sea and land on the WMR by report case studies, 2009-2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

In terms of the route itself, it can begin in Sub-Saharan origin countries before proceeding to the desert path and then reaching North Africa and the Mediterranean. The IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix particularly highlights Gao in Mali and Agadez in Niger as two transit places on the WMR (Bensaâd 2003). The paths from these two cities usually meet in Tamanrasset, Algeria, before proceeding on through other Algerian cities and entering Morocco. Meanwhile, Senegalese traditionally transit through Mauritania on their way to Morocco (Ibid.). Again, it should be qualified that routes remain in constant flux.

In considering the overall WMR trajectory, both the ultimate destination and type of migration are of note. Regarding the former, travel along the WMR does not necessarily entail a final destination in Europe. **The WMR overlaps with interregional migration characteristic of Sub-Saharan Africa**, and particularly West Africa, with movements related to negotiating limited economic opportunities, poverty, subsistence, and harsh environments, as well as aspirations, among other factors. Indeed, with regional mobility patterns motivated by informal work in seasonal mining, the socioeconomic ecosystem of the region is heavily intertwined with the business of migration (Boulay 2021). Moreover, even if travelling on to North Africa, Sub-Saharan migrants may remain in Morocco instead of proceeding on to Europe, which can serve as a destination of prolonged transit in negotiating the next steps in their journey, as they meanwhile may make a livelihood in the informal sector (Pickerill 2011; De Haas 2008b). However, research indicates that the Sub-Saharan migrants residing in Morocco compose a relatively negligible percentage of the total population, and that these migrants ultimately intend to move on to another destination country or return to their country of origin (El Ghazouani 2019; Mghari 2007).

While the desert journey is a challenge, **the sea journey** can also be dangerous. Apart from the sea passage, crossings into Ceuta and Melilla often attract political, media or humanitarian attention, particularly in Spain, as sometimes several hundred migrants have attempted to cross the six meters, barbed-wire or anti-climb mesh fences separated by a road, manned by police patrols, and including spotlights and noise and

motion sensors (Idemudia and Boehnke 2020). As of 2018, the Spanish government announced it would remove the humanitarian-condemned barbed wire in selected areas, opting for a higher fence instead, though this remains to be achieved (Europa Press 2018). Migrants also sometimes attempt a dangerous and deadly route in swimming to these enclaves.

As a final key consideration in an overview of the WMR, it is estimated that at all stages of the journey from Africa to Europe, most migrants obtain support from **smuggling organizations** or are subject to trafficking, which can be understood as kidnapping, extortion, forced labour, slavery, sexual exploitation, organ trafficking and detention (Malakooti 2020; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2021; Lahlou 2018a). While there are intermittent efforts to curb them, these practices seem to be on the rise, and are conducted by smuggling organizations from different local criminal groups, which may also collaborate with state authorities or European criminal organizations (Ventrella 2017).

More recently, **the Western African Route (WAR)** has served as an alternative to the more traditional WMR utilized by migrants from North, West and Central Africa. This route includes a multitude of points of departure on the West Coast of Africa, from **Morocco**, the **Western Sahara**, **Mauritania**, **Senegal** and sometimes **Gambia**, some of them more than 1500 km away from the ultimate destination of **Canary Islands**, Spain. The journeys can vary from one to two days if travelling from Tarfaya in southern Morocco, to 11-12 days if coming from Senegal, dependent on conditions (Monreal and Paredes 2021). Regardless, the journey is also risky and dangerous, often conducted in small fishing boats. It has also been estimated that there are incidences of remigration. The route's profile is predominantly male, although final considerations of recent trends indicate a possibly diversifying profile (Ibid).

This route first gained visibility in terms of migration management actors in 2006 with the so-called “cayuco crisis,” when an unprecedented number of 31,678 refugees and migrants, arrived aboard these small boats, named “cayucos.” Following this first development, Spain and Senegal engaged in a Bilateral Memorandum of Collaboration

addressing irregular migration, to be followed by further measures by the EU, Spain and West African states. Apart from diplomatic agreements, militarization and resource-sharing, European funding has even gone towards awareness campaigns to discourage migrants from moving, even before having left their respective countries of origin (Vammen 2021).

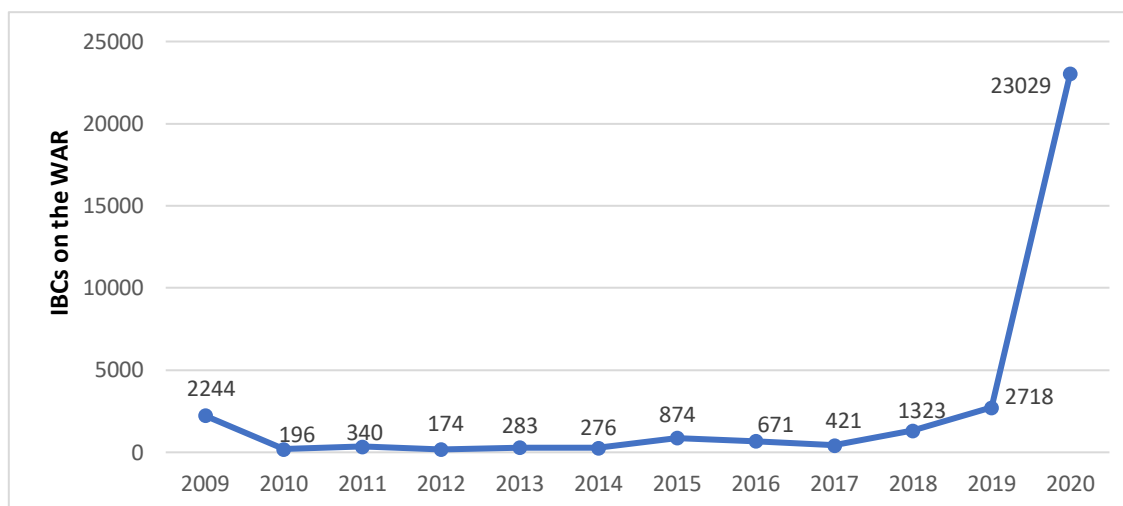
As demonstrated in Table 1, the detections of unauthorized border crossings by Malians are a part of the overall detections on the WAR. It goes without saying that this route experiences less volume than the WMR. However, it has become more popular in recent years, experiencing **a substantial increase from 2018 forward**. The top ten countries of origin of migrants tracked by Frontex as irregularly crossing the border on this route from 2009 to 2020 consistently includes Morocco, as well as Senegal with the exception of the year 2016, and Mali with the exception of 2016 and 2017. Gambia and Guinea often frequently rank in the top ten as well; Gambia falls out of the top ten rankings in the year in the years 2013 and 2019-2020, and Guinea in years 2010 and 2019. The year 2016 and 2017 are striking, in that there is no record of Malians in 2016, and in 2017 only 1, with only 1 registered IBC from Senegal in 2016 (and 64 “unknown”).

Table 1. Detections of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009-2020

Mali			
YEAR	Detections of Malian nationals WAR	Total detections WAR	As % of total detections
2009	555	2,244	24.73%
2010	1	196	0.51%
2011	2	340	0.59%
2012	5	174	2.87%
2013	54	283	19.08%
2014	24	276	8.70%
2015	14	874	1.60%
2016	0	671	0.00%
2017	1	421	0.24%
2018	11	1,323	0.83%
2019	48	2,718	1.77%
2020	290	23,029	1.26%
Total 2009-2020	1,005	32,549	3.09%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Most notably, in looking at recent trends, the final months of 2020 saw a significant and exponential rise in migratory flows to the Canary Islands, most likely due to border closures due to Covid-19. The exceptional year of the Covid-19 pandemic has also entailed further diversification of nationalities on the WAR. Of course, even those high numbers may not reflect the actual amount of those who set out on the journey in the first place.

Figure 4. Total detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) on the WAR, 2009-2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

3. Case studies

3.1. Eritrea

3.1.1. Migration Profile

Eritrea has an estimated population of 3.5 million (UNDESA 2019). Almost one third (998,000) lives in the capital Asmara. Population estimates vary significantly as Eritrea has never conducted an official government census. Eritrea is a highly fragile state and ranks 180th out of 189 countries and territories in the Human Development Index (HDI) with a score of 0.459 (UNDP 2020).

In the context of migration, Eritrea represents a special case, as it is characterised by **deeply rooted and long-standing migration drivers**. Since ancient times, the country has entertained close political, trade and cultural ties with its neighbourhood, which witnessed significant population movements across the Red Sea.⁵¹ More recent emigration phenomena, both in the region and to other continents, date back to the exile triggered by Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in 1962 and grew in the following decades. After a thirty-year old liberation struggle which led to independence in 1993, Eritrean emigration has peaked again between 1998-2000, during the border war with Ethiopia in the region of Badme. Since 2001, Eritreans have fled the **increasingly authoritarian and militarised state** of President Isais Afeworki (Clapham 2017). They are mostly young men (18-24 years), fleeing mandatory conscription, forced labour and lack of economic livelihoods. Most leave the country using smugglers' networks, to bypass strict state emigration policies and exit visa requirements. They originate from all over Eritrea, especially from conflict-prone and underdeveloped regions, such as Debub in the South and Gash Barka in the South-West. They seek refuge in neighbouring countries in the Horn and Northern Africa (Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt), but then often seek onward migration to Europe because of weak protection systems and limited prospects of integration in the country of first displacement. Countries of transit are particularly important in the context of Eritrean

⁵¹ Eritrean regional influence and people-to-people relations have been documented since the 1st century A.D., when the Red Sea was commonly known as the Eritrean sea. One of the best known ancient descriptions of regional geography, people and society from Hellenic times is the Greco-Roman manuscript *Περίπλους τῆς Ἐρυθρᾶς Θαλάσσης* (Periplus of the Erythraean Sea).

migration to Europe, as the latter mostly originates from secondary movements after Eritreans have spent years in transit countries without achieving decent living conditions.

This long exodus has produced **a large diaspora**, estimated at some 2 million people in 2019,⁵² which established strong networks with family members in Eritrea. The large majority of the diaspora (around 70%) is estimated to have settled in the Greater Horn of Africa region (i.e. Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Kenya), whereas North America has become the main destination outside the continent (10%). Eritrean households have benefitted greatly from diaspora's remittances, estimated by the International Monetary Fund at 37% of GDP at their highest between 1993 and 2003 (Amahazion 2019). The Eritrean state has managed to tax the diaspora to subsidise its national budget, by imposing a 2% levy on diaspora's income.

Eritrea is primarily a country of origin and is mostly characterised by asylum-related migration, being one of the top countries generating most refugees in the world. Eritrean refugees abroad are estimated at 522,000 (UNHCR 2021a), close to 15% of the Eritrean population. On the contrary, migration to Eritrea is negligible. The country is home to some 200 refugees, originating from Somalia and neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa. Around 60% of Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers are found in neighbouring Ethiopia (170,231) and Sudan (125,115). Over the last decade, Europe has become the third destination, with Germany hosting the largest share of Eritrean asylum seekers (55,000) (UNHCR 2021b).

Nevertheless, Eritrean migration is not only bound to neighbouring countries or Europe. **Israel** also became a popular destination for Eritrean migrants from the mid-2000s. Eritrean asylum-seekers have continued to flow into Israel until the latter sealed its border with Egypt in 2013. Very few Eritreans have been granted the refugee status and enjoy limited access to basic services and employment. Since 2014, a reverse trend has been observed which has reduced the number of Eritreans in need

⁵² Recent estimates on the size of the diaspora by the Eritrean government were published in an official report in *Tigrinya* by the Social Affairs Office of the Eritrean People's Democratic Party (EPDP). A summary in English is available [online](#).

of protection in Israel from more than 30,000 to around 21,000 in 2020 (UNHCR 2020). This has been mainly the result of detention-oriented government policies and of shrinking protection space for refugees and asylum-seekers.⁵³

A labour-related emigration pattern has long been observed with Eritrean migrant flows to **the Gulf States**, particularly to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where Eritreans are not registered as refugees and reside with a residence permit. Eritreans have migrated to the Gulf States for decades along with other nationalities from the Horn, including Ethiopians and Somalis. In the past few years, aggregate numbers of East Africans travelling through Yemen have sometimes exceeded those directed to Europe via the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), reaching a high of 138,000 in 2019 (IOM 2020). However, as far as Eritreans are concerned, this trend has significantly reversed since 2018, as thousands voluntarily returned to Eritrea and to other African countries from Saudi Arabia in the wake of new nationalist policies foreseeing unaffordable expat taxes for foreign-born workers in Saudi Arabia, as well as degrading working conditions and protection risks for Eritrean migrants (IRRI 2020). Eritrean migration movements along the Eastern corridor to the Arab Peninsula have now decreased and the few directed to Yemen often cross again back to Sudan, to continue along the CMR (IOM 2020).

Eritrean migration legislation and policies provide mainly for administrative rules and procedures regarding entry, residence, exit and issuance of stay permits. Eritrean law also prohibits human trafficking, slavery and forced labour.⁵⁴ However, provisions are scarcely enforced and generally fail to ensure protection of victims of trafficking and the prosecution of perpetrators. Internationally, Eritrea is not part to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and is yet to ratify the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

⁵³ For a brief outlook on the situation of Eritrean refugees in Israel see: <https://eritreanrefugees.org/surviving-in-israel/>

⁵⁴ Eritrean national legislation includes the Transitional Criminal Code (Article 605 and Article 565 on trafficking in women and young persons for sexual exploitation and slavery), the New Criminal Code (Articles 315-316 on trafficking), the Labour Proclamation 118/2001 and the 1992 Proclamation on Immigration.

Eritrea is part of the **AU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative**, also known as the Khartoum Process. Initiated in 2014, it seeks to tackle the challenges of human trafficking and smuggling of migration between the Horn of Africa and Europe. The initiative aims to develop cooperation between origin, transit, and destination countries to stem irregular migrant flows through technical assistance, law enforcement assistance, capacity building, information sharing and protection of migrant rights.

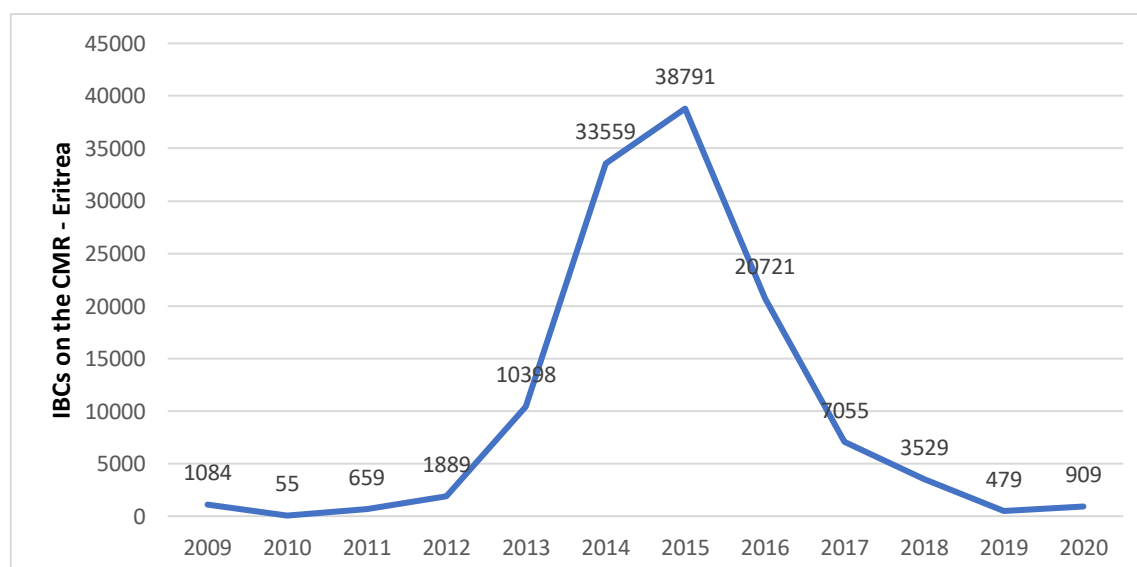
3.1.2. Recent trends in EU-bound migration: 2009-2020

According to Frontex data (Frontex 2021a), Eritreans have been one of the top national groups in terms of irregular arrivals to the EU through the CMR and other routes from 2009 to 2020 (128,293 on aggregate). Overall, Eritreans have **been the main nationality travelling through the CMR** in the same period (119,128 on aggregate), appearing among the largest nationalities almost each year. With the exception of 2019-2020 (overtaken by Sudan), Eritrea has always been the most represented nationality from the Horn of Africa along the CMR. Eritrean arrivals in Europe through the CMR have risen steadily since 2010 and peaked in 2015 (38,791). Since 2016, the number has declined steeply, reaching its lowest in 2019 (479). Figures have almost doubled in 2020 (909).

Table 2. Detections of Eritrean nationals on the CMR, 2009-2020

Eritrea			
YEAR	Detections of Eritrean nationals CMR	Total detections CMR	As % of total detections
2009	1,084	11,043	9.82%
2010	55	4,450	1.24%
2011	659	64,261	1.03%
2012	1,889	15,151	12.47%
2013	10,398	45,298	22.95%
2014	33,559	170,664	19.66%
2015	38,791	153,946	25.20%
2016	20,721	181,376	11.42%
2017	7,055	118,962	5.93%
2018	3,529	23,485	15.03%
2019	479	14,003	3.42%
2020	909	35,673	2.55%
Total 2009-2020	119,128	838,312	14.21%

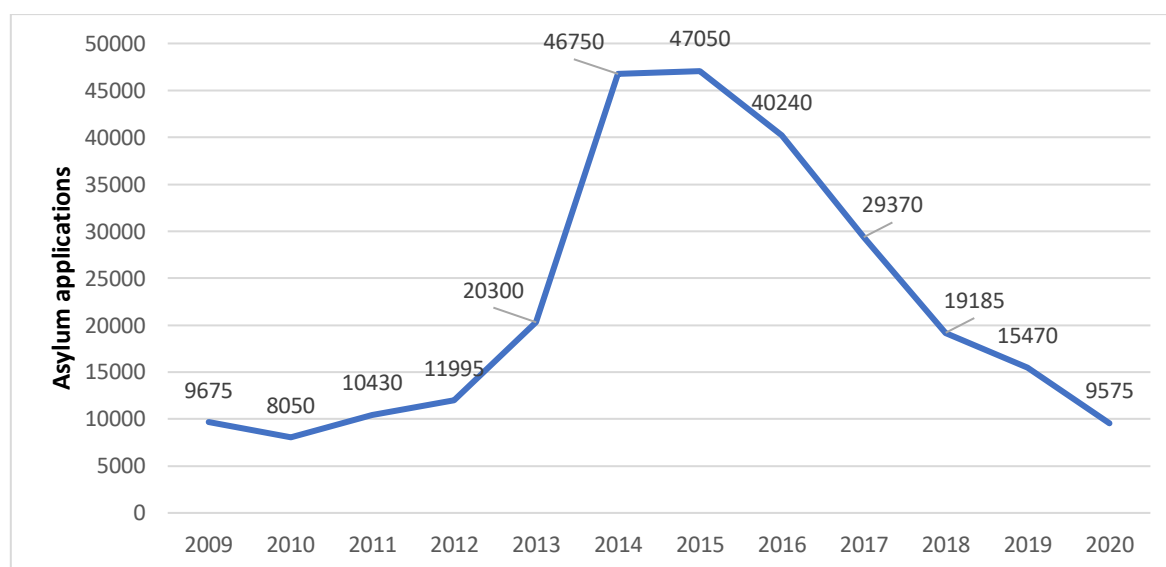
Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Figure 5. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Eritrean nationals on the CMR, 2009-2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

The abovementioned trends are reflected by Eurostat data on Eritrean asylum applicants in Europe, which report **the highest numbers between 2014-2016** (above 40,000 each year), declining significantly in the following years with the lowest score in 2020. Although Italy is the main country of arrival for Eritreans through the CMR, in the period 2011-2019, on average, less than 10% of all Eritreans asylum-seekers have submitted their asylum application in Italy. The majority applied in other EU member states, albeit not the first countries of arrival (Germany 28% and Sweden 14%). The first non-EU European country for Eritrean asylum-seekers is Switzerland, which registered more than 40,000 Eritrean asylum applications in the same period. Around 70% of asylum applications to the EU have come from Eritrean males (similar ratios apply to Italy and other member states).

Figure 6. Asylum applications of Eritrean nationals in Europe, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on "Asylum and first time asylum applicants" (Eurostat 2021)

The main route followed by Eritrean migrants to Europe has been the CMR. **The peak of Eritreans arrivals in 2014-2016** coincides with increasing overall flows along the CMR during the same period. Accounting for more than 90% of all Eritrean arrivals to the EU between 2009-2020, the CMR is by far the most popular migration route to Europe. The second (minor) route is the Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR), which

accounted for 6% of Eritrean flow to the EU in the period 2009-2020. Eritrean flows through the EMR were affected by the border closure between Israel and Egypt in 2013. As a result, travel by land has almost entirely stopped and smaller numbers arrived through the EMR by sea. All other routes remain negligible.

3.1.3. Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends

Drivers of Eritrean EU-bound migration are shaped by multiple factors in origin, transit and destination countries. While those in the country of origin and destination are mostly structural and predating 2010, factors in transit countries have been more fluid and relevant to migration routes and trends. Nonetheless, it is rather the interaction of these drivers that contributed to the shifts in trends on the CMR observed in the last decade. Major shifts in Eritrean irregular arrivals to the EU include the post 2012 increase, peaking in 2016; the sharp decrease since 2017; and a small rebound in 2020.

Before having a closer look at the drivers of recent Eritrean migration, it is worth remarking that the following analysis provides an account, albeit non-exhaustive, of the main drivers which are relevant to illustrate, specifically, recent trends in Eritrean EU-bound migration. These drivers do not necessarily apply to all Eritrean migration patterns or movements within Eritrea, the Horn of Africa region or to other non-EU destinations. This could be the case, for instance, of **drivers related to climate change**, whose effects such as draught and land degradation largely account for Eritreans' migration movements within the country or in the region, especially among pastoralist and nomad communities. Climate related effects, often mixed with socio-economic drivers, are also behind seasonal migration patterns, as is the case for seasonal crop labourers, along the borders between Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. However, these movements are mostly limited to internal or regional displacement and are often performed as adaptive strategies to climate change. Therefore, even though climate-related drivers may add or mix with other prominent structural

factors, their relevance for EU-bound Eritrean migration has still to be fully understood.

Furthermore, as for other African countries in the region, **economic hardship and lack of livelihoods** can also contribute to shaping Eritrean EU-bound migration. Nevertheless, compared to the political factors examined below, it can be argued that economic drivers are also dependent on the political and institutional setting and dynamics inherent to the Eritrean state. As elaborated in this section, it is often the indefinite duration of the national service or the regime tight political control over the economy and business environment that are ultimately responsible for the dearth of economic livelihoods. On this point, it is also important to add that, more than any other African nationality, Eritrean's mostly undisputed refugee status determination makes their decision to migrate primarily socio-politically driven, rather than based on economic considerations. This is also reflected by their long-term migration journeys aiming at settling in a third country, which contrasts other short-term and economically driven migration patterns in the region, such as from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf States. Such observations are also confirmed by surveys among Eritreans migrants' heading to Europe, which have highlighted the importance of political and institutional drivers for their migratory decision-making: in 2018, 60% of respondents from Eritrea declared that 'a lack of rights' was a driver of their decision to leave the country (IOD PARC 2018). However, other investigations suggest that economic-drivers can still influence migratory processes unfolding along the trajectories connecting the Horn of Africa to Europe and North Africa, even if to a lesser extent than migration to the Gulf (Horwood, Forin and Frouws 2018).

In light of the above, what follows is an overview of what can be arguably considered as the most influential drivers shaping Eritrean EU-bound migration over the last ten years. Two out of each category (origin, transit and destination) are examined.

Since the outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia in 1998, **Eritrea has become an increasingly militarised state**. The threat posed by Ethiopia, albeit existent, has been instrumental to President's Afeworki political tactics of rallying the ruling elite

against a common enemy and cracking down on political opponents. The state of emergency was introduced in 1998 and never lifted ever since, as it provided the ground for the infinite prolongation of the national service. The historic Peace agreement with Ethiopia signed in 2018 - which failed to involve the TPLF leaders of Tigray who rejected the deal - did not have any impact on reforming the national service and its effects were limited to a temporary reopening of borders with Ethiopia: in the following months, at least 15,000 people crossed the frontier to Ethiopia, mainly to reunite with their families or for trade (Horwood, Frouws and Forin 2019). Despite promises by Eritrean officials to bring the national service back to its origin, no changes have been implemented to date (EASO 2019b).

Since 1995, **the national service** (*Hagerawi Agelglot*) is disciplined by the National Service Proclamation, which establishes that the service must be performed by all Eritreans aged between 18 and 40 for a statutory term of 18 months. Students attending their final high school year are subject to mandatory training and service at the Sawa military and educational camp. After training, young conscripts are assigned to military or civilian service according to government's priorities and needs.

The national service, with its mandatory and indefinite conscription, is commonly acknowledged and reported (EASO 2019b) as the main structural driver of Eritrean emigration, notably affecting young males and unaccompanied minors. In some European countries, such as the Netherlands, the largest group of unaccompanied refugee minors originates from Eritrea (van Es, *et al.* 2019). The current framework for national service is the most striking feature of the state's political repression which has fuelled the outflow of Eritrean asylum-seekers in the last decade and is likely to persist as long as the regime clings on power.

At the same time, the limited social and political freedom experienced by Eritrean citizens, with particular reference to **young women's education**, has been related to shaping migratory attitudes among women in the country (Belloni 2019). As noted above, irregular arrivals recorded in Italy in 2009-2020 have been predominantly male, but the role of women in Eritrean society – and their attitudes towards

emigration – is also affected by the restrictive political regime and its main manifestations, like the national service. Not coincidentally, Eritrean women who have left the country declare the fear of indefinite conscription into national service as an important factor shaping their migratory choices (IOD PARC 2018).

Linked to the national service are the **strict state emigration policies and exit visas**. Entry/exit requirements and the exit visa regime are regulated by Proclamation 24/1992 and by Regulation 4/1992. Article 17 of the Proclamation defines the fulfilment or exemption from national service as a precondition for the issuance of exit visas. Moreover, according to the provisions set in the Regulation, regular exit is permitted only to certain population groups such as government officials, former freedom fighters and their families, men above 54 years, children below 13, and persons in need of health treatments abroad (EASO 2019b).

Eritrean emigration policies represent a strong incentive to irregular exit of young Eritreans, and have contributed to **the proliferation of smuggling services** on the border with Sudan and Ethiopia in the last decade. Small smuggling networks and local “facilitators” have become even more endemic in recent years and able to ensure undetected border crossing and onward journey to neighbouring countries and Europe, sometimes relying on colluding Eritrean officials and border guards (MGSoG 2017).

Once crossed the strictly monitored frontiers of their home country, the paths followed by Eritreans moving along the CMR usually meet the urban centres and regions of Kassala, Khartoum and Dongola in Sudan, and converge in Libya transiting through AlKufra, Bani Walid and Tripoli or Benghazi. Border controls along the way are another element to factor in when analysing the transit of migrants through these countries. For instance, the effectiveness of **border surveillance between Libya and Sudan** has varied over the years and mainly depends on the amount of financing received by the Sudanese paramilitary and militias such as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF): in times of enhanced controls at the Sudanese border, Eritrean migrants may also enter Chad before crossing into Libya.

Reception conditions in countries of transit of Eritrean asylum-seekers constitute another diriment element to better understand their migratory choices. Such conditions have been generally poor over the last decade, regardless of domestic political turmoil or regime change, and governments' efforts have been directed to tackle irregular migration rather than strengthening protection guarantees. Recent internal political developments (such as the political transitions unfolding in Ethiopia in 2018 and in Sudan in 2019) and geopolitical shifts occurring in the Horn of Africa and in other relevant countries for Eritreans' migratory paths, such as Sudan and Egypt, did not fundamentally alter the conditions of their national reception systems. Rather, as they lack durable solutions in the camps, only a limited number of Eritreans registers as refugee in neighbouring countries, in Northern Ethiopia (Shire)⁵⁵ and Eastern Sudan (Shagarab). The majority seeks onward migration to urban areas in Sudan and Libya, and ultimately to Europe (Marchand, *et al.* 2017).

Apart from Libya, which is not part to the 1951 Refugee Convention⁵⁶, all transit countries (Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt) are signatories of the main international and regional legal instruments (the 1951 Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa). However, convention protection standards have remained scarcely implemented, largely due to the absence of adequate monitoring mechanisms, capacities and political will. Only Egypt grants Eritrean asylum seekers with the right to work and move outside the refugee camps, while Ethiopia provides Eritreans with limited access to basic services and out-of-camp movement.

Even though Eritreans may spend years stranded in transit, the low priority given to their protection, as well as the existing gaps in protection standards with regard to the EU, provided a strong incentive for Eritrean migrants for onward migration to Europe (Horwood and Hooper 2016). As already mentioned, the reception conditions in the first countries of transit met by Eritrean migrants discussed so far did not change over

⁵⁵ Many Eritreans tend to move to refugee camps in Tigray region before engaging in long-term migration trajectories – at least those heading to Ethiopia and of course before the current crisis.

⁵⁶ Although Libya has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Government of National Accord allows UNHCR access to persons of concern from nine nationalities, including Eritreans.

the period under analysis, scarcely explaining the shifting trends at the concluding end of the CMR (see section 3.1.2.).

In addition to the weak protection systems in countries of transit and the lack of durable solutions even for registered refugees, Eritrean migrants have to face protection risks related to exploitative **smuggling networks in Sudan and Libya**, whose practices are increasingly associated with human trafficking. Commonly reported protection risks for Eritreans include torture, kidnapping and being sold to other smuggling networks, with girls and women vulnerable of becoming victims of human trafficking for forced labour and sex exploitation (Hovil, *et al.* 2017). A specific concern is the high incidence of Eritrean unaccompanied minors on migration routes to Europe (RMMS 2016). Limited access to legal documentation and migration pathways in transit countries (not only in Eritrea) has been a strong incentive for Eritreans to engage with smuggling networks, since they provided the only reliable way, albeit fraught with danger, to secure onward migration and arrival to Europe (UNHCR 2019a). **The lack of legal pathways** in transit countries is particularly relevant for EU-bound Eritrean irregular migration, as in most cases Eritrean asylum-seekers would be eligible for refugee status determination in Europe, as the EU's high rate of acceptance of Eritrean's asylum applications demonstrates. However, Eritrean migrants do not have access to legal pathways until their asylum application is submitted to the first EU country of (irregular) arrival.

Special consideration is recommended for **Libya**, when it comes to context-specific situations in countries of transit contributing to shape the trends in irregular arrivals unfolding in Italy in 2009-2020. The security situation in Libya has been a key element mediating Eritrean flows and arrivals along the CMR. The fall of Qaddafi and the ensuing civil war had a twofold effect. On one hand, it deteriorated safety and living conditions of Eritrean migrants in the country and accounted for route diversion through Egypt and to Israel in 2011-2013. Specifically, even if prioritising the tackling of irregular migration over protection, Egypt has sometimes offered relatively higher protection guarantees for Eritreans. This has **made Egypt a country of destination** of Eritrean asylum-seekers, besides a country of transit to Europe and Israel. Most

importantly, on the other hand, instability in Libya provided better chances for Eritreans to reach Italy, by relying on a vast array of smuggling networks. The latter used to provide Eritrean migrants with a relatively safe journey through Libya and to Italy, as they faced few restrictions or control by border authorities. Unrestricted smuggling networks in Libya have contributed to the steep increase in irregular arrivals between 2012 and 2016 through the CMR. Israel's decision to seal its border with Egypt in 2013 further consolidated this trend by diverting former migration from the EMR to the CMR.

In 2017, the decline in arrivals was accompanied by **a strengthened cooperation of the EU – and Italy - with Libyan authorities** on countering smuggling and human trafficking activities.⁵⁷ At the same time, EU support and technical cooperation on border management was swiftly extended to other countries of transit, including Egypt and Sudan. As a result, smuggling activities were curbed and reduced to fewer competitive networks. However, their exploitative practices against migrants (ransom, detention, force labour) persisted and developed as coping strategies to respond to the lack of resources, longer journeys, and increased controls en route. In Libya, for example, Eritreans appear to be among the most vulnerable groups to prolonged captivity by smugglers throughout their journey. Smuggling and trafficking networks perceive Eritrean refugees as “valuable” migrants as they are able to pay more for ransom, given their wealthy diaspora communities and likelihood of obtaining refugee status upon reaching the EU. Therefore, since prolonged captivity can be a source of income for smugglers, extortion practices of Eritrean migrants through multiple kidnappings, torture and bonded labour have become more common. (UNHCR 2019a).

EU policies and measures countering smuggling and trafficking activities in countries of transit have seemingly been successful in contributing to reducing Eritrean arrivals since 2017. This has come at the cost of **exacerbating migrants' protection risks**,

⁵⁷ Please refer to the case studies on Nigeria and Mali for further elaboration about the role played by EU policies in Libya and the contrasting effects of the various phases of the conflict on EU-bound irregular flows crossing the country.

extending the length and hardship of the journey and increasing the number of stranded migrants along the CMR. However, EU-bound migration has not completely stopped: as long as legal pathways remain limited, these developments may induce Eritrean migrants to re-route their journeys to Europe through alternative Western routes.

Despite limited arrivals in Europe in the last few years, thousands of Eritreans continue to leave the country every year. On top of long-standing structural drivers, this suggests that EU policies and interventions tackling the ‘root causes of migration’ in the country of origin have been less effective than those implemented in contexts of transit, or that they have not delivered the expected outcomes in the short-term. More often than not, the ‘root causes’ represent an ill-defined category of drivers in the country of origin which is problematic to identify and tackle in practice. Even when an alleged “root cause” of migration is effectively measured and addressed (e.g., poverty), its implications for migration are mixed and may well foster migration movements, rather than curbing them, as immediate effect in the short-term (Fratzke and Salant 2018).

In 2015, the Valletta Summit on Migration launched **the European Union Emergency Trust Fund (EUTF) for Africa**. The EUTF for Africa is worth over €5 billion, with almost 88% of the contributions coming from the EU, and around 12% from EU member states and other donors. EUTF interventions tackle the root causes of irregular migration and aim at improving migration management in the Sahel region/Lake Chad area, the Horn of Africa, and North Africa. A total of €1,8 billion finance the Horn of Africa operational window, of which €151,75 million support the implementation of ten EUTF projects in Eritrea, now suspended due to the Tigray conflict (European Commission 2021). After five years, it can be argued whether local interventions have actually improved migration management, conflict prevention, employment opportunities and community resilience.

Another issue area linking drivers of migration in countries of origin like Eritrea with contexts of destination concerns the role of the diaspora. The long record of

emigration provides Eritrean migrants with **a safe and well-established network of compatriots abroad**. The diaspora has been a structural driver of Eritrean migration since independence and continued to fuel emigration in the last decade as well, regardless of the number of arrivals on the European shores, which mostly depended on EU anti-smuggling cooperation with transit countries, as well as the cycle of stability and upheaval in Libya since 2011.

EU countries with a significant Eritrean diaspora include **Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden**. Other non-EU European countries include Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (UK). This diaspora is composed of now second and third generation Eritreans, whose relatives migrated to Europe during the second half of the last century, and of a more recent wave of asylum seekers. The former component is rooted in countries such as Italy and the UK, not least for colonial legacies, while the latter characterises countries such as Germany and Sweden, which are among the most attractive for Eritrean asylum applicants, as illustrated by their highest rate of acceptance of asylum requests. Nevertheless, in most European countries the Eritrean diaspora's status is a combination of refugees, foreign citizens and national citizens of Eritrean origin, generating a certain ambivalence towards homeland politics, ranging from patriotism to disenchantment and staunch opposition (Belloni 2018).

The Eritrean diaspora remains one of the strongest drivers of Eritrean migration in destination countries in the EU and beyond. This overseas network, one of the largest in the world considering the diaspora/country of origin population ratio, is often decisive in migrants' decisions for a twofold reason: it offers the opportunity for family reunifications and concrete prospects of integration in the host country; it provides **reliable contacts, financial resources** (that can be exploited by criminal networks to extract ransom) **and information** ahead and during the migration journey.

A second driver of Eritrean EU-bound migration is **the high acceptance rate of first-time Eritrean asylum applicants in the EU**. Acceptance rates over the last decade

have been above 80% on average, the highest rate for any African country and the third highest overall after Syria and Venezuela (Eurostat 2021). EU member states have usually granted Eritrean asylum seekers the refugee status, or at least some degree of protection, on the basis of the multiple human rights violations suffered in their home country. These include political repression, mandatory conscription, discrimination, exploitation and forced labour. The human rights principle of non-refoulment guarantees that no Eritrean is returned to a country if she or he would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. In sum, besides being aware of the higher standards offered by the EU protection system, Eritreans have good reasons to assume that gaining access to it is highly likely for them.

Only in some cases acceptance rates decreased significantly since 2017, as a consequence of EU member states' more restrictive asylum policies. **Italy** for instance **reduced the acceptance rate of Eritrean applications to around 50% in 2018**, down from 80-90% high in 2014/15 (Eurostat 2021). However, rates in Eritrean top destinations for asylum, such as Germany, the UK (then an EU member) and Sweden, remained high. This also explains why lower rates in Italy did not affect Eritrean inflows to the EU, given its transit role for Eritreans' movements to northern European destinations in 2014-2016. Most importantly, the general decrease in the number of asylum applications is strictly correlated to the drop of Eritrean arrivals to the EU, as applications are submitted in the country of destination rather than in the country of transit. Moreover, even when the number of asylum applications had been higher in Italy, Eritreans were filing their request in the country to relocate in Northern Europe, as provided by the EU Relocation Scheme launched in 2015.

Higher figures for asylum applications than for irregular arrivals are a general trend which applies beyond Eritrean nationals, and is usually explained by the existence of multiple asylum applications submitted by third country nationals (typically the case for Eritreans), the use of fraudulent documents, travel to the EU/SAC area by air (IBCs include only arrivals by land and sea) and the presence of nationals of visa exempt countries among asylum applicants (Frontex 2021b).

In conclusion, the analysis of Eritrean migration drivers suggests that those characterizing Eritrea and EU countries of destination are likely to persist, as they are generally structural and long-standing. Drivers in the country of origin, such as mandatory conscription and strict emigration policies, are embedded in the political and institutional setting and will probably fuel migration flows along the CMR as long as the current regime survives. Likewise, drivers in EU countries, notably the diaspora and the high acceptance rate of Eritrean asylum applications, are unlikely to lose their attractive force in the foreseeable future and could be probably strengthened if the political and security situation in Eritrea deteriorates. Eritrea's stability is also highly dependent on the upheavals of a volatile neighbourhood, which witnesses Sudan's fragile political transition and Ethiopia's ethnic turmoil in bordering Tigray and other regions. **Growing instability and conflict** in the region is likely to exacerbate the abovementioned drivers in the country of origin, and lead to forced displacement to neighbouring countries and beyond.

In this context, drivers of Eritrean migration in countries of transit deserve greater attention, as they tend to be less monolithic, providing **more leverage to national policies** and EU migration cooperation initiatives. Moreover, countries of transit are particularly important in the context of Eritrean migration to Europe, as the latter originates from secondary movement from countries of first displacement, where Eritreans can spend years without achieving decent living conditions.

EU cooperation with countries of transit has attempted to **improve the rule of law along migration routes**. The decline in arrivals in the last five years is mainly the result of EU migration policies tackling irregular migration and enhanced border cooperation with transit countries such as Libya and Sudan. These initiatives, at times debated with respect to migrant rights, aim at countering smuggling and human trafficking networks in multiple ways, such as building capacities of local authorities and sharing information on migration flows among origin, transit and destination countries. Other factors identified as contributing to the decline in irregular arrivals of Eritreans to Europe after the peak reached in 2015 have been increased interception, detention and deportation by Sudanese forces and a tougher stance against migratory

flows transiting through Egypt (IOD PARC 2018): both elements underline once more the key role played by policy developments in countries of transit. Interestingly, it has also been argued that this recent trend could be also related to the increasing number of Eritreans settling in key transit cities rather than continuing to the European border (Frouws 2016).

Nevertheless, while the issue of effective border management remains a priority, the lack of protection systems in countries of transit has not been sufficiently addressed. As shown, the poor reception conditions and limited protection guarantees provided to Eritrean asylum-seekers, as well as the lack of legal pathways which lead migrants to engage with smuggling networks, represent a strong incentive for onward migration to Europe.

Against this background, drivers contributing to shaping EU-bound irregular migration from Eritrea that could be prioritized are:

- The political, social and economic effects of the Eritrean state's authoritarian regime (conscription service and restrictive exit policies);
- The evolution of reception and asylum systems in key countries of transit like Sudan;
- The enhanced role of smuggling networks and potential evolutions of border policies in countries of transit;
- The contribution of the diaspora in providing information and resources;
- The impact of EU policies on border management and rule of law along the route and in the Mediterranean Sea;
- The dynamic of the high recognition rate for asylum applications filed in Europe by Eritrean citizens.

3.2. Mali

3.2.1. Migration profile

Mali, a landlocked country in the Sahel, is a **low-income economy**, vulnerable to widespread poverty and food insecurity: the extreme poverty rate stood at 42.3% in 2018 (World Bank Mali Overview). The country displays a rapid demographic growth (5.88 children per woman in 2018) and an extremely young population: 47% of Malian citizens are under 15 and 53% are under 18 (EASO 2018). The rate of gross primary school enrolment stands at 77.1% (KCMD 2019), highlighting the need for further investment in access to basic services. Mali is usually conceived as divided between the North, scarcely populated and poorer, and the South, where the main cultivated areas are concentrated. Since colonial times, the southern region has been considered the area where economic dynamism has taken place, fuelling feelings of abandonment and unrest in the North. However, this imbalance appears to be less pronounced than conventional wisdom suggests, especially when the informal and extra-legal economic sector is accounted for. The urban-rural divide is another important cleavage in the Malian social fabric.

Mali has suffered from **growing political instability and deepening insecurity** in the last decade, with widespread consequences on internal displacement and international mobility. The country has faced an armed rebellion in the North in 2012, followed by a peace agreement in 2015, and the combined threats of insurgency, clashes with armed forces and attacks on civilians in various regions (especially at the border with Niger and Burkina Faso) in the following years.

Malians share **an established history of mobility and migration**, dating back to pre-colonial times, which has been described as a response to cyclical downswings and food insecurity (Findley 2004). The political economy of French West Africa contributed to enhancing migration pressures in order to respond to labour shortages for extensive agriculture in neighbouring areas. While emigration towards France began to grow after World War II, the country has traditionally experienced a high degree of population mobility, both internally and across its borders. The main

internal dynamic concerns population movements towards major urban areas, in particular the capital Bamako. Mali has also been involved in relevant patterns of circular migration at regional level, as Malian labourers have sought agricultural employment on a seasonal basis in neighbouring countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, but also Senegal and Gambia. Pastoralists populations have been engaged in circular movements from the North to the South of the country and in neighbouring States. The number of individuals involved was estimated at approximately 500,000 in 2013 (IOM 2013). Both internal and interregional movements also reflect labour opportunities at key artisanal mining sites within Mali, as well as the influences of climate change and environmental degradation on livelihoods and food security (Bolay 2021; Hegazi, *et al.* 2021; IOM 2021; Van der Land and Hummel 2013). In the past decades, Mali has also **hosted different waves of refugees** from other countries in the region, notably Mauritania, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. Regulations approved in 1998 equate the access of refugees to health, education and labour markets to that of nationals (IOM 2018). At the same time, Mali state authorities have been criticized for a lack of migration regulation and enforcement or laissez-faire approach, as well as for their absence in development efforts, with civil society stepping in to fill these gaps (Trauner and Deimel 2013; Hegazi, *et al.* 2021).

Official figures in 2001 counted **more than 920,000 Malian citizens living abroad** (8.4% of the Malian resident population), with the large majority (80.6%) in African countries, in particular 56.6% in Côte d'Ivoire. (Di Bartolomeo, *et al.* 2010). Outside the region, long term emigration flows have mainly targeted **France**, which in 2001 hosted 94.3% of Malian residents in Europe. (Di Bartolomeo, *et al.* 2010). During the 1990s emigration outside Africa has diversified and **the United States** emerged as another preferred destination, alongside France (Findley 2004). Mali signed various cooperation agreements on circulation, stay and co-development with France (1994, 1998 and 2000) and on immigration with Spain (2007).

At the same time, **the importance of Mali as a transit country has increased** in the 2000s, both for trans-Saharan and Europe-bound mixed migration flows. As a consequence, Mali has gained a significant position in European policy-making not

only as a migration-sending country, but also as a transit country for migrants departing from other Sub-Saharan States. The city of Gao has become a relevant departure point (IOM 2013). Transit through Mali is facilitated by its membership in ECOWAS (Economic Community of Western African States) and by the provisions of **the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, the Right of Residence and Establishment**, which entails visa free entry for ECOWAS citizens throughout the region. Furthermore, Malians have been exempted from visa requirements in several countries in the Maghreb, such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Mauritania (Di Bartolomeo, *et al.* 2010). Thus, in most cases migration flows crossing Mali are not considered irregular, but they become so further down the route towards Europe or other destinations.

Moreover, due to a readmission agreement established between Spain and Mauritania since 2003, deportees from Canary Islands are often expelled to the African country, where they are then returned to the borders of Senegal or Mali without any assistance (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021). In fact, with respect to all routes (including both WMR and CMR), due to increasing criminalization in Northern and Western Africa, alongside **inter-African deportations** and refoulements laid out by several states (including Libya and Algeria), returnees often end up in Mali, which accepts returns of non-Malians as well (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Trauner and Diemel 2013).

The increasing relevance of Mali as a transit country has deepened the challenge posed by human smuggling, usually linked to illegal trade and activities of cross-border criminal networks. Human trafficking of Malians and migrants of other nationalities has also been worsening. While internal exploitation of Malian victims is a key matter of concern, international migrants crossing the country are also highly vulnerable to sex and labour exploitation, especially Nigerians. Malian women are vulnerable to sex trafficking in Western Africa, but also in Tunisia and Libya, and to domestic servitude in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia (US Department of State 2020).

To respond to these growing concerns, Mali has adopted an **Anti-Trafficking Law in 2012**, while a National Migration Policy has been approved in 2014, with the goal of aligning migration management to international standards and enhancing the benefits of migration-development nexus (IOM 2018). The new policy also reinstates the importance of enforcing the free circulation provisions of ECOWAS.

3.2.2 Recent Trends in EU-bound migration: 2009-2020

Due to the peculiar migratory profile of Mali, EU-bound irregular migration has unfolded along different corridors over the last decade. In particular, during the so-called “migration crisis” of 2014-17 Malians mainly moved along the various trails composing the CMR, while in 2018-20 their presence grew in the routes heading to Spain. The following two sections highlight major patterns of mobility and migration of Malians along these passages.

3.2.2.1. Recent trends on the CMR

Malians constitute **the 6th national group among irregular arrivals on the CMR** in 2009-2020 (38,663 arrivals, 4.61% of total detections), which contributes to explaining the relevance that the country has gained in European (and Italian) policy-making. Anyway, there is a deep gap between the number of arrivals from Mali and those from other key countries of origin in Sub-Saharan Africa in the same period, such as Eritrea (119,128 detections, 14.21%) and Nigeria (99,056 detections, 11.82%).

At a first sight, the number of irregular arrivals from Mali followed the general trend of the route, with **the peak year being 2016** (10,008 Malians detected, 5.52% of total arrivals). The 2014-2017 ‘crisis’ has clearly been the time during which arrivals from Mali have intensified. Looking at the national groups reaching Italy, Malians appeared among the top-10 nationalities in seven years during the 2009-2020 timeframe, but never in an apical position. Only in 2014 Mali was the 4th country of origin in terms of

arrivals, while Malians reached the highest share on the total number of arrivals in 2017 (5.98%).

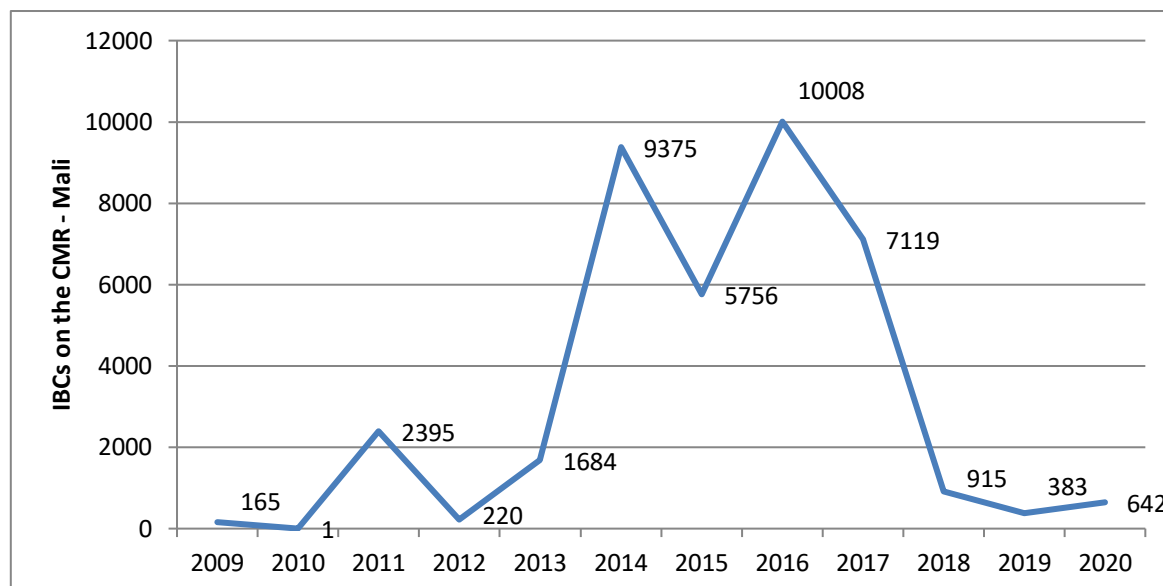
The trend in irregular arrivals in 2009-2020 has not been linear though. From a relatively low base (and a first wave of almost 2.400 detections in 2011), the numbers of Malians increased dramatically in 2014, then dropped significantly the next year, and climbed again to their peak in 2016. After 2017, arrivals from Mali declined again to a few hundreds. The share of Malians on the total number of arrivals on the CMR dropped as well (from 5.98% in 2017 to 1.8% in 2020).

Table 3. Detections of Malian nationals on the CMR on the CMR, 2009-2020

Mali			
YEAR	Detections of Malian nationals CMR	Total detections CMR	As % of total detections
2009	165	11,043	1.49%
2010	1	4,450	0.02%
2011	2,395	64,261	3.73%
2012	220	15,151	1.45%
2013	1,684	45,298	3.72%
2014	9,375	170,664	5.49%
2015	5,756	153,946	3.74%
2016	10,008	181,376	5.52%
2017	7,119	118,962	5.98%
2018	915	23,485	3.90%
2019	383	14,003	2.74%
2020	642	35,673	1.80%
Total	38,663	838,312	4.61%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Figure 7. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the CMR, 2009-2020

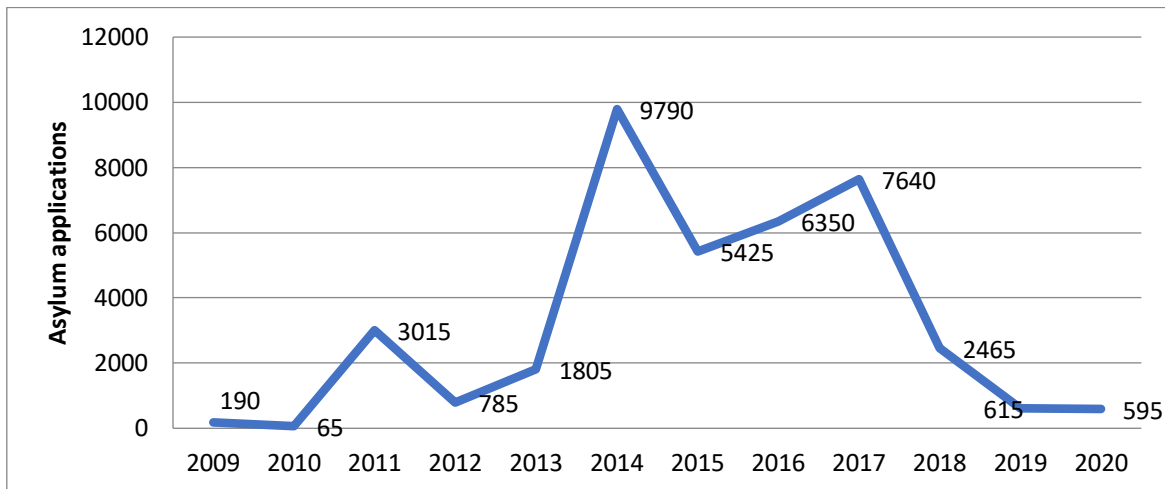


Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Although the figures on the CMR indicate that Malians have not always constituted a pivotal priority for Italian authorities in terms of yearly irregular arrivals, asylum applications show a different picture. During the last decade, **Italy received 49% of all asylum applications filed by Malians in EU-27** and it has been the top European destination for Malian asylum seekers (38,740 requests in 2009-2020) along with France, the traditional destination country in Europe (23,420 requests). Another key fact drawn from the figures on asylum applications concerns the male/female ratio: flows of asylum seekers in Italy have been predominantly male. For each year that we have analysed, the male percentage of asylum seekers has been well above the 90% threshold. On average, women have counted for just 2.44% of asylum applications in Italy. Nonetheless, a slight shift might be occurring, as an increasing female presence among asylum seekers have emerged in 2019 and 2020, when their share (7.32% and 6.72% respectively) has risen to its highest point of the last decade.

While the stock of asylum seekers at the end of the decade clearly points to Italy as the top destination in Europe, yearly flows of applications followed the pattern described earlier for irregular arrivals: after a first wave in 2011 (3,015 requests), the flow of asylum requests peaked in 2014 (9,790) and then remained at high level (more than 5,000 requests per year) until 2017. A significant decrease followed, especially in 2019-2020.

Figure 8. Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Italy, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on "Asylum and first time asylum applicants" (Eurostat 2021)

3.2.2.2. Recent trends on the WMR and WAR

While flows are not as significant on the WMR as the CMR, **Malians are among the top five nationalities in IBCs along the WMR land routes** in the 10-year period under study for all years except 2015 to 2017, and rank in the top five nationalities in combined WMR sea and land routes from 2018-2020 (Frontex 2021). Moreover, as noted earlier, Spanish or inter-regional involuntary returns often end up in Mali, making it another pivotal country on the WMR (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman, 2021).

Table 4. Detections of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009-2020

Mali			
YEAR	Detections of Malian nationals WAR	Total detections WAR	As % of total detections
2009	555	2,244	24.73%
2010	1	196	0.51%
2011	2	340	0.59%
2012	5	174	2.87%
2013	54	283	19.08%
2014	24	276	8.70%
2015	14	874	1.60%
2016	0	671	0.00%
2017	1	421	0.24%
2018	11	1,323	0.83%
2019	48	2,718	1.77%
2020	290	23,029	1.26%
Total 2009-2020	1,005	32,549	3.09%

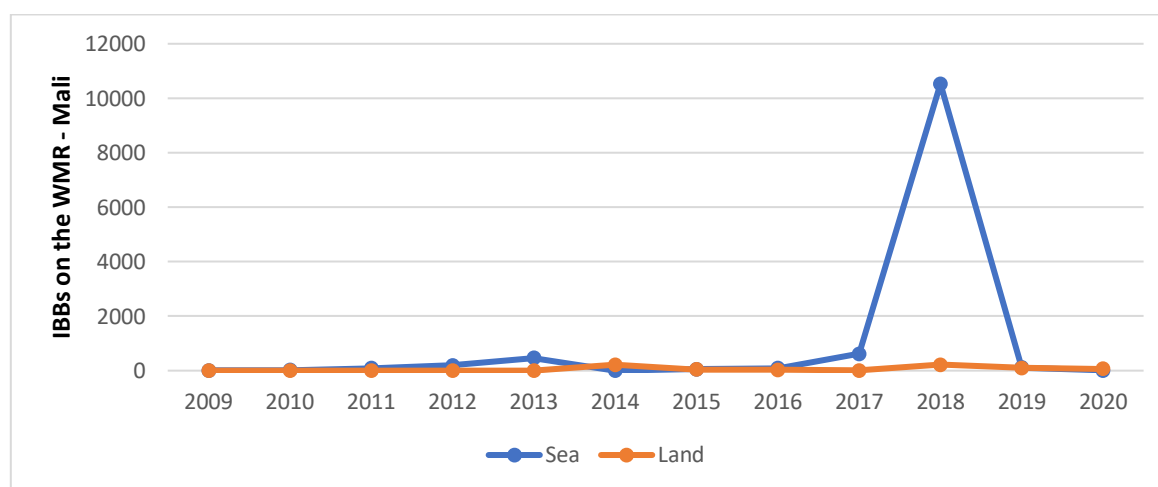
Table 5. Detections of Malian nationals on the WMR, 2009-2020

Mali			
YEAR	Detections of Malian nationals WMR Sea&Land	Total detections WMR Sea&Land	As % of total detections
2009	3	6,642	0.05%
2010	20	5,003	0.40%
2011	87	8,448	1.03%
2012	194	6,397	3.03%
2013	467	6,838	6.83%
2014	219	5,654	3.87%
2015	97	7,004	1.38%
2016	125	9,990	1.25%
2017	624	23,063	2.71%
2018	10,747	56,245	19.11%
2019	216	23,969	0.90%
2020	66	17,228	0.38%
Total 2009-2020	12,865	176,481	7.29%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

In light of its return to the top nationalities on WMR land routes in 2018, as well as how Mali emerges in the top five nationalities in sea routes, and given the spike in 2018 IBC detections of Malians indicated in the graph below, 2018 seems to mark a significant year. **Malians make up 19% of total sea and land detections** on the WMR that year. Specifically, in 2018, Malian nationals rank third behind those from Morocco and Guinea in sea crossings, and also third behind those from Guinea and Burkina Faso in land crossings. In zooming in to the monthly data, IBC detections of Malians rise significantly starting from the month of May until October where they reach 1841 in the latter month, and begin to taper down in November and December. By contrast, while in December 2018 there were 993 detections, January 2019 only registers 9. Meanwhile, October 2018 registers the most land detections.

Figure 9. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the WMR, 2009-2020

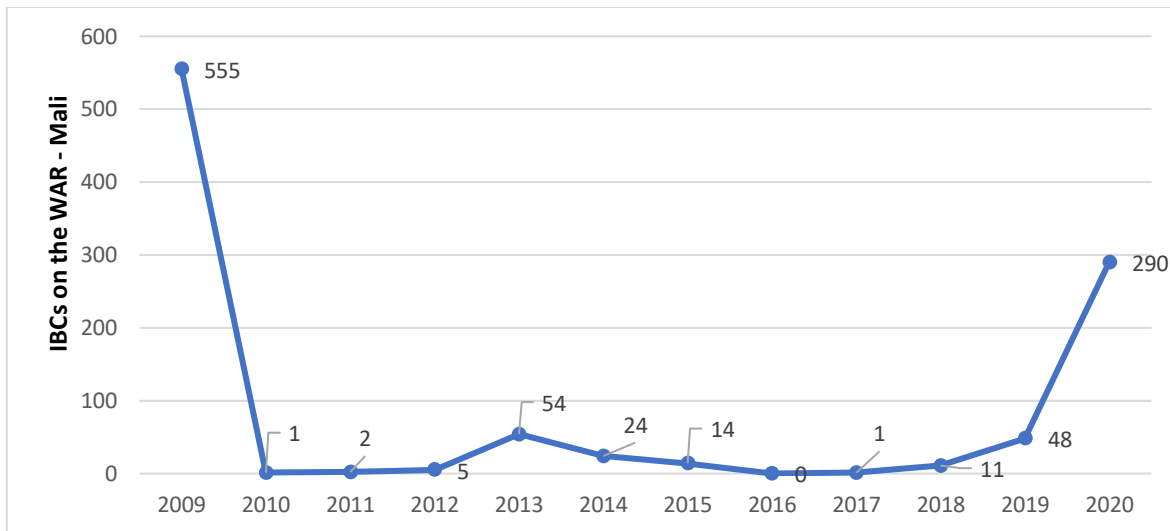


Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

The increased numbers of Malians on the WMR in 2018, and later on to the WAR throughout 2019 and 2020, as illustrated in the figure below, seems to suggest a diversion of the flow from the CMR. In terms of the WAR, three trends emerge over the selected time frame. As the figure displays, the most significant year for monthly detections of Malians on the WAR was in 2009 (with over 500 detections), with

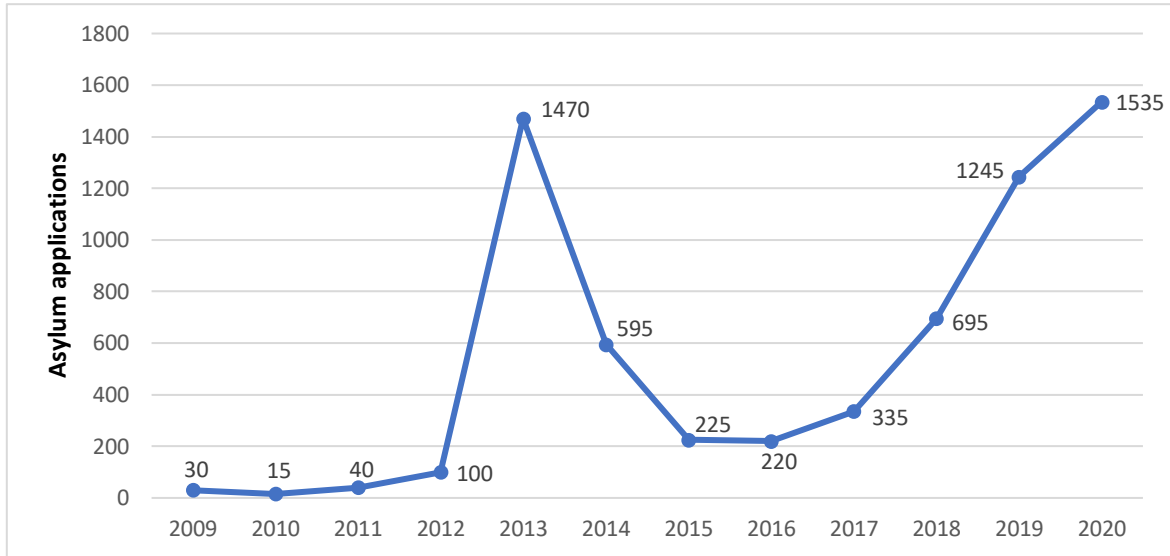
another slight rise in 2013. At the same time, detections also significantly rise from 2018-2020.

Figure 10. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Malian nationals on the WAR, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

More specifically, **in 2009**, Malian nationalities make up the greatest number of detections on the route, and **25% of overall WAR detections**. Numbers then remain relatively low until 2013, when Malians make up 19% of all detections along the WAR route, the second most prominent group after Moroccan nationals. These detections are in the months of January through March, June, July and August, with the highest number in February. After bottoming out in the following years, in 2018 and 2019 detections begin to rise again, reaching a significant amount in 2020. The 290 detections in 2020 (practically all in the month of May, specifically) is much greater than the average annual detections for Mali. In looking at Mali over the selected time frame, the year 2020 is second only to the 555 detections of Malians in 2009, but due to the overall surge of WAR detections in 2020, Malian nationals only make up 1.26% as compared with total route detections, ranking third and far behind in absolute numbers (again, 290) after a substantial amount of Moroccan nationals (11,759) and an "unknown" category of nationals (10,620).

Figure 11. Asylum applications of Malian nationals in Spain, 2009-2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on "Asylum and first time asylum applicants" (Eurostat 2021)

Looking at the figures illustrating **asylum applications to Spain from Malian nationals**, from 2009 to 2011 there were relatively few applications, but they almost doubled from one year to the next in 2012, and then tripled to reach the second highest number of applications in the ten-year period in 2013 at 1,470 (with the exception of detections at their height in 2020). In terms of the male to female ratio of Malian asylum applications, looking at the entirety of applications to the EU over the ten-year period is perhaps more illustrative, given that Eurostat data indicates applications to Spain make up only an average of 8% of those to the EU overall in this timeframe, and the Spanish figures may be unrepresentative (see below). Given this, from 2009-2020, Malian asylum applications to the EU reflect a male majority, with 82% of applications from males and 18% from females over the ten-year time frame. While this overall average reflects the general breakdown from 2011-2020, the years 2009 and 2010 saw a more balanced breakdown, with 58% male and 42% female, and 47% male and 53% female, respectively.

After 2013, applications almost halve in 2014 and diminish further in 2015, remaining relatively stable through to 2018 where they begin to rise again, reaching the third highest number in the period in 2019, and again, the highest over the course of the

period in 2020. Albeit a steady increase in the number of asylum petitions of Malians since 2016, the statistics do not reflect the real sum of nationals reaching Spain to seek asylum, due to the bureaucratic difficulties that prevent them from successfully requesting international protection.

3.2.3. Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends

Both trends of irregular border crossings detected by Frontex and asylum applications in Italy and Spain signal how mixed flows of Malian migrants along the CMR, the WMR and the WAR in 2009-2020 have intensified, despite their wavering strength in different moments of the decade on different routes. In particular, the major shifts on the CMR during this period can be identified in a first, limited, wave of arrivals in 2011; the sudden intensification of irregular crossings in 2014-2017, with a momentary reduction in 2015; and the significant drop starting in 2018. In Spain, the most significant turning points have been the momentary surge in asylum applications in 2013, their new, gradual increase since 2017 and the spike in irregular arrivals registered in 2018 on the WMR. Meanwhile, the WAR has experienced rising detections of Malians from 2018 to 2020 (albeit this route reflects much less volume than the WMR and CMR), with particular surges in arrivals at the beginning (2009) and at the end (2020) of the period under analysis.

Two broader aspects about emigration from Mali in the last decade seems to emerge. First, asylum seekers and refugees have become a more relevant – but not dominant – feature of migration towards the EU. Second, while the incidence of forced displacement on Europe-bound routes seems to suggest a correlation with the deepening instability in the country, the role of insecurity in Mali as the key driver of emigration has to be balanced against the declining trend of irregular arrivals in 2018-2020 and its decoupling from asylum requests in Spain. The impact of other factors along the routes needs to be assessed in order to better understand these diverging trends.

Established **regional differences in migratory attitudes within Mali** also matter, as the majority of Malians engaging in international migration seem to depart from the

region of Kayes, bordering Senegal and Mauritania. An estimate in 2007 found out that 80% of Malians in France originated from that region, which has long been considered as one of the most peaceful in Mali. Moreover, surveys undertaken in the region signal a deeply rooted social culture that generate long running expectations for the young to leave. Insecurity does not appear prominently among the factors fuelling such expectations, that are rather based upon a view of migration as 'the norm' and 'the only way out of poverty', but also on the lack of work at home and the young's perceived social responsibility towards their family (REACH 2020).

Social practices and family pressures could also be conceived as structural drivers predating our period of analysis when it comes to the importance of gender roles and expectations. While Malian asylum-seekers reaching Europe in 2009-2020 have been predominantly male, the social construction around gendered mobility at regional level contributes to influencing the context within which migratory choices are made in Mali. On the one hand, migration of young male is part of family economics and it is used to strengthen their family status (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013), as it is one of the few options in rural settings to acquire the material and symbolic resources to get married. On the other hand, other studies suggest that migration is increasingly considered as **an inevitable part of life** for many adolescent girls in Mali and that the migratory experience has significant impacts on women social position, as "it allows girls to avoid early marriage" (Engebretsen, *et al.* 2020). Migration experiences can also expose girls to social practices, especially marriage-related, incongruent with cultural expectations at home, indirectly influencing marital relationships (Ibid).

Moving back to our analysis aimed at problematizing the view of Malians' emigration as predominantly conflict-related, another element mediating migratory choices in Mali is constituted by **shrinking access to natural resources**, which is an important driver of rural mobility. While the nexus between the consequences of climate change in the Sahel (such as desertification) and international migration is gathering increasing attention by the literature and the international community, it should be noted that there is still no consensus on the concrete ways in which environmental dynamics are operating in the region. However, although international migration from

Mali usually originates in urban contexts, as illustrated by recent interviews with migrants in the country (Mixed Migration Centre 2021a), most of these trajectories still constitute secondary movements after the failure of initial migration projects from rural contexts to major urban centers like Bamako. Rural-urban movements remain both a major pattern of internal migration and often a prelude to international mobility: therefore, the role of competition over natural resources in rural areas cannot be ignored as another wide-ranging driver.

Nonetheless, political instability and armed conflict have played a central role in Mali over the last decade, affecting the socio-political context and economic livelihoods, and acting as a driver of displacement. First of all, it is important to draw attention to **the conflict enacted in 2012 in northern Mali**, which reflects the combined dynamics of an allegedly weak state, separatist groups or armed rebellion, and jockeying, extremist Islamist groups, in addition to other inter-community disputes. Extremist attacks, including by forces affiliated with the Islamic State, became so targeted, frequent and deadly throughout 2017 and 2018, that the UN Peacekeeping Mission MINUSMA reclassified its listing of civilian threats in 2017, so as to separate out “terrorist” groups from other “non-state armed groups” (Di Razza 2018). Moreover, the peace process initiated in 2015 under the Bamako Agreement has been scrutinized as to its effects years later, as findings highlight how: it did not address terrorist groups and the UN presence attracted further threats and violence; it left fighters idle and thus predisposed to armed banditry; and it increased divides among clans as they attempted to consolidate power or reorganize and reposition (Boutellis and Zahar 2017; Di Razza 2018).

The trends of emigration towards Europe could be related to some extent to this insecurity cycle, as the numbers of asylum seekers, refugees and IDPs have been at historically high levels (Migration Data Portal 2021a). However, a more careful analysis of the situation on the CMR in 2017-2020 seems to nuance this assumption: despite persisting insecurity in the country after 2017, the number of Malians reaching Italy (and Spain after 2018) significantly declined. Furthermore, **economic determinants have been singled out as having a much bigger role in shaping**

migratory aspirations in West African countries, including Mali, than political determinants (Schöfberger, *et al.* 2020). Coupled with the declining post-2017 pattern, this seems to suggest that, while the conflict might have partially driven emigration, there is not a straightforward connection between lasting conditions of insecurity in Mali and irregular arrivals of Malians in Europe, at least since 2017. Other elements should be factored in the analysis, such as the disrupting effects on the CMR of an intensifying Libyan conflict, as well as the impact of EU-sponsored policies in countries of transit and the shift towards the WMR, that not coincidentally experienced a spike in arrivals in 2018.

Apparently, a clearer connection with conditions of political instability could be drawn concerning the 2009 WAR high figure (or alternatively 2010 decrease). A certain consensus has emerged on the fact that Mali saw relatively low levels of violence until around late 2011: however, **a previous Taureg uprising in northern Mali**, spurred by low economic development and secessionist demands, which lasted from 2006 to 2009, was particularly more violent towards the end of that period, thus possibly explaining the high 2009 numbers and the following drop (Hoogeveen, *et al.* 2018). The long-term consequences of the rebellion could also have a role in the sudden – albeit rather limited – increase in irregular arrivals in Italy in 2011, even if also other national groups, such as Nigerians, experienced a similar surge that year.

Looking to the most recent developments, instability in the country has also been fuelled by the deterioration of **the crisis in the Liptako-Gourma region**, spread across southeast central Mali (as well as Niger and Burkina Faso), where tensions between pastoral farming Dogon and nomadic Fulanis came to a head in 2018 over land and water access points, leading to clashes with the armed forces, attacks on civilians and militia formations (ACAPS 2019). Moreover, the Malian Presidential elections took place in the summer of 2018. One survey estimated that almost half of Malians feared becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during the campaign (Haïdara and Isbell 2018). Indeed, there was an uptick in extremist attacks in the months leading up to the election, which ventured down from the North to central Mali and the capital city of Bamako. The UN Secretary General noted that the

three-months period in which the July elections fell represented the deadliest for civilians since 2013 (Gilmour 2019; UN Security Council 2018). Still, as previously detailed, it would be simplistic to link drivers and migration decisions solely to the international intervention, armed conflict, peace-building and development nexus. As already recalled, the effects of climate change and environmental degradation affecting food security, among other dimensions, as well as the (often gendered) cultural and societal understanding of mobility, should also be borne in mind when examining these trends (Hegazi, *et al.* 2021; Boulay 2021).

The intensifying armed conflict engulfing the country has nonetheless influenced internal transit routes operating in the most affected areas, especially the city of Gao, which is located in the Liptako-Gourma region and has been a key transit point along the WMR: the route may have thus served as a logical choice for those consequently displaced in 2018. At the same time, Gao has also traditionally acted as one of the most important crossroads for journeys with public and private transport from central Mali towards Niger and Algeria. Together with enhanced law enforcement and (limited) controls implemented by Malian authorities, especially in 2018, the insecurity in the area has had **a disruptive effect on established smuggling networks** and has made Gao a less attractive transit point for migrants departing from Bamako. Since 2018, instability in the region has also prompted migrants from Mali to try other routes towards Burkina Faso and Niger and, at a later time, towards the city of Timbuktu, which consolidated its position as a new smuggling hub towards Algeria in early 2020. This shift from Gao to Timbuktu has also affected the costs of smuggling services to enter Algeria, which are estimated to having increased from €76 - €122 to €229 - €305 in 2020, before the impact of border closures due to the pandemic (Micaleff, *et al.* 2021). Recent interviews with migrants transiting through the country also indicate that the use of smugglers and facilitators is less frequent in Mali (58%) than in Niger (84%), and that the relationship between facilitators and people on the move is much more complex than what transpires from **the rigid dichotomy between ‘victims’ and ‘criminals’** that seems to underpin several policy interventions in Mali: the most common services provided in Mali by these actors are

not only the crossing of borders, but also accommodation and the facilitation of money transfers (Mixed Migration Centre 2021d). As these changes in Mali occurred concurrently with a decline in irregular arrivals in Italy through the CMR, as well as with the post-2018 drop in Spain, it appears that the role of conflict in driving and mediating migration flows in origin and transit areas is not a given fact, but can produce contrasting effects.

Against this backdrop, **the security-migration nexus** attracted several foreign interventions. The multi-layered Malian crisis has entailed various missions and policy initiatives from the UN, the European Union and some European Member States (Ioannides 2020). For instance, Italy's deepening diplomatic foothold in Mali is mainly related to the relevance gained by immigration from the Sahel in Italian policy-making during the refugee crisis. Mali is also one of the top beneficiaries of the EU Emergency for African Trust Fund, which allocated over 220 million euros to the country (European Commission 2021b). Overall, Mali is one of the key African countries where externalisation policies have been applied.

Despite this deepening engagement of external actors, different legs of the route converging to Libya from Mali have also been affected along their trajectories by local developments, which persisted and went through modifications multiple times over the last five years. As also made clear by the internal shift from Gao to Timbuktu, the routes followed by migrants departing from Mali have shown a certain degree of adaptability in light of insecurity at home. In particular, the trans-Saharan traits of the CMR have shown a pronounced durability, especially when compared to the dramatic decrease in irregular arrivals experienced at their concluding end in Italy from 2017 onwards. Such misalignment could be partially explained by the large presence of Malians still stranded in Libya's bottleneck, which amounted to 32,840 at the end of 2019 (IOM DTM 2020), the lowest point in terms of irregular arrivals to Italy, and by the possible diversion of flows towards the WMR in 2018. Changing mobility patterns along the route could also be part of the explanation. In its Displacement Tracking Matrix, IOM identifies three major corridors to Libya used by migrants departing from

Mali: **through Niger, Algeria, or through Burkina Faso and then Niger**. In 2016,⁵⁸ IOM reported that 34% of those migrants in Libya had reached the country using the Burkina Faso-Niger corridor, while 30% had passed through Algeria (IOM DTM 2016). Over the years, while the Europe-bound flow was dwindling, the volume of movements along these trans-Saharan traits kept on shifting: in 2018-2019 Algeria became the preferred country of transit for migrants from Mali on the CMR,⁵⁹ being used by slightly over 40% of those stranded in Libya. Those years also marked the EU-sponsored crackdown against human smuggling in Niger, especially in the key transit point of Agadez, and the enacting of **the Nigerien Anti-Trafficking Law**. As analysed in the section of this report dedicated to Nigeria, the effects of this significant modification to the policy framework in Niger intervened upon a grey area of informality often enabling smuggling and other services linked to mobility, sometimes with the tolerance or even the active participation of local authorities (Raineri 2018).⁶⁰ At the same time, as already recalled, insecurity in northern and central Mali undermined smuggling networks especially in Gao, a traditional departure point to Niger. The direct involvement of non-State armed groups in human smuggling in northern Mali also remained low as the activity proved to be less lucrative than other illicit trades (Micaleff 2019).

The focus thus moves to **Algeria**, a country which has traditionally emphasized its sovereignty in managing its borders and has remained uncooperative with the EU on migration management. After having introduced a law in 2008 criminalizing irregular entry into its territory, Algeria had responded to the crises in its neighbourhood in the first half of the decade, including Mali's, by increasingly linking immigration to terrorist threats and by securing its own frontiers, notwithstanding the persistence of traditional mobility patterns across its borders, especially among the Tuaregs (Teevan 2020). A new and revamped securitized policy adopted by the national authorities has

⁵⁸ The first time these figures have been made available.

⁵⁹ In the meantime, the use of the WMR, away from the CMR and Algeria, was also increasing. Please refer to case study on Morocco.

⁶⁰ For further analysis of the role of Niger as country of transit please refer to the case study dedicated to Nigeria in this report.

made the tentative shift in 2018-2019 from the Nigerien leg of the CMR to the Algerian one short lived: Algeria had already militarized the control of its frontiers, but in 2018 it went even further by conducting several raids and leaving Malian nationals in the desert across the border (Zardo and Loschi 2020). These interventions ended up anticipating the decrease of Malians transiting through Algeria already in 2019 (41%, slightly down from 42% the year before) and, in a more pronounced fashion, in 2020, when the share dropped to 27% (IOM DTM 2021).

The partial disruption of flows crossing Niger⁶¹ and policy developments in Algeria have therefore affected the trajectories of Malians, as also underlined by the diversion of their movements towards Chad in 2017-2018 (Tubiana, *et al.* 2018). However, despite the recrudescence of Algeria's policies, Malians remain amongst the primary nationalities represented in the immigrant population there (Teevan 2020), as the country has traditionally served as a destination for Sub-Saharan migrants, especially from West Africa (Lahlou 2018b), applying an ambivalent policy approach to their contribution to the local economy.

The country of 'alternative destination' where the scenario for Malians has changed more dramatically over the last decade has been **Libya**. The inception of a decade-long conflict in 2011 after the toppling of the Qaddhafi regime may have facilitated the first wave of departures of Malians in 2011 and, most significantly, the decisive increase of their numbers during the 'refugee crisis' in 2014-2017, concurrently to the intensification of the civil conflict in the Libyan country.⁶² In fact, Libya had long been a key destination country for Malian workers before 2011. While the inflow of economic migrants has not completely faded during the last decade, the deterioration of the economy has impacted the immigrant population. The profile of Sub-Saharan workers in Libya has changed as well, being composed predominantly of **single males with a lower level of education**. Malians employed in Libya reflect this profile and are mainly hired in agriculture (El Kamouni-Janseen, *et al.* 2019). The reduced

⁶¹ Over 35% of Libya-bound migrants from Mali kept on choosing this route even in the years of relative decline of this corridor, namely 2018 and 2019.

⁶² For an analysis of the broader role of Libya as a country of transit please refer to the case study on Nigeria in this report.

attractiveness of the Libyan labour market could be a factor at play when considering the increasing number of migrants attempting to reach Italy in 2011 and then in 2014-2017, due to the reduced opportunities of employment available there. At the same time, secondary drivers of emigration from Libya have been mainly connected to forced migration, not only as a consequence of the enduring violence, but also of widespread discrimination and exploitation (Crawley, *et al.* 2016), especially after 2014, when the security situation further worsened. While this applies generally to all Sub-Saharan migrants transiting and/or residing in the country, this rings also true specifically for Malians, because of their vulnerability to trafficking in Libya, as previously mentioned in Mali's migration profile. Moreover, rising emigration from Mali has also been indirectly affected by the influence of the Libyan crisis: significant numbers of Tuaregs were for instance engaged in security forces in Libya under Qaddafi and many of them returned in Mali after 2011, fuelling the ensuing instability in the North (IOM 2013). The influx of Libyan arms in the Sahel, and particularly in Mali, is also estimated to having played a role in nourishing regional and national instability. In turn, it partially drove the increase in Europe-bound flows culminating in 2016 on the CMR and in the following spike on the WMR in 2018.

As drivers – especially linked to conflict - interacted in such contrasting ways in shaping Malians' mobility in contexts of origin and transit, it is also important to assess **the impact of European policies** at the concluding ends of CMR and WMR. The sudden rise of asylum applications of Malians in Spain in 2013 could have been already related to the role of European policies, with particular reference to the dynamic of French and Spanish bilateral agreements with Mali within the EU's cooperation framework on migration control and development. At that time, relations deteriorated between France and Mali with regards to readmission agreements and overall cooperation, while a strengthening of ties with Spain in migration control and police cooperation was taking place (Trauner and Diemel, 2013).

More recently, as already noted, the detections of Malians on the CMR have followed the general pattern of decreasing arrivals inaugurated in mid-2017, after a number of significant policy developments in Libya and in the Mediterranean took place, among

them **the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Tripoli's government in February 2017**. Italy has heavily invested in the policies promoted in the same year by Italian Ministry of Interior Marco Minniti and its strategy of “mending, sewing and repairing” (Liga 2018) relations with different local actors in Libya, such as militias, tribes and mayoral authorities both on the coast and in the South, with the explicit goal of reducing the number of irregular arrivals by dismantling and de-potentiating smuggling operations. Other measures, such as the delegation of Search and Rescue responsibilities to Libyan authorities and the training of the Libyan Coastal Guard went in the same direction. Restrictions on NGOs operating rescue ships in the Mediterranean were also put in place by the Gentiloni government, followed in 2018 by a decree introduced by the government led by Giuseppe Conte that weakened asylum and international protection in Italy. Further restrictive migration policies were introduced under the new Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini (Vecsey 2019). These measures have significantly distanced the Italian approach from the humanitarian stance of the naval mission Mare Nostrum launched in 2013. A more restrictive framework - especially when it comes to the shift to the Sophia and Iriini EU's sea operations – has been developed, which has also been meant as an instrument of deterrence to disincentivize departures from Libya and beyond (Mali included). These measures affected the CMR, and thus would go towards explaining the rise in WMR and WAR detections in 2018.

Finally, the rise in Malian detections in 2020 on the WAR might be attributed to shifts and volume of overall migration routes caused by **the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic**. Apart from mobility repercussions like border closures causing route shifts, forced displacement, insecurity and conflict continue unabated in countries along the CMR, WMR and WAR, and secondary movements have become significant as the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic affect countries of origin, transit and destination, thus influencing the volume of the flows (Displacement Tracking Matrix 2021).

It is also worth noting that access to political asylum in the Canary Islands presents many challenges because the region has not been sufficiently strengthened with

specific capacities and the needed infrastructure. There is a shortage of economic and logistical resources to accommodate the entrances of asylum seekers, which mainly affects those arriving from sub-Saharan Africa, e.g., due to a lack of interpreters and counsellors (Martín 2021). These considerations can be taken into account alongside the impacts of COVID-19 described earlier.

Against this background, drivers contributing to shaping EU-bound irregular migration from Mali that could be prioritized are:

- The evolution of the conflict and instability cycle in certain regions of the country, especially the Liptako-Gourma area, focusing on its effects on displacement, but also on smuggling/facilitation networks;
- The durable and ever-shifting nature of migratory corridors from Mali to key countries of transit as Niger and Algeria, looking at policy evolutions at the national level, the interaction with EU actions in transit countries on the CMR, WMR and WAR, and how these interventions sit within the free circulation regime of ECOWAS;
- The multifaceted consequences of the conflict in Libya, which has either enhanced irregular movements through the country or hindered the activities of smuggling networks in different moments in time;
- The impact of border policies of the EU and Italy in the Mediterranean Sea in potentially diverging the flow towards the WMR and WAR.

3.3 Nigeria

3.3.1 Migration profile

Nigeria is the most populous country in the African continent (190,1 million people in 2017) and a political heavyweight in the region of West Africa. Its federal structure mirrors **significant differences among the States composing its territory**: conventionally, the most important divide on political, cultural, religious and environmental grounds has been considered the one between the North and the South. This divergence is also based on economic imbalances, due to the presence of extended oil reserves and the commercial hub of Lagos in the South (EASO 2017). Despite being the biggest economy on the continent, the country faces widespread poverty and unemployment, especially among the youths, whose incidence on the Nigerian population is high, as 35% are aged between 15 and 30 and 44% are under age 15 (Adepoju 2017). Over 40% (83 million people) of the national population live below the poverty line (World Bank 2021b). Both extreme poverty and unemployment put Nigerian society under severe pressure, as economic growth (2.2% before the pandemic) does not keep pace with demographic trends. Even before a recession begun in 2016, the sustained economic performances of the previous 15 years were described as “**jobless growth**” (Adepoju 2017). One of the most pressing challenges concerns the diversification of an economic system still heavily reliant on oil. Large swathes of Nigerians also suffer from food insecurity and a lack of basic services, especially among IDPs.

The country has been characterized by an history of political instability, despite the introduction of democracy in 1999. In 2009, the jihadist insurgency of **Boko Haram** begun to destabilize the North-Eastern States and since then it has developed into a severe humanitarian and security crisis that has provoked the killing of more than 30,000 people in the Lake Chad area (Venturi and Barana 2021). Communal violence in the Middle Belt between agricultural and pastoralist populations, as well as separatist claims in the southern States, constitute other key security challenges (Adibe 2017).

Informed by this complex social, economic and security context as well as the sheer size of the country, **migration has been a constant feature in Nigeria's history**, both as a territory of origin and as a country of destination. As in other areas of West Africa, mobility has long constituted an established social feature: pre-colonial mobility of traders between Nigeria and Gold Coast (Ghana) and other regional movements were facilitated by the presence of homogenous populations across Nigeria's borders (Afolayan, *et al.* 2008). Deeply rooted seasonal movements of nomads continued also during the British rule (Ikwuyatum 2016). In the meantime, colonisation had established a new framework for migration: the colonial rule enhanced internal and rural-urban movements of labour towards administrative centres and areas hosting vital export infrastructure like harbours (Gopalkrishna and Oloruntoba 2012). The British domination also encouraged regional flows providing workers in mines and plantations outside Nigeria. In a similar fashion, Nigeria received different waves of labour immigration from French West Africa (Mberu and Pongou 2010).

Migration patterns in the newly independent Nigeria have been variegated. Internal labour mobility towards major cities and economic hubs continued: in particular, the creation of Abuja Federal Capital spurred a sudden flow of public servants and workers to the new territory (Ikuteyijo 2020). Nigeria became even more of a key destination country for migrants from other West Africa States: the country experienced an oil boom in the 1970s and early 1980s, attracting many labour migrants. The ratification in 1980 of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Free Movement Protocol – Nigeria being the most prominent member of ECOWAS – has been widely considered another key factor facilitating the entry of labour from neighbouring countries (Afolayan, *et al.* 2008). However, the economic downturn during the following years was also blamed on foreigners: in 1983 such sentiment drove the mass expulsion of ECOWAS citizens, especially Ghanaians, who had overstayed their residence permits (Arhin-Sam 2019). In the 1980s and 1990s Nigeria also hosted many refugees from the region, especially from Liberia and Sierra Leone, whose presence has declined in recent years, as conflict in their home-

countries has subsided (Isiugo-Abanihe and IOM Nigeria 2016). In 2013, **more than 950,000 foreign nationals were estimated to be present in Nigeria**, most of them from West Africa, attracted by its large market, the porosity of its borders and the implementation of the ECOWAS provisions on visa-free entry.

Outbound migration and mobility from Nigeria have also remained **predominantly intra-regional**, especially within ECOWAS, targeting countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Ghana, Niger and Togo. Nigerian migrants also moved towards other African destinations, especially South Africa, which historically have attracted immigrants from other countries on the continent due to its economic dynamism. Other destinations for economically motivated migration of Nigerians also included Sudan, Cameroon and Gabon. Nigerian forced migrants have instead started to seek refuge in Cameroon and South Africa in the 1990s. Overall, it is estimated that over 3 million Nigerians live abroad in Africa (Adepoju 2017).

A more recent feature of migration and mobility concerns emigration outside Africa, which has gained steam after independence in 1960. Emigration, especially towards **the United Kingdom** and then **the United States**, has been mostly motivated by education and economic reasons, even if political instability also played a role. There are over 15 million Nigerians abroad (27% in the US and in the UK). Many Nigerians left their country to seek higher education and most of them never returned. Nigeria has experienced outflows of high-skilled workers and professionals to a point that “a well-developed culture of professional migration emerged” (Mberu and Pongou 2010). This has proven especially true for health-care professionals. With the sector being hit hard by the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s, scores of nurses and doctors left not only towards Europe and the US, but also to the Gulf. (Adepoju 2017). The Nigerian diaspora is thus one of the best educated immigrant populations in several destination countries (Isiugo-Abanihe and IOM Nigeria 2016).

A **vast and well-educated diaspora** marks some key implications for development policies and migration governance. Nigeria is the top recipient of remittances in Sub-Saharan Africa: they amounted to over 24 billion US dollars in 2018 (McAuliffe, *et al.*

2019). Together with Egypt, Nigeria receives 50% of all remittances in Africa (Isaacs and Natali 2020). At the same time, the departure of many high-skilled citizens has raised concerns about brain drain, especially in health-care. The role of diaspora is equally important for migration governance and trends: established and broad social networks within the Nigerian community abroad constitute a prominent component of the social discourse on migration in the country and contribute to shape personal and collective preferences on migration and mobility (Arhin-Sam 2019). Remittances do not only play a key role in national development strategies – and hence, are strongly incentivized by public authorities, but they also contribute to local livelihoods, making the choice to depart also part of family strategies facilitating emigration, especially of the youths (Ayuba 2018).

Emigration has also acquired a gendered dimension: official figures in 2010 indicate that **51% of Nigerians emigrants were female** and, most strikingly, only 38.7% of returnees were women, suggesting how female emigration is more often a long-term choice (Isiugo-Abanihe and IOM Nigeria 2016). Irregular emigration of female workers has also been described as “a survival strategy” in search for employment opportunities so as to escape deepening poverty in the country (Ayuba 2018).

Irregular flows of economic migrants towards Europe have increased only more recently: for instance, migration towards **Italy** reached notable levels for the first time in the 1980s. The highly educated professionals initially arriving in Europe (and other destinations abroad) have been followed by lower skilled workers looking for employment opportunities mostly through irregular channels, as the domestic conditions were worsening during the 1990s (Adepoju 2017). In the meantime, forced migration had become another key factor: the number of Nigerian refugees started to climb during the 1990s, particularly in the UK and Ireland.

At the same time, profound concern has been raised by **human trafficking**, which is run by “highly organized criminal webs” usually involved in international trafficking networks exploiting their victims both in areas of transit, such as Niger and Libya, and countries of destination in Europe and the Gulf (US Department of State 2020). In

Libya, vulnerable Nigerians are exploited in construction, agriculture and commercial sex, and are usually lured by the promise of reaching Europe. Sex trafficking in Europe since the 1990s has been directed especially towards Italy, while Spain and the Netherlands have emerged as other key destinations. Criminal networks have developed “a self-reproducing organization” (Carling 2005) based on the role of local actors in Nigeria, who usually sponsor the journey, trapping the victims in debt.

Human trafficking – especially of women – and trends in irregular migration both highlight the regional peculiarities within Nigeria: for instance, a significant share of Nigerian women trafficked in Europe have historically come from **Edo State**. Explanations for such geographical concentration range from the particularly disadvantaged conditions of women in the area, due to cultural and historical factors, to the presence of self-reinforcing mechanisms that involve local actors once migratory flows have been initiated, in turn shaping networks, infrastructure and expectations (Carling 2005). When it comes to irregular departures, the State’s capital, Benin City, has been labelled the “Agadez of Nigeria” due its function as a point where prospective migrants from different parts of the country pass through and organise their onward journey (Arhin-Sam 2019). The fact that certain States are subjected to higher volumes of outbound migration and human trafficking, contributes to shape different institutional attitudes towards prevention, protection and prosecution between the States and the central government, and among the various Nigerian States.

Notwithstanding these internal asymmetries, Nigeria has been updating its migration governance regime. A **National Migration Policy has been adopted in 2015**, establishing a Migration Governance Framework that aims to enhance coordination both among different Ministries involved in migration policy and between different levels of government, with some States, like Edo, more actively engaged than others. The National Migration Policy acts as a framework for sectorial laws, like the 2014 National Labour Migration Policy and the regulations on diaspora engagement. Another key normative tool is the Trafficking in Persons Law Enforcement and Administration Act, amended in 2015 to include stricter sentencing guidelines, which

criminalizes sex and labour trafficking. In the field of anti-trafficking, Nigeria established an ad hoc agency in 2003, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking In Persons (NAPTIP). Moreover, engagement with the EU and its members has been relatively enhanced in the last years, as the EU activism in migration cooperation has geared up.

3.3.2 Recent Trends in EU-bound migration: 2009-2020

According to Frontex statistics on ‘detections of illegal border-crossings’, Nigerian nationals constituted **the second largest group at the CMR between 2009 and 2020**. In cumulative terms, 99,056 Nigerian migrants reached Italy and (to a lesser extent) Malta irregularly, constituting 11.82% of the total irregular arrivals recorded by Frontex in this period. At the CMR, arrivals from Nigeria were only surpassed by those of Eritreans (119,128 detections, 14.21%), while far fewer irregular crossings have been detected when it comes to nationals of other African countries, like Mali and Gambia. Nigeria is thus the most significant Western Africa country in terms of recorded irregular border-crossings at the CMR. In all but two of the years we have analysed, Nigeria appeared among the top-10 nationalities at the CMR, while it should also be noted that the overall detections at the CMR dramatically decreased from 2018 onwards. The notable exception was 2020, when the number of irregular arrivals from Nigeria decreased significantly, despite the overall surge in total detections from 2019 (14,003) to 2020 (35,673).

The mixed flow of Nigerian migrants has reached **the highest point in terms of irregular arrivals in 2016**, also the peak year of the general pattern of the CMR, when 37,553 detections from Nigeria were recorded. This constituted the highest record of arrivals by Nigerians both in absolute terms and as of their share of total detections: more than one in five detections in 2016 originated from Nigeria (20.71%). Overall, the presence of Nigerians on the CMR, after having gradually increased in previous years, intensified particularly in the period between 2015 and 2017, during the so-called migration crisis in Italy – and the EU. In those years, Nigeria repeatedly figured among the top nationalities, being the 2nd highest in 2015 (21.914

arrivals, 14.23% of total detections), and the most numerous both in 2016 and 2017 (18,163 arrivals, 15.27%). The number of irregular arrivals of Nigerians at the CMR spiralled down in the following years, decreasing to 1,262 in 2018 (5.37% of total arrivals) and constantly declining afterwards.

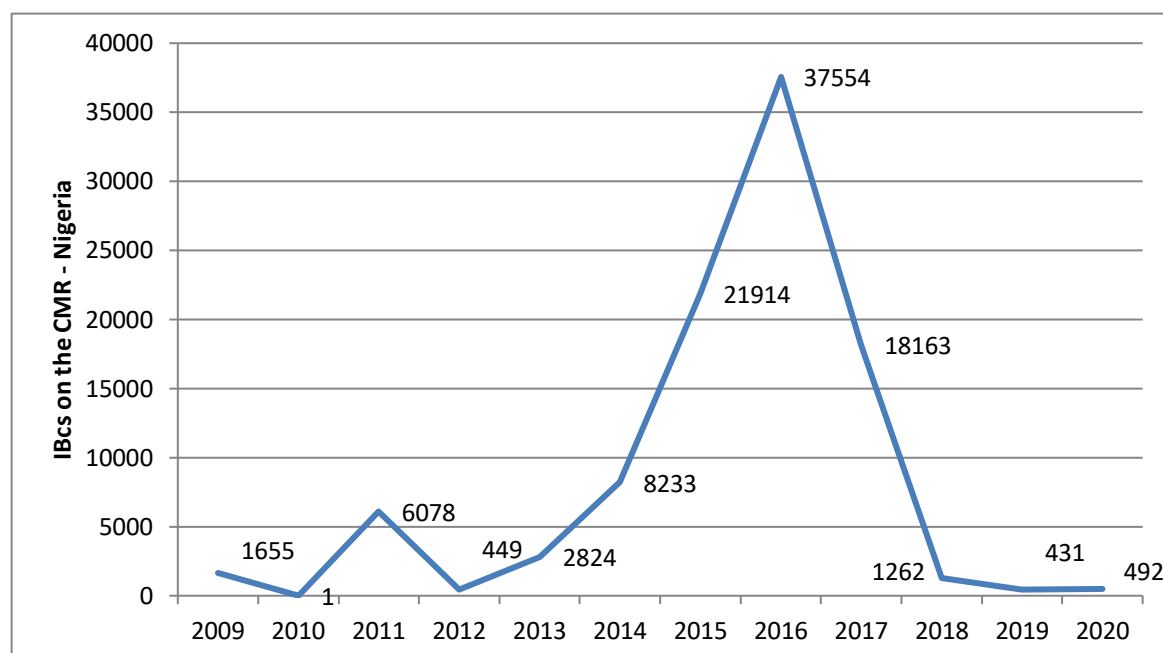
The year 2017 has clearly been a turning point. A focus on the monthly trends further shows that a steep and sudden decline in the number of arrivals occurred in the summer of 2017: **detections dropped** from 4,834 in June, one of the highest ever monthly records, to 2,199 in July and just 305 in August. This trend mirrors the general dynamics at the route that has seen a decisive reduction of irregular arrivals in that same period.

Table 6. Detections of Nigerian nationals on the CMR, 2009-2020

Nigeria			
YEAR	Detections of Nigerian nationals CMR	Total detections CMR	As % of total detections
2009	1,655	11,043	14.99%
2010	1	4,450	0.02%
2011	6,078	64,261	9.46%
2012	449	15,151	2.96%
2013	2,824	45,298	6.23%
2014	8,233	170,664	4.82%
2015	21,914	153,946	14.23%
2016	37,554	181,376	20.71%
2017	18,163	118,962	15.27%
2018	1,262	23,485	5.37%
2019	431	14,003	3.08%
2020	492	35,673	1.38%
Total	99,056	838,312	11.82%

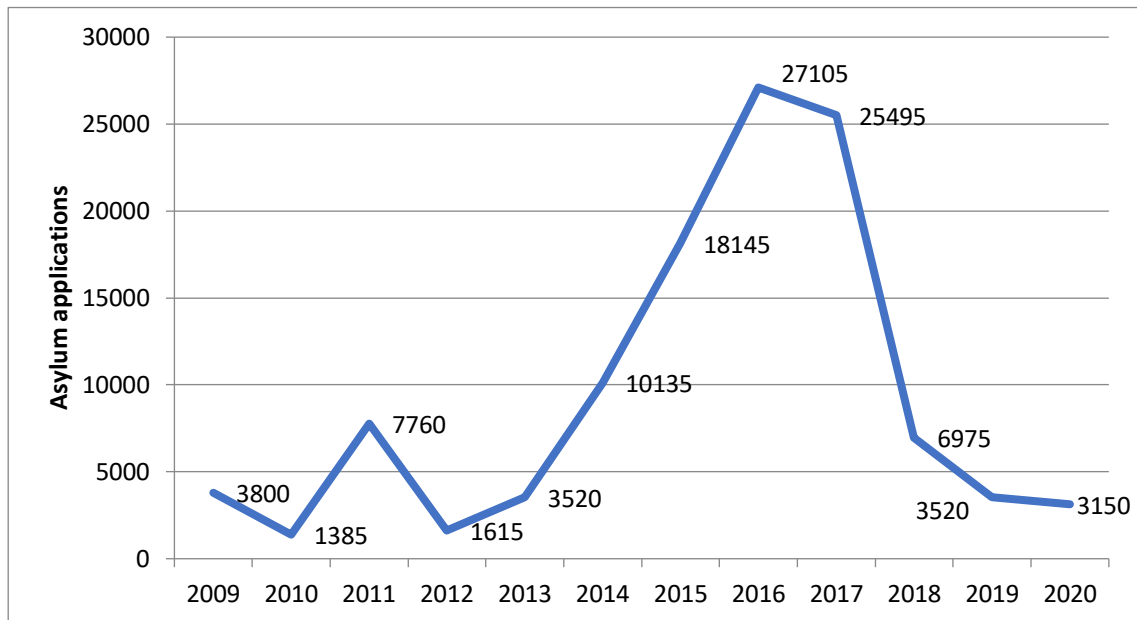
Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Figure 12. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Nigerian nationals on the CMR, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Eurostat data on asylum applications depict a parallel pattern. 2017 was the last year in which Italy resulted as the top recipient of asylum applications from Nigeria in EU-27, with 25,945 Nigerian asylum seekers filing their request in the country. Italy had been the top destination for Nigerian asylum seekers in the EU since 2009. Looking at other European countries – including those Schengen members outside the EU, only Switzerland received slightly more asylum seekers in a couple of years at the beginning of the decade. Then a change occurred. **In 2018 Germany has become the favourite destination for Nigerians seeking refuge**, even if with lower numbers than those recorded in Italy at the peak of the 'crisis': Germany received 11,010 requests in 2018. France has also overcome Italy among the preferred destinations of asylum seekers from Nigeria. This shift towards Germany and France has consolidated in 2019 and 2020.

Figure 13. Asylum applications of Nigerian nationals in Italy, 2009-2020

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on "Asylum and first time asylum applicants" (Eurostat 2021)

Despite this recent trend, within the in EU-27 **Italy remains by far the top destination** where asylum claims were made by Nigerian nationals during the timeframe of our analysis. In total, more than 112,000 applications were filed in Italy, doubling the number of those in Germany (over 61,000) and with France as a distance third (over 27,500). It is also worth highlighting how the UK, historically a country where the Nigerian diaspora has been particularly strong, has recorded far fewer asylum applications in the period between 2009 and 2020 (almost 16,000).

Table 7. Ranking - based on Total asylum applications of Nigerian citizens in Europe, 2009-2020

Italy	112,605
Germany	61,560
France	27,655
United Kingdom	15,955
Switzerland	14,965

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on "Asylum and first time asylum applicants" (Eurostat 2021)

Nigerian applicants in Italy in 2009-2020 have been **mainly male**. In 2014, 82.44% of asylum seekers filing their application in Italy were male, the highest share recorded during the timeframe under consideration, while the most robust presence of females among those seeking refuge in Italy has been reached in 2010 (49.82%). Overall, the yearly percentage of male asylum seekers in Italy has stood over 60% for most of the last decade, also when the flows of Nigerians intensified in 2015-2017. On average, 32.27% of asylum applicants in Italy in 2009-2020 have been female.

3.3.3 – Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends

The presence of Nigerian nationals among the migrants detected by Frontex at the CMR and among those who have applied for asylum in Italy has strengthened over 2009-2020. As already recalled, Nigeria has been the second most important country of origin for irregular migrants reaching Italy at the CMR during that time. Trends in arrivals have experienced some key turning points during this period: a seemingly isolated first increase in 2011; the gradual rise of 2013-2014 becoming much sharper in 2015-2016 at the peak of the 'migration crisis'; and the sudden decline starting in 2017, confirmed in the following years. In terms of asylum applications, the trend has been similar, but statistics suggest that Nigerians tend to apply for asylum more often than they have been recorded at the CMR (Melachrinou, *et al.* 2020), as in different

years during the period of our analysis the number of applicants recorded by Eurostat (see section 3.3.2) has been higher than those of irregular entries.

Irregular arrivals of Nigerian citizens at the CMR occurred against a background of **deteriorating security conditions in Nigeria**, especially under the growing threat posed by Boko Haram, and the consequent forced displacement of population both within the country and towards other States in Africa and beyond. In this sense, the country has been labelled as a hotspot of (internal) displacement in West Africa (Dick and Schraven 2018). Accordingly, the number of refugees and asylum seekers from Nigeria have significantly grown in the last decade: overall, Nigerian asylum seekers numbered 73,100 in 2020 (down from the peak of 109,000 in 2019), while the refugees from the country reached the record number of 353,000 in 2020 (Migration Data Portal 2021b). Also, **internal displacement** remained at high level during the decade, with 2,7 million IDPs recorded in 2020 (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2020). Founded in 2002, Boko Haram, a radical Islamist group, launched a major insurgency in north-eastern Nigeria in 2009 and since then it has been carrying out assassinations and large-scale acts of violence in that region, but also in Chad, Niger and Cameroon. It has associated itself with the Islamic State (ISIS), assuming in 2015 the new denomination of Islamic State West Africa Province. The depth of ISIS involvement is not fully clear though (Barana and Venturi 2021). The violence enacted by Boko Haram has caused more than 30,000 victims over the last decade, while the kidnappings of schoolgirls and other attacks against the civilian population have attracted international condemnation. The international response to the growing menace has mainly relied on the launch of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF), under a mandate of the African Union Peace and Security Council: its track record reveals some successes in stymieing Boko Haram activities in 2015-2016, but the insurgency was back to regain ground in 2018-2019.

However, the threat of Boko Haram is not the only instability-related driver of displacement in Nigeria: according to EASO, Nigerians are seeking protection also due to the actions of militant groups in the Delta, separatist movements, clashes between herders and farmers, the role of students' cults, the impact of trafficking and

kidnapping networks, but also human rights violations committed by the State and affiliated groups (EASO 2019a). Recently, **kidnapping events have escalated** at national level, with abductions and forced disappearances doubling in 2020 compared to the previous year (Ayandele and Goos 2021). Boko Haram is not the only actor involved in these crimes, that are predominantly carried out by unidentified armed groups. Further complicating the picture, it has been argued that many layers of conflict – and thus displacement – are a product of increasing climate-induced risks, for instance referring to the crisis in the Lake Chad region and intercommunal clashes between agricultural and pastoralist populations (Bendandi 2020).

However, the deterministic link between these multiple, nation-wide drivers of forced displacement and the trends of mixed migration flows towards Europe is disputed. While the intensification of both irregular arrivals at the CMR and asylum requests in Italy, first in 2011 – just two years after the insurgency led by Boko Haram flared up – then in 2013-2017, seems to confirm to some extent the deepening role of those drivers in shaping emigration from the country, **conflict and political violence can hardly explain by themselves the non-linear dynamic followed by the flow towards Europe**, which has displayed different volumes while conditions of insecurity in Nigeria persisted and evolved. For instance, the post-2017 drop in arrivals to Italy occurred while attacks perpetuated by Boko Haram were intensifying again after the initial gains of the MNJTF, while the relative calm in 2018-2020 materialized while the kidnapping crisis was worsening in Nigeria.

Furthermore, emigration from Nigeria is still **mainly driven by economic factors** and by the research of better job opportunities (Benattia, *et al.* 2015). An OECD study highlighted in 2018 how economic motivations are by far the main reasons declared by those in Nigeria willing to leave the country,⁶³ also towards Europe. Moreover, the regions more prone to insecurity, like the North-East, are actually those where migratory aspirations are lower, also due to the extreme marginalisation of local populations (Kirwin and Anderson 2018). Nigeria has also been listed among the

⁶³ “Better jobs and pay” was the main factor indicated by 51% of respondents, “send money home” was referred to by 23% of them.

“relatively prosperous African countries” where urban coastal zones are emerging as sources of extra-continental emigration (Flahaux and De Haas 2016). Widespread conditions of poverty and the “jobless growth” experienced by the country during the commodities boom in 2000-2014 have informed international migration patterns. Such findings suggest that the **recession** inaugurated in April-June 2016 (BBC 2016) should have kickstarted a significant increase in the movements along the CMR: not coincidentally, arrivals in Italy between July 2016 and June 2017 were at their peak (more than 39,000 detections over 12 months). However, since mid-2017 the Italy-bound flow has significantly declined, while a feeble economic recovery was occurring in the country in 2017-2018.⁶⁴

The relevance of economic motivations and the complex interaction among different drivers in shaping migratory choices made by individuals is also confirmed by interviews with Western Africa migrants engaging in international migration towards other African regions and Europe – with Nigerians being a significant proportion of those interviewed. Overall, almost 80% of respondents declare economic reasons as one of the key factors in their decision to leave (Mixed Migration Centre 2021a). This observation is reiterated by migrants’ voices collected by the same survey in Western and Northern Africa. However, when specifically looking at the responses of those who have reached Europe, violence, insecurity and conflict becomes a more prominent driver (43%), followed by personal and family reasons and economic motivations (Ibid.). Available data on drivers of female emigration from countries in West Africa⁶⁵ point to a similar direction, as **42% of women interviewed describe economic reasons as the most pressing** (IOD PARC 2018). It is also interesting to note how Western African women on the move possess an advanced degree more frequently than those from other African regions. In terms of social attitudes on female mobility, nuclear and extended families also play a key role in encouraging the decision to migrate (Ibid.).

⁶⁴ The fact that data on irregular arrivals in Italy do not capture the whole picture of emigration from the country should also be taken into account when assessing the impact of the recession.

⁶⁵ Nigerian women compose a large share of the sample for such surveys.

Another element to factor in, so as to better understand the interplay between various drivers, concerns **the evolution of public attitudes**: social discourse on irregular migration has significantly changed in Nigeria in 2017 due to the publication of a damning CNN report on the abuses suffered by Nigerian migrants in Libyan detention centres, pushing Abuja's government to change its policy approach and organizing the return of thousands of nationals stranded there (Arhin-Sam 2020). Finally, the issue of social and economic pressures on the environment and shrinking access to natural resources in Nigeria should also be taken into account, even if the nexus between conflict, migration – especially EU-bound - and the effects of climate change is not fully clear (Raineri 2019). However, regions like the Lake Chad area in Northern Nigeria appear vulnerable to enhanced environmental challenges and the increasing competition for access to natural resources around the Lake.⁶⁶

Therefore, the contrasting dynamics illustrated so far challenge the conventional wisdom assuming a clear and deterministic 'push effect' of insecurity and economic crisis on the trends unfolding on the CMR and call for further reflection on the fragmented nature of EU-bound migratory patterns. Our assumption of the multileg trajectory of migratory routes from Nigeria to Europe along the CMR is also validated by qualitative surveys intercepting the voices of Nigerian migrants; overall, they clearly indicate that their journey is characterized by different stops, usually in certain urban centres along the way, such as **Kano** (Nigeria), **Agadez** (Niger), **Sabha** (Libya) and **Tripoli** (Libya). Migratory corridors between these cities and other transit points have shifted in different moments in time, but the multileg nature of migration remains a common trait, mostly due to logistical reasons, such as waiting from transport for the next phase of the travel. The chance of being stopped for detention increases in Libya, but it is an almost non-existent threat in previous legs of the journey (Mixed Migration Centre 2020b).

⁶⁶ Please refer to similar reflections in the section on Mali of this report for further observations on the complex nexus between environmental dynamics, rural-urban migration in West Africa and EU-bound emigration.

To shed more light on the shifts occurring in irregular arrivals to Italy, the multifaceted trajectories experienced by migrants through countries of transit such as Niger and Libya will be now further investigated.

Migrants from Nigeria have predominantly transited through **Niger** in order to reach Libya. For instance, at the height of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Italy during 2016, 83% of individuals traveling from Nigeria to the Northern African State took the Nigerien leg of the CMR (IOM DTM 2016). Geographical reasons are evidently an element to consider in order to understand this preference, as Niger shares a long border with Nigeria to the south and with Algeria and Libya to the north. Another factor enabling the development of this corridor has been – and still is - the entrenched culture of mobility, trade and transhumance of nomadic populations living in Northern Niger, like the Tebus and the Tuaregs, that facilitate the north-bound movement of Nigerians who have entered freely in the country thanks to the free circulation regime established among **ECOWAS** member States. However, the implementation of this agreement is uneven: free circulation out of Nigeria is still often subject to the payment of bribes at border posts and not all citizens possess the required travel documents. Both circumstances create new incentives for activities of facilitators and smugglers for the organization of movements also within ECOWAS (Benattia, *et al.* 2015): 26% of Nigerian migrants interviewed between 2017 and 2018 in Niger declared of having started their journey with the help of a smuggler (Golovko 2019). Other surveys have collected similar opinions some years later, at a time when EU-bound flows were dwindling: 79% of those interviewed between 2019 and 2021 in Niger declared of having already made use of a smuggler at that stage of their journey (Mixed Migration Centre 2021d).⁶⁷ The use of these facilitation services is reported higher among migrants from Nigeria’s South-West (99%) than in other areas of the country (67% among migrants from North-West), highlighting the regional differences between North and South (Mixed Migration Centre 2021b).

⁶⁷ The percentage increases even further for those interviewed in Italy (88%) and Libya (100%).

In this framework, **human smuggling** has long been legitimized in certain areas of Niger as **a business deep-rooted in the local political economy**, with local and State authorities choosing to adapt to it, rather than fight it (Raineri 2018). It has also emerged as a significant source of income for populations in border areas or transit hubs like Agadez. Here, the local economy has been relying on these practices especially before 2016: “connection men”, guides and drivers of vehicles equipped for the desert have become key actors in Agadez for the facilitation of mobility through the Sahara of ECOWAS citizens heading towards the border with Libya, where the ‘true’ irregular trait of their journey begins (Crawley, *et al.* 2016). Sometimes such networks constitute the only alternative available in the absence of legal channels of entry. These developments in the smuggling infrastructure have consolidated before 2015 and, interacting with shifting conditions in Nigeria and the evolution of the Libyan conflict down the route, could have led in part to the surging number of irregular arrivals of Nigerians in Italy between 2014 and 2016.

Burgeoning smuggling activities and irregular migratory trails crossing Niger have attracted the attention of policy-makers in Europe, even though the proliferation of human smuggling has also been analysed as an unintended consequence of EU’s increasingly high barriers to entry put in place over the years (Reitano 2015). Once the flow on the CMR surged in 2014-2016, the EU did not change track and responded by relaunching the same securitized approach. The Nigerien government thus became one of the most important partners for the renewed European drive to externalize migration policies: it has been **one of the top beneficiaries of the EU Emergency for Africa Trust Fund**, receiving 279,5 million euros since 2015, with the majority of those resources being allocated to improved governance, conflict prevention and improved migration management (European Commission 2021c).

Pushed by its international partners, the national government has also introduced in 2015 **the Law n.36-2015 criminalizing human smuggling** through the penalization of irregular entry or exit for both migrants and smugglers. The implementation of the Law in the following years has had significant consequences on the route crossing Niger: IOM reported a 62% reduction of migratory movements through the country in

2017. Also, the proportion of Nigerians transiting in Arlit (key transit point to Algeria) and Séguedine (key transit point to Libya) diminished from 18% of the whole flow in 2016 to 3% in 2019 (Yuen 2020). The political price borne by Nigerien authorities for this new policy approach sponsored by external partners, that has been described as a “revolution” for Nigerien society (Pellerin 2018), has however been heavy, especially in terms of the loss of legitimacy with local populations (Tubiana, *et al.* 2018).

It has been reported that the decline in human smuggling has been particularly stark in Agadez, where smugglers decreased from a few hundreds to a few dozens, mainly active through underground operations, a factor that has raised the costs for migrants up to five times the previously required expense for the same trait (Micaleff, *et al.* 2021). The number of migrants transiting through the town, presumably including the Nigerians, dropped as well from 350 a day in 2016 to between 60 and 120 per week in 2018 (Malakooti and Fall 2020). This crackdown on human smuggling has affected the flow of Nigerians towards Libya since 2017, contributing to shape the decrease in their arrivals to Italy in the second half of that year. Despite these visible effects, which have been hailed as a momentous success by EU’s policy-makers, North-bound **routes have been displaced, not curbed** (Raineri 2018). Increased enforcement and controls have fragmented established routes, but have not eliminated them. Even if in diminished number, over 95% of migrants departing from Nigeria and heading to Libya in the next three years have continued to use the corridor through Niger (IOM DTM 2019; IOM DTM 2020; IOM DTM 2021).

Despite the policy focus on anti-smuggling operations in Niger and other traits of the CMR, the rigid dichotomy between migrants and smugglers has to be nuanced, in order to shed some light on the complex interactions between structural factors and individual agency in shaping irregular flows. Nigerian migrants themselves express **a more nuanced opinion on the role of smugglers and facilitators**, more frequently describing them as service providers and business persons (83%). Women tends to indicate them as criminals more frequently than men (15% vs. 10%). Anyway, perceptions on the role of these actors change along the route: 56% of Nigerian migrants interviewed in Italy declares that smugglers have intentionally misled them

about their journey (61% among women), while only 9% responds in the same way when contacted in Niger (Mixed Migration Centre 2021d).

These observations on the complex role of smugglers and facilitators could also help to better understand the decision of Niamey's authorities, between 2019 and 2020, of toning down the law enforcement efforts of previous years, in order to respond to the economic grievances in the North. However, the initial and partial reprise in smuggling activities, emerged after this new policy turn, has been mitigated by the **long-term blow suffered by the smuggling infrastructure** during the crackdown and, soon afterwards, it has been further suffocated by the impact of the pandemic (Micaleff, *et al.* 2021). So, it is hard to assess whether any clear effects have emerged down the route: the number of Nigerians arriving in Italy has remained stable and at a low level in 2019 and 2020.

As highlighted by the previous discussion, a thorough understanding of the multi-leg, non-linear trajectories of migration from Nigeria towards Europe must take into account how individuals adapt their migratory behaviours to the shifting context in key transit countries. Beyond the situation in Niger, the evolving and conflict-riven conditions of **Libya** – the African country where the different legs of the CMR converge – can similarly go towards clarifying the choices of Nigerian nationals arriving in Italy. First of all, the toppling of the Qaddhafi regime in 2011 proved to be a turning point for Nigerian immigrants earning a living in Libya, as the country had long been an established destination for migrant workers from many Sub-Saharan countries, who found themselves suddenly deprived of income opportunities due to the conflict and the ensuing economic disruption. Another element worsening the conditions of migrants in Libya at that time was the proliferation of episodes of discrimination concurrently with the explosion of political violence. Nonetheless, tracing a causal link between the Libyan upheaval and the first wave of irregular arrivals of Nigerians in Italy in 2011 would risk falling into “the trap of oversimplification” (Rothe and Salehi 2016), as African migrants residing in the country have adopted **several adaptive strategies to the new context**, from internal movements within Libya in search for more stable areas, to the attempt of returning

to their home countries once opportunities in Libya plummeted. This shows that “going to Europe was often not the migrants’ primary choice” among those living in Libya (Rothe and Salehi 2016). At the same time, while it is safe to assume that the crisis made Libya a less attractive ‘alternative destination’ for Sub-Saharan migrants, the entry of immigrant workers did not completely fade during the ten years of political violence and conflict, as the upheaval has also provided new opportunities for them to enhance their economic agency, due to the dependence of the Libyan economy from their contribution (El Kamouni-Janssen, *et al.* 2019).

Women labour migration to Libya over the last years seem to confirm the complex interactions between developments in the country and immigration from West Africa.⁶⁸ Finding a job has remained the main aspiration for the majority of Western Africa women – including Nigerians – heading to Libya, despite the recrudescence of the conflict. However, economic reasons are also intertwined with protection factors. Interviews in 2017 show that Libya has maintained, at least partially, its role as a destination for labour migration, but women have become more vulnerable to the risks of being trapped in debt or blackmailed due to their irregular status in the country (Danish Refugee Council 2017). Despite the risks, women from West Africa increasingly travel alone while looking for employment in the Northern African state. Several women have reported of having been attracted in Libya by exploitative middle-men with the promise of stable jobs in Europe. Others see Libya as a country of transit, but say they have been forced to work there to pay the passage through the Mediterranean Sea. Some of them seem also to have found a more stable employment in Libya in the meantime. Anyway, 40% of those who arrived in Italy in 2017 reported that they had left the Libyan country because they could not find a job (Ibid.).

Although Libya has remained a relatively suitable destination for foreign workers, the conflict developing in the country over the last decade has surely re-shaped its migratory environment. Irregular migratory movements from Libya through the Mediterranean Sea were already common practice under the previous regime, but

⁶⁸ As already specified for other surveys based on migrants’ interviews, Nigerians feature prominently among the women included in these qualitative surveys on migration patterns on the CMR.

after 2011 the country established itself even more as the 'launching pad' towards Europe. The **share of arrivals to Italy departing from Libya**, especially from the western trait of the coast, **increased from 38% in 2012 to 83% in 2014** (Malakooti 2015). Trafficking of Nigerian women by boat to Italy seems also to have been facilitated by the 'opening' of the Libyan corridor and the constant demand in Europe: their number has been reported to grow by 300% in 2014 in comparison to the previous year (Benattia, *et al.* 2015). While these dynamics were unfolding in Libya, the number of irregular arrivals of Nigerian gradually increased as well, as highlighted by Frontex figures on irregular crossings. Following this rising trend, a new turning point proved to be 2014. A key element that changed in Libya at that time was the sudden arrival of thousands of **Syrians trying to reach Europe** through Italy. Syrian migrants were usually wealthier than those from Sub-Saharan Africa: the presence of a significant population of 'new' migrants with more resources at their disposal asking for smuggling services out of Libya led these activities to mature. Stakeholders engaged in smuggling soon developed their business responding to Syrians' demand. At that point, also potential migrants from Nigeria and other African countries found a smuggling infrastructure readier to accommodate their needs (Tinti and Westcott 2016). While Syrians did not remain long among the top nationalities of those leaving Libya, smugglers re-oriented their business towards the vast population of Sub-Saharan Africans arriving in the country or already residing in Libya. For instance, at the end of the decade Nigerians accounted for 4% of foreigners residing for more than 5 years in the country and 8% of those present for more than a year (Teppert and Rossi IOM 2020). Such interplay between different migratory flows crossing Libya contributed to the surge in irregular border crossings at the CMR – and of Nigerians in particular – in 2014-2016. The irregular departures of Nigerian migrants also interacted with the various evolutions of the Libyan conflict: for instance, the increasing violence and economic disruption provoked by the civil war of 2014 could have influenced the decision to leave made by the migrants who until then had lived in Libya.

However, the conflict could have also had **a disrupting effect on migratory flows**, creating the conditions for the drop in irregular border crossings in the Mediterranean Sea occurring since 2017. The intercommunal clashes in the Fezzan, especially among the Tuaregs and the Tebus in 2014-2015, anticipated the already recalled disruption of the Nigerien leg of the CMR in 2016, as the Tebus in particular are heavily involved in smuggling with Niger. The role of the Tebus in the South has also drawn the attention of Italy, which in early 2017, through the diplomatic actions orchestrated by then Minister of Interior Marco Minniti, tried to engage these groups and their networks in enhanced migration controls (International Crisis Group 2017). These evolutions in Southern Libya have particularly affected the flow of Nigerians due to their preference for the Niger—Libya corridor.

At the same time, the disrupting effects of the Libyan conflict has contributed to **displace and/or reshape the business model of local smugglers**: for instance, the war in Sabratha and jostling armed groups in Bani Walid at the end of 2017 reduced the operativity of networks in those two smuggling hubs and pushed militias “from monetizing the movement of migrants to monetizing their extortion and ransoming” (El Kamouni-Janssen, *et al.* 2019). Another example of the disrupting impact of the Libyan conflict on the outflow of Nigerians, and of irregular migrants in general, has been provided in the West during the advance of General Khalifa Haftar’s forces in 2019. The attempted conquest of the capital, Tripoli, and the mobilization of armed forces that followed, moved the conflict nearer Libya’s western coast, where unauthorized departures towards Italy had previously concentrated. Such developments were met by a sudden decrease in departures in April 2019 (Micaleff, *et al.* 2021). Despite a moderate reprise of activities in the following months, irregular entries of Nigerians in Italy remained low that year. These could be also explained by the fact the since 2018 coastal militias have retreated from the protection of smuggling activities, due to the international pressures that made them “toxic” (Micaleff, *et al.* 2021).

Thus, the significant decrease in irregular border crossings of Nigerian nationals recorded in Italy since 2017 could be attributed to the cascading effects of different

factors in transit countries, such as the relative decline of the Nigerien trait of the CMR and the obstacles posed by the Libyan conflict. The European political pressure on smuggling operations on the Libyan coast deserves also attention. **Italian policies in the Mediterranean** and at home⁶⁹ could have had a particularly profound impact on Nigerian migrants due to the fact that they appear, among the national groups arriving in Italy, the ones more willing to elect the country as their preferred destination in Europe (Crawley, *et al.* 2016). This is proved also by their preponderant presence among the detections at the CMR and the significant numbers of asylum applications filed by Nigerian individuals in Italy. To explain the descending trend experienced over the last few years, it is also worth noting that over 50,000 Nigerians were still stranded in Libya in 2019 (IOM DTM 2020), when the flow to Italy was at its lowest. This figure declined to around 37,000 presences in 2020, after border closures due to the pandemic were introduced (IOM DTM 2021).

In conclusion, the impact of different policies on the traits of the route linking Nigeria to Libya could give some hints on the reasons why the flow of Nigerian migrants did not pick up accordingly to the general trend of the CMR in 2020: such misalignment could be partially explained by the border closures in the Sahel and the general disruption that smuggling networks and irregular routes between Nigeria and Libya have met due to the pandemic, especially in the first half of the year. It could be assumed that many departures from Libya in 2020 have involved migrants residing for longer time in the country, finally taking the decision to leave due to Covid-related economic hardships.

⁶⁹ Please refer to case studies on Mali and Morocco for a broader analysis of such policies.

Against this background, drivers contributing to shaping EU-bound irregular migration from Nigeria that could be prioritized are:

- The evolution of the conflict and instability cycle in certain regions of the country, especially in the North-East, but also developments of other unfolding causes of internal displacement (kidnapping networks);
- The significance of economic motivations for Nigerian migrants, in the light of the “jobless growth” affecting the country even before the 2016 recession; a factor that could be exacerbated by the socio-economic impact of COVID-19;
- The durable and ever-shifting nature of migratory corridors and smuggling/facilitation activities unfolding between Nigeria and key countries of transit such as Niger and Libya, looking at policy evolutions at the national level, the interaction with EU actions negotiated with Niamey, and how they sit within the free circulation regime of ECOWAS;
- The multifaceted consequences of the conflict in Libya, which has either enhanced irregular movements through the country, partially reduced its economic attractiveness for foreign workers, or hindered the activities of smuggling networks in different moments in time;
- The impact of EU border policies in the Mediterranean Sea.

3.4 Tunisia

3.4.1. Migration profile

Tunisia is a tiny but strategically located country, between Africa and Europe, and as such it plays a fundamental role in migration dynamics along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR). Over the decades, **Tunisia's mainly youthful population has left in great numbers for Europe**. Tunisia's recent socio-economic and political situation is largely seen as directly or indirectly responsible for such migration patterns (REACH and Mercy Corps 2018). In particular, comparatively high levels of educational attainment in primary and secondary grades and the presence of extended social networks in Europe do represent important factors shaping Tunisians' tendency to migrate in greater numbers compared to other nationalities (Ibid.). The regional context in which Tunisia finds itself, the existing historical connections to the other North African countries and in particular its exposure to security developments in Libya all represent important factors to be accounted for in assessing Tunisia's recent migration trends, Tunisia-European Union (EU) relations in this domain and the changing attitudes of Tunisian civil society vis-à-vis migration. Finally, the migration situation has been aggravated by the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Historically, Tunisians' migration destinations also included **other North African countries** and the countries in **the Gulf** in addition to Europe. In particular, in the late 1960s Libya became one of the major destinations for Tunisian migrant workers due to geographical proximity and in connection to the development of the Libyan oil industry. As documented by De Bel-Air, "legal as well as irregular migration channels, sustained by cross-border tribal connections, brought increasing numbers of Tunisians to Libya (up to 85,000 in the mid-1980s), mostly from the border areas and from the poor, steppe regions in west-central Tunisia (Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Kairouan)" (De Bel-Air 2016: 1), which have by and large remained the main departure bases of Tunisian migrants till today. Tunisian migration flows to Libya were characterised by a high turnover due to difficult diplomatic relations between Libya and its neighbours. As a result of this, between 1969 and 2012 Tunisian

migrants were repeatedly expelled from Libya, thus creating the conditions for the prevailing informality characterising Tunisian migration to Libya (De Bel-Air 2016: 2; see also Camilli and Paynter 2020). In the 1980s, European countries – in particular **France and Italy** – became the main destinations of Tunisian workers. Italy started to become very attractive “due to its geographical proximity to Tunisia and to new opportunities in the country’s informal economy” (De Bel-Air 2016: 1), particularly in the agricultural sector (Boubakri 2013b; Natter 2015). A more restrictive visa policy and the introduction of stringent control of EU external borders mainly deriving from the gradual abolition of internal border controls and the expansion of Schengen membership during the 1990s had significant implications for Tunisian labour migration in Europe, which manifested the following structural features: “permanent settlement, irregular entry or overstaying” (De Bel-Air 2016: 1). In parallel, new patterns opened up for Tunisian migrants in the Gulf countries thanks to a diversification strategy pursued by the Tunisian authorities leading to the signing of technical cooperation agreements between Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (Awad and Selim 2015).

In light of the substantial number of Tunisians living abroad, Tunisian authorities have always been very aware of the need to remain engaged with **the diaspora**, predominantly in the European countries. During the Bourguiba and later the Ben Ali leadership, Tunisia’s migration patterns were linked to two factors shaping state-society relations: first, “workers were encouraged to emigrate” for economic reasons and, second, Tunisian diasporas were closely monitored by the home authorities and by the rest of the expatriate community (De Bel-Air 2016). Tunisian governments came to realise that the country’s economy was facing enormous difficulties in absorbing “all the available labour force and that remittances from abroad were an indispensable source of foreign currencies” (Ibid.: 1) for the cash-strapped economy, hence the attempts to closely monitor the Tunisian population living abroad.

Until 2011, the migration phenomenon has been mainly framed along these lines. In this context, the main goal was to foster the integration of Tunisians living abroad in the hosting societies and to manage the transfer of their remittances so as to harness

their economic and social potential (Colombo and Gozzini 2021). This role was performed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Solidarity and Tunisians Abroad and the Office for Tunisians Abroad as its executive body (Weinar 2017).

The 2000s was a period of rising socio-economic difficulties and political tensions, which contributed to opening the door to the unrest and the revolution of 2011. Two structural factors or **dynamics of marginalisation** need to be taken into account in this respect. The first dynamic of marginalisation concerns the **generational gap** between the youth (male and female) and the rest of the population. The younger Tunisian population was able to benefit from the availability of higher education for all the population, with UNESCO data for 2009–2010 indicating that “as many as 40 per cent of 18–23 year olds were enrolled in higher education in Tunisia” (De Bel-Air 2016: 1). This is confirmed by the fact that Tunisian migrants arriving in Europe both regularly and irregularly are mostly skilled and highly-skilled (Schäfer 2015). However, when structural adjustment policies, launched in cooperation with international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other socio-economic reforms promoting a neo-liberal economic model, which were implemented in the country since the late 1980s, started to produce their effects, employment opportunities drastically decreased (especially in the government sector, a traditional employer of university graduates). It has been calculated that in 2010, 23 per cent of graduates were out of the labour market, considerably above the unemployment rate of 13 per cent for the total population (De Bel-Air 2016; see also Szakal 2017). More specifically, Honwana and Mnasri estimate that 31% of the youth with an engineering degree, 50% with a technical and master’s degree and 68% with a master’s degree in legal studies were unemployed at the beginning of the revolution (Mnasri 2011; Honwana 2013: 26; see also Sofi 2019).

The second dynamic of marginalisation regards the significant **inequalities between the centre and the peripheries** that have traditionally been key factors in explaining Tunisia’s socio-economic development patterns (or the lack thereof) and state policies. Since Tunisia gained independence in 1956, most investments in tourism and infrastructures had gone to the coastal areas (such as Tunis, Monastir, Mahdia and

Sousse) while the internal regions (such as Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine, Medinine and Gafsa) had continued to experience marginalisation, creating an explosive gap between the centre and the peripheries of the country (Colombo 2021). The marginalisation of central-southern regions continued to worsen under Ben Ali's regime who, over two decades, undertook deliberate political decisions that have progressively reduced Tunisia's interior regions to "reservoirs of cheap labour, agrarian products and raw materials for the more developed industries and service sectors operating in the coastal regions" (Colombo and Meddeb 2018: 36). Clientelist resource distribution systems based on tribal and family affiliations helped to maintain apparent stability over two decades in the Tunisian interior regions while fuelling frustration and anger among those parts of society who were excluded from patronage networks (Hamid 2015). As documented elsewhere, on the eve of the fall of Ben Ali, poverty was estimated at 42% in the Centre West and 36% in the North West, whereas it was at the much lower rate (11%) in the capital and the Centre East of the country (Colombo and Meddeb 2018; Colombo 2021).

On top of all this, the 2007-2008 global financial and economic crisis dealt a huge blow to the tourism sector, which used to represent around 10% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), thus further reducing job prospects domestically and avenues for legal migration abroad for Tunisian youth (De Bel-Air 2016). The combination of **rising youth unemployment**, the proliferation of low-paid jobs in the informal sector, increasing economic inequality and regional disparities largely explain the outburst of the revolution in Tunisia at the end of 2010 (Achy 2011; see also Cavatorta and Haugbølle 2012).

Classified as a country of departure (of origin and transit), both inbound and outbound migration trends need to be taken into account in the case of Tunisia when talking about migration patterns. The start of the Arab uprisings represented a watershed for Tunisia's migration trends, with important changes happening both on the inbound routes and the outbound ones. With regard to the former⁷⁰, the growing

⁷⁰ The main recent trends in outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe are described and analysed in the following two sections.

instability in most countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a key factor explaining these trends. With regard to nationalities, **Algerians, Syrians and Libyans** are the most numerous ones. Following the collapse of the Qaddhafi regime, a great number of migrants left Libya for Tunisia to escape the civil war, especially soon after 2011. Their number, although difficult to pin down with certainty, reached around 1 million people in 2011 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2011). In a similar fashion, Syrians have reached Tunisia to seek refuge since 2011 but their exact number in Tunisia is not clear either as many are not registered with the UNHCR (Mixed Migration Hub 2018). These low registration numbers of refugees is due to the fact that – compared to those arriving from sub-Saharan Africa – migrants from Libya and Syria have a relatively easier time supporting themselves in Tunisia and have more connections and resources, and therefore are less motivated to apply for refugee status (Mixed Migration Hub 2018).

Tunisia is rightly framed as a destination country, but it is also **a transit country** to Europe as many sub-Saharan migrants depart from the Tunisian northern coast towards Italy and other European destinations (Mixed Migration Hub 2018). Others come to settle in Tunisia and survive in clandestine, low-skilled and low-pay economic activities. An increasing number of sub-Saharan Africans are trafficked to Tunisia: many boys and young men are attracted into Tunisia by the promise of careers in sport and other highly-paid jobs but are then exploited. Some experience sexual harassment and are forced into domestic labour and other forms of hard work in agriculture, construction or in services (Mixed Migration Hub 2018; see also Mazzoleni 2016). From the legal point of view, Tunisia is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Although its new constitution voted in 2014 guarantees the right to seek political asylum (Article 26), the country has yet to adopt a national asylum and protection legislation due to both technical and political reasons. Meanwhile, the UNHCR is still tasked with refugee status determination (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018). Nevertheless, Tunisia has taken major steps forward in terms of **combatting human trafficking**. On 3 March 2016, the Loi organique n°61/2016 was adopted by the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP)

improving the country's anti-trafficking regulation, in particular with regard to child trafficking and exploitation (Veron 2020), while “an ad hoc National Authority for the fight against human trafficking (*Instance nationale de lutte contre la traite des personnes*) was set up in February 2017 and formally inaugurated in January 2018” (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 88). These improvements notwithstanding, generally speaking, Tunisian governments have approached migration from sub-Saharan Africa as a security issue, under pressure from the EU and the need to respond to the latter's concerns for the control of migration at its borders.

The first step towards cooperating with the EU on migration and mobility was taken by the Tunisian authorities in 2003 when they joined the informal consultative platform “**Dialogue on Mediterranean Transit Migration (MTM)**” (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018).⁷¹ Until that moment, EU-Tunisia relations on migration had been discontinuous and piecemeal (Fargues 2004). On the Tunisian side, despite the early signing of a bilateral readmission agreement with Italy in 1998, irregular migration from the Tunisian coasts was not regarded as a key priority by the Tunisian governments, which – as already argued – have tended to frame migration and mobility as a domestic security and economic issue only (Paciello *et al.* 2016). On the EU's side, the increased relevance of Tunisia as a departure and transit country started to catalyse Brussels' attention.

3.4.2. Recent Trends in EU-bound migration: 2009-2020

When, on 8 October 2017, a boat sank 60 kilometres off the Tunisian Island of Kerkennah causing the death of 46 migrants trying to reach Italy, Tunisia emerged as a key country from the migration perspective both domestically and internationally (IOM 2017). Talking about outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe, the last decade has seen important developments along the CMR involving Tunisia. According

⁷¹ The “Dialogue on Mediterranean Transit Migration (MTM)” is an interregional intergovernmental consultative forum of migration officials in countries of origin, transit and destination along the migration routes in Africa, Europe and the Middle East with a focus on irregular and mixed migration, as well as on migration and development in the Mediterranean region and beyond, aiming to build common understandings and to jointly develop evidence-based comprehensive and sustainable migration management systems. For more information, see https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/orphan-pages/glossary/dialogue-mediterranean-transit-migration_en

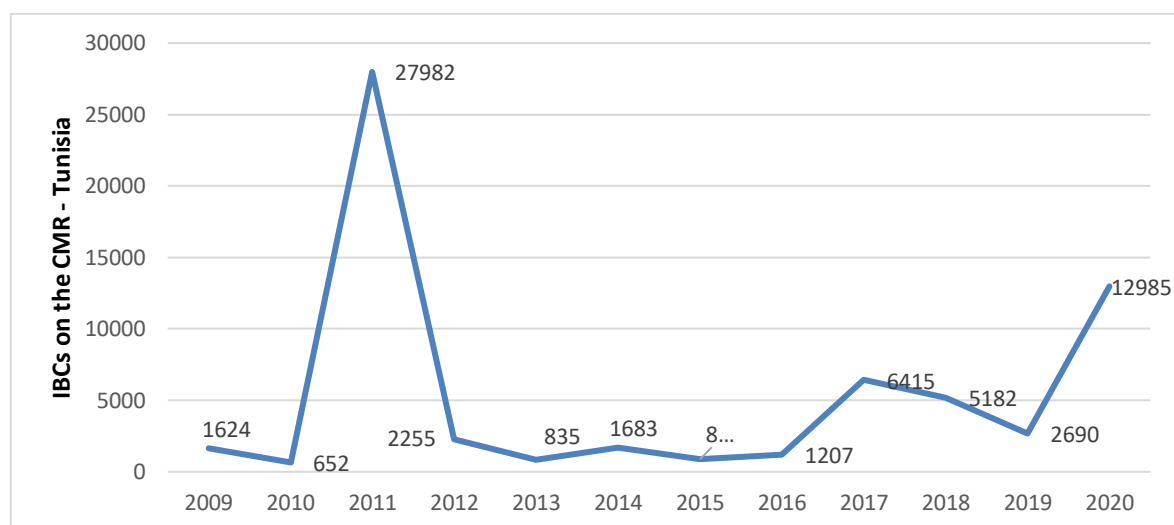
to Frontex statistics on ‘detections of illegal border-crossings’, during this timeframe (2009-2020), two major peaks were registered: first, an immediate and **major upsurge** in migration from Tunisia through irregular channels **in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution**, when almost 28,000 Tunisians left the country profiting from the relaxation (or outright absence) of border controls to cross into Europe (Frontex 2021). The second ongoing increase (the peak might not have yet been reached at the time of writing, i.e., October 2021) started **in the second half of 2017** – with 6,415 Tunisian migrants’ detections – and has continued in the following years with an increase to 12,985 arrivals in 2020.

Table 8. Detections of Tunisian nationals on the CMR, 2009-2020

Tunisia			
YEAR	Detections of Tunisian nationals CMR	Total detections CMR	As % of total detections
2009	1,624	11,043	14.71%
2010	652	4,450	14.65%
2011	27,982	64,261	43.54%
2012	2,255	15,151	14.88%
2013	835	45,298	1.84%
2014	1,683	170,664	0.99%
2015	880	153,946	0.57%
2016	1,207	181,376	0.67%
2017	6,415	118,962	5.39%
2018	5,182	23,485	22.07%
2019	2,690	14,003	19.21%
2020	12,985	35,673	36.40%
Total	64,390	838,312	7.68%

Source: Authors’ elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on “Detections of illegal border-crossings” (Frontex 2021a)

Figure 14. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Tunisian nationals on the CMR, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

In 2011, Tunisians represented the relative majority of arrivals (43.54% of detections), followed by Nigerians (representing not even 10% of total arrivals). Their number then shrank in the following years (2012-2016) and remained low until it has started to grow again since 2017 onwards. Such trend in 2012-2016 contrasts with general patterns unfolding on the CMR, whose flow intensified prominently in those years. In 2017, the fourfold increase of departures from the Tunisian coasts compared to 2016 caught the attention of policy-makers at the EU level and in many member states (UNHCR 2017). Since then, Tunisians have represented again **the largest cohort of arrivals** (Frontex 2021a). However, as argued by Zardo and Abderrahim, "concerns are less related to the number of people reaching the European shores than to the fact that sea-crossings involve mostly young Tunisian citizens fleeing unemployment and lack of prospects" (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 85). In 2018, Tunisian migrants along the CMR were reported to represent over 22% of total CMR detections and in 2020 their share increased to over 36% of total detections (almost 13,000 migrants in absolute terms). The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic does not seem to have halted Tunisian departures in significant ways; on the contrary, 2020

has ranked second among the years with the highest number of detections of Tunisian migrants in the 2009-2020 period.

Eurostat data on asylum applications paint a similar picture. Most Tunisian asylum-seekers (more than 11,000 asylum applications in the period 2009-2020 according to Eurostat data) reached Italy, followed by Switzerland (9,175) and Germany (6,765), as the other two key destinations. The number of Tunisians reaching Italy **peaked in 2011 with over 5,000 asylum applications**, and again in 2018 and 2020, with 1,025 and 1,020 applications, respectively. While during the first peak of 2011, following the fall of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisians travelled by sea to Lampedusa in Italy to pursue employment opportunities or reunite with their families (those who had connections) in light of what was happening in their own country, seen both as an opportunity and a threat, the 2017-2020 increase was linked to several factors related to the domestic and regional contexts, as well as general developments along the CMR route (Gallien and Herbert 2017).

Tunisian asylum applicants in Italy in 2009-2020 have been **disproportionately male**. Overall, the yearly percentage of male asylum seekers in Italy has stood in the range of 84-to-97% of the total, a remarkably high proportion. In 2011, 97.02% of asylum seekers filing their application in Italy were male, the highest share recorded during the timeframe under consideration, while the most robust presence of females among those seeking refuge in Italy was in 2020 (15.69%).

Tunisian people's motivation to migrate was particularly strong in low-income neighbourhoods in the country, thus eventually fuelling a vicious cycle of displacement and under-development. Boats leaving Tunisia for Europe usually depart from the Tunisian Northern coast (for example, Bizerte, Cap Bon) and Eastern coast (most prominently, Sfax, Thyna and the Kerkennah islands) and try to reach Lampedusa and Sicily in Italy (Mixed Migration Hub 2018). Despite the relatively short passage, taking these routes entails significant risks for migrants including drowning and the possibility of being intercepted by the coastguards (Ibid.) that are in

charge of implementing the highly securitised and externalised European approach to migration along the CMR also with regard to Tunisia.

3.4.3. Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends

Several intertwined factors account for the general trend in outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe between 2009 and 2020 and, in particular, the recent spike in departures. Since 2011, **Tunisia's poor economic performance**, persisting unemployment and inequalities, political crisis and uncertainty related to the country's democratic transition and consolidation process, in addition to the impact of the Libyan conflict across the border, have been fuelling feelings of frustration and disillusionment with the regard to the expected changes of the 2011 revolution, especially among the Tunisian youth (REACH and Mercy Corps 2018) and those living in marginalised areas of the country. Returning to the two dynamics of marginalisation mentioned above (i.e., generational and geographical marginalisation), they can be identified as powerful factors shaping the context for recent outbound migration trends from Tunisia. Concerning generational marginalisation, young Tunisians' unmet expectations and lack of prospects for a decent life in their own country, entailing finding a job, accessing housing and eventually having the possibility to marry, feature high in the list of motivations commonly contributing to their decision to leave (Schäfer 2015). The lack of trust in the government's capacity to successfully address persisting economic difficulties has heightened the feeling of alienation felt by young people vis-à-vis political and economic participation and fulfilment (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018). Expectations for a better socio-economic future have plummeted: in 2019, only one third of Tunisians still believed that the situation in their country could improve in the near future compared to 78% in 2011 (Arab Barometer 2019; see also Narbone 2020). This means that frustration has run very high. Frustration has created a sense of non-belonging to the communities at the individual level, thus motivating many to consider leaving the country (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018). In addition to that, the perception of migration itself and the social frames associated with this phenomenon

have “undergone a critical change by shifting from an individual to **a family choice** as some families now encourage and help their sons to leave the country” (Ibid.: 97). Finally, young people tend to, on the one hand, have more connections to Tunisians living abroad and, on the other hand, more easily fall into the dirty hands of traffickers as they are often approached by them over the Internet and through the social media.⁷²

In 2012, the Tunisian government launched the “National Strategy for Employment 2013-2017”. However, by looking at its results it appears that it has not been successful in light of the fact that in recent years poor employment opportunities, mainly in the informal sector, remain the only venue for young Tunisian graduates. In 2017, 54% of young people could only find a job in the informal economy (DirectInfo 2017; Colombo and Meddeb 2018). Some of them have also become involved in the cross-border smuggling trade and trafficking with nearby countries such as war-torn Libya and Algeria (Marzo 2016: 9), thus challenging even more Tunisia’s capacity to control its peripheries where terrorist groups affiliated with **al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State have exploited porous borders** to traffic weapons and jihadists (Gallien 2018). Indeed, young Tunisians have represented the largest group of foreign fighters who have joined ISIS to be trained and fight in Syria and Iraq or elsewhere, and then returned to their country (Marzo 2016; Cristiani 2014). Some reports put this number at a staggering total of three thousand (The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation 2015).

The **generational marginalisation** of large swathes of the population makes internal and international migration more rewarding in terms of employment and social security. This set of socio-economic opportunities and constraints within Tunisian society applies both to rural-urban migratory movements inside Tunisia – reflecting the geographical marginalisation of certain Tunisian regions analysed below – and even international migration. Both internal and outbound migration show a gendered dimension as well, with repercussions on the role and social position of women both

⁷² Author’s interview with a Tunisian youth activist, phone interview, June 2021.

at home and within the migrants' community. On the one side, migrant women experience higher employment opportunities and labour market participation than non-migrants. As such, Tunisia has been experiencing **a process of deepening "feminization" of migration** (Zuccotti *et al.* 2018). This mainly applies to rural-urban movements on seasonal basis, but, after 2011, increasingly to international migration as well, thus becoming a key factor mediating aspirations and attitudes towards gendered EU-bound migratory patterns. The process of feminization is also linked with the emergence of a higher number of highly educated migrant women. 2011 seems to have been a turning point also in the sense that Tunisian women on the move have increasingly declared that the reasons for their departure were related to study, while the incidence of marriage-related reasons has been decreasing, especially when compared with the situation before 2010. On the other side, migration from Tunisia is still predominantly male and "households with migrants are more feminized, i.e. with a higher share of women, who are more likely to be active compared with women in non-migrant households" (Ibid.).

Moving on to geographical marginalisation, many Tunisian migrants who have left for Europe via the sea, particularly since 2017, have come from some of the poorest and marginalised governorates in Tunisia, thus uncovering a potential link between outbound migration and the poor economic performance of Tunisia's countryside and southern regions (REACH and Mercy Corps 2018: 8; see also Boubakri 2013a). Indeed, these regions have been shaken by significant incidents of popular mobilisation from 2016 onwards, which have reinforced **the idea of a two-speed Tunisia in development terms** and have been mainly motivated by the pressing issues of (youth) unemployment and underdevelopment. In January 2016, a series of popular demonstrations began in Kasserine in response to the death of a young man protesting the results of a hiring procedure. The wave of unrest quickly spread through 16 other governorates (Szakal 2016). In September of the same year, the mining region of Gafsa and the Jendouba governorate at the Algerian border saw protests and unrest against economic marginalisation and local corruption (Yahia 2016). In March 2017, strikes and demonstrations in Tataouine completely blocked all

economic activity in the region. As reported by Colombo and Meddeb (2018: 42), “protesters proclaimed their right to employment and the development of their marginalised region, where many oil companies operate without accepting any social or environmental responsibility for the development of the area” (see, also Cherif 2017). New protests broke out in January 2018 around the passing of the new economic and financial law and following the announcement of new rounds of austerity measures (International Crisis Group 2018). A national strike to demand pay increases for public employees in January 2019 brought the country to a halt (Al-Jazeera, 2019). Strings of protests continued up to President Kaïs Saïed’s decisions taken on 25 July 2021 to suspend the Parliament and concentrate powers in his hands, in spite of Covid-19-related restrictions (Abouzoohour 2021).

In light of **the insecurity nexus connecting Tunisia to Libya**, some of these locally-driven protests have had a strong connection to developments in Libya when it comes to migration ramifications. The increase in departures from Tunisia since 2017 is indeed partially linked to the relative closure of the Libyan route.⁷³ Traffickers’ proven capacity to adapt fast to changing circumstances has meant that a growing percent of those making the trip to Europe has been represented by people from sub-Saharan countries, although the greatest majority has continued to be represented by Tunisians. According to some accounts, “in the past, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa comprised between 9 and 11% of those departing from Tunisia” (Camilli and Paynter 2020), while in 2019 this percentage increased substantially because of the worsening conditions in in Libya, as signalled also by the bombing of Libyan detention centres (Ibid.). It could be argued then that Tunisia is increasingly assuming the role of a transit country, to the extent that many refugees and migrants moving from neighbouring Libya are spending longer time in Tunisia than expected (Horwood, Frouws and Forin 2020).

It is clear that the increase in departures from Tunisia to Europe analysed above has placed huge strains onto the former’s relationship to the EU. It is not by surprise that –

⁷³ See case studies on Mali and Nigeria for more details on the disrupting effects on migratory flows of certain phases of the Libyan conflict and of EU’s border policies.

in a vicious circle – since 2015 **EU-Tunisia relations have undergone a process of over-securitisation** that has reinforced the EU's inborn dynamic towards the externalisation of borders control (Cherif and Kausch 2018). This process of over-securitisation has mainly been framed along the strong emphasis placed on radicalisation and migration as two contiguous challenges in the EU's discourse (Badalič 2019). Contrary to the past, Tunisia has become a priority for EU policy-making on migration since the collapse of Ben Ali's regime and the outbreak of civil war in neighbouring Libya. The dramatic rise in irregular arrivals from Tunisia to the EU at the beginning of 2011 was seen by Brussels as reason enough for intensifying bilateral migration cooperation with the Tunisian authorities (De Bel-Air 2016). In that context, **readmission agreements** between Tunisia and major European recipient countries (i.e., Italy, Switzerland and France) were concluded (Ibid.). As most readmission agreements, these also focused on stronger cooperation on border and mobility control as well as the return and readmission of Tunisian nationals with no right to legal stay in the EU back to Tunisia, while some agreements also included clauses on the return of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) (Ibid.). Considering the latter is typically highly contested by non-EU countries along EU-bound irregular migration routes, the inclusion of TCNs' returns in particular contributed to poisoning the relations between Tunisia and the EU on migration issues (Meddeb 2017).

In November 2012, the European Union and Tunisia signed an Action Plan for 2013-17 in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), granting Tunisia a 'Privileged Partnership' status and "strengthening financial support, trade openings and improved mobility" (De Bel-Air 2016: 3; see also Lixi, 2018). The priorities of the post-2011 Tunisian government for a new era of migration cooperation with the EU focused on "the movement of people, the management of legal migration, and the fight against irregular migration and readmission" (De Bel-Air 2016: 3-4; Cassarino 2014). However, the negotiation of the Action Plan's Chapter 6 dealing specifically with 'migration, mobility, and security' proved not to be an easy task.⁷⁴ After a lengthy

⁷⁴ Author's interview with a Tunisian civil society representative working on the migration dossier, phone interview, July 2021.

negotiation process, the Tunisia-EU Mobility Partnership was eventually signed on 3 March 2014 (Rouland 2021). Since that moment, EU funding to Tunisia on migration and mobility has substantially increased (Cassarino 2014; Zardo and Abderrahim 2018). For example, the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) has supported the development of the Tunisian National Migration Strategy trying to foster a more comprehensive approach to migration management. Furthermore, out of the €23 million planned for the Security Sector Reform (SSR) programme, an important share has been devoted to border management and **€11,5 million under the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF)** have been committed to: i) operationalise the National Migration Strategy; ii) involve the diaspora in local development; iii) support reintegration; and iv) link migration and local development (European Commission 2015; Zardo and Abderrahim 2018). The EU and Tunisia started negotiations on a readmission agreement and a visa facilitation agreement in October 2016.

However, EU-Tunisian cooperation on migration has also faced a number of stumbling blocks that persist till today. The EU's insistence on the signing of a readmission agreement with Tunis, as with the other North African countries, has been faced by the Tunisian authorities' opposition (Limam 2020). For them, readmission is a very sensitive topic – in its relations with the EU and domestically. Tunisian authorities and civil society organisations alike have heavily criticised the procedures for readmission, both of Tunisian citizens and TCNs, included in the first draft agreement discussed in October 2016 (then temporarily withdrawn). Among the factors quoted to justify the opposition to these procedures, “the weakness of the Tunisian institutional and legal framework to deal with the readmitted TCNs, such as the lack of an official regularisation policy or of voluntary return programmes” (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 95) stands out as the most important ones. Moreover, these practices are regarded as dangerous as they would expose the fragile Tunisian socio-economic and political context to people's reactions to having to host an increasing number of migrants. This is why Tunisia has declined forcefully the EU's request to set up migration hot-spots on its territory (Ibid.).

Many discussions have also been undertaken on migration between Tunisia and some of the European member states that have been more concerned by the general trend in outbound migration from Tunisia to Europe in the period 2009-2020. The case of **Italy** is paramount in this regard. In light of the spike in arrivals from Tunisia experienced in Summer 2020, Italian authorities and officials have asked their Tunisian counterparts to step up their commitment to control and stem migration flows. These requests were laid out in a series of visits paid to Tunis by several Italian political figures over the same months and that have continued into 2021 as well. These meetings have provided the opportunity to discuss migration relations in the framework of broader cooperation initiatives, leading – among other things – to increased bilateral economic support to Tunisia in return for tougher efforts to stop migrants coming into Europe and the announcement in May 2021 of a "hotline" for better exchange of information about unauthorized departures from Tunisia (Africa News 2021).

Overall, several critiques have been voiced to the approach and concrete initiatives for EU-Tunisia cooperation on migration as well as to bilateral Tunisia-member states migration deals particularly by the very active Tunisian civil society organisations that have been flourishing since 2011. Firstly, this approach has failed to provide Tunisian citizens with concrete, legal opportunities to enter and live in the EU countries and to address the existing **bureaucratic burdens encountered by Tunisian citizens when submitting visa applications**, “the relatively high financial costs [...] and the often-reported opacity of the motivations for visa rejection” (Zardo and Abderrahim 2018: 96). Secondly, mobility opportunities continue to target high-skilled Tunisians only and do not represent an alternative to undocumented travels that are mainly undertaken by young unemployed Tunisians who long for opportunities abroad that are barred from them. Thirdly, mobility chances for Tunisian students and researchers provided by the EU through a series of programmes (Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ or Creative Europe) are steps that go in the right direction (Ibid.). However, they do not answer either qualitatively or quantitatively to the demands of change that the Tunisian authorities and CSOs have been advancing. In particular, they still

cannot compensate for what is perceived by Tunisia as an emergency-driven, short-term approach by the EU (Ibid.). A partial improvement in this respect is on the radar thanks to the newly-launched Talent Partnerships. Inaugurated June 2021 in the framework of the ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’, the Talent Partnerships aim to provide opportunities for vocational education and training for people in their countries of origin, followed by the possibility to live and work legally in the EU countries once the training period is completed.⁷⁵

Going back to the criticalities of the EU-Tunisia migration cooperation, it remains to be noted that the draft visa facilitation agreement with Tunisia – contrary to other similar agreements signed by the EU and “wider Europe” countries – does not mention a visa-free regime as a (very) long-term goal, thus complicating the prospects for opening safe and legal pathways from Tunisia to Europe.

All this has contributed to not only **poisoning EU-Tunisia bilateral relations** in general but most importantly to continuing pushing mainly young Tunisians to attempt dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean to reach Europe, as the recent increase in irregular arrivals seem to confirm. On the first aspect, it is important to be aware of the fact that Tunisia’s domestic democratic policy-making process is very sensitive to the public opinion’s views on this matter voiced by Tunisian CSOs. Away from “migration management”, perceived as a synonym for migration deterrence, civil society has been calling for “a human-rights-based immigration policy” both domestically and externally (Natter 2015). Regarding the second aspect, one can conclude by saying that the 2011 Tunisian uprising has “revolutionised the space of mobility” in Tunisia and raised people’s expectations of freedom in unprecedented and highly visible ways and as such these expectations need to be accounted for and acted upon before they turn into deadly decisions (Garelli and Tazzioli 2017).

⁷⁵ For more information, see https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_2921

Against this background, drivers contributing to shaping EU-bound irregular migration from Tunisia that could be prioritized are:

- The widespread effects, sometimes translating in social unrest, of the marginalization of large sections of Tunisian society, looking in particular at some peripheral geographical areas and the youth;
- The widespread lack of employment and limited access to income opportunities,
- The shifting political conditions in the country;
- The consequences of EU border policies in the Mediterranean Sea and the evolutions of the conflict in Libya, which have again made Tunisia a key departure point towards Italy;
- Ongoing negotiations between the EU and Tunisia on migration management and readmissions.

3.5. Morocco

3.5.1. Migration profile

The Kingdom of Morocco is a lower middle income, parliamentary constitutional monarchy with a population of roughly 36,5 million (when including the Western Sahara), located in North Africa and bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Algeria and Mauritania (World Bank 2021a; UN Data 2021). At the same time an origin, transit and sometimes destination country, it is **pivotal in the landscape of migration between Africa and Europe**, and has assumed an increasing leadership role in both regional and global migration management (Benjelloun 2020; Messari 2018). Morocco serves as the departure point for Europe on the traditional Western Mediterranean route (WMR), as migrants access Spain either via the sea routes crossing the strait of Gibraltar (from Tangier to Tarifa), or traverse land routes in North Africa into the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in Moroccan territory.

While throughout the 20th century Morocco largely was a country of emigration, **the 1990s saw a shift to irregular and transit migration**. This decade was recently preceded by Spain's accession to the EU and marked by Spain's economic success; while Spain experienced seasonal labor demand, increasingly restrictive political and legal measures in EU migration requirements meant any corresponding and growing migration flows became irregular. Moreover, the 1990s involved political and economic developments within Africa that transformed Morocco into a significant transit country, with migratory movements primarily from Sub-Saharan countries. This was linked to the 1985 institution of the Schengen zone and free movement regime in the EU, with a multiple-entry Schengen visa afforded to Moroccan citizens, as well as Ceuta and Melilla forming part of the Schengen area. Civil unrest and economic crises in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and the Ivory Coast led to refugee migration during this time, and Libyan restrictions on labor migration in 2000 also encouraged economic migration. Later, post-2000 mixed flows to, through and out of Morocco were not exclusively economically motivated but also drew from a variety of

factors not limited to war, natural disaster, climate change and rapid population growth (Benamar and Ihadiyan 2016).

In particular, the literature emphasizes **post-2000 Sub-Saharan flows through Morocco to Europe**, with Sub-Saharan migrants arriving to Morocco spiking in 2006 (Berriane, *et al.* 2015; Mghari 2007). With respect to post-2000 Sub-Saharan transit migration, a 2007 demographic study of Sub-Saharan Africans transiting in Morocco found that the most prominent nationalities included Nigerians, Malians, Senegalese, Ivorians, Guineans and Cameroonians (Mghari 2007). After a highly sensationalized 2006 surge in Sub-Saharan arrivals to Spain's Canary Islands catalyzing securitization and monitoring measures at the EU and Spanish levels in tandem with Moroccan state cooperation, WMR flows through Morocco have especially come into focus (Schapendonk 2012). While the later analysis will point to significant and pivotal Sub-Saharan transit migration, it could be argued that Morocco is not a significant country of destination (Lahlou 2018a). It is difficult to account for irregular Sub-Saharan migrants residing in the country: a 2014 estimate puts the number with irregular status between 25,000 and 40,000, another records 50,000 Sub-Saharan working and living legally in the country, and yet another totals 70,000 Sub-Saharan migrants of any legal status in a country of **negative net migration** (Benamar and Ihadiyan 2016; El Ghazouani 2019). For example, the aforementioned 2007 demographic survey found that a negligible number of Sub-Saharan migrants intended to stay in Morocco, rather than continue on to another destination country or return home to the country of origin (Mghari 2007).

In terms of Morocco's emigration history, after gaining independence from France in 1956, contemporary Morocco has been a major sending country, with initial emigration to **France, Belgium and the Netherlands** as European countries actively recruited low-skilled labour. In the 1980s, in tandem with more restrictive immigration policies in Europe since the early 1970s, migration flows increased to Spain and Italy, given their high demand for low-skilled labour as well. At first, this migration to Southern Europe was circular in character, in that Moroccans travelled back and forth; however, when **Italy and Spain** joined the Schengen Area in the early

1990s, entailing visa requirements, flows became more irregular, despite both European states' periodic regularization of unauthorized migrants. From the turn of the century forward, Morocco's implementation of varying migration policy reflected its new role as a transit country (Berriane, *et al.* 2015; Berriane 2017). At the same time, it has also remained an origin country, with emigration and corresponding remittances still continuing to bolster the Moroccan economy (Khachani 2006).

Morocco's migration profile is linked to the state as an influential geopolitical and regional actor. A founding member of the Organization of African Unity (1963), historically Morocco's African foreign policy under Kings Mohamed V and Hassan II boasted strong ties with Senegal, Gabon, Guinea and former Zaire. Cultural and social ties were also established via Moroccan universities hosting students from African states since the mid-1980s, and the country has long served as a religious influence in Western African Islam, via its religious leadership in the Tijani branch of Sufi Islam (Berraine 2014; Berriane 2017).

In terms of interregional cooperation within North Africa, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania signed the constitutive treaty of the **Arab Maghreb Union (AMU)** in 1989 in order to achieve economic integration with the intent of eventual political unification that could better position the Maghreb within the international economic system (Zoubir 2000). However, discord regarding the Western Sahara conflict meant a stalemate, and instead, Morocco has established bilateral agreements with African countries to the South. In essence, North African regional cooperation or integration on migration issues remains unfulfilled; for example, the opposing foreign policy interests and tensions between Algeria and Morocco have repercussions for the entire Maghreb and Sahel regions, which in turn affect migration management and patterns. Since the 1990s, economic development and trade has often been conducted via primary economic partners as the EU and or/its Member States, United States and China, rather than fellow Maghreb countries, leading to vertical rather than horizontal integration of economic policy in addition to migration policy (Kireyev, *et al.* 2019; Zoubir, 2000).

After the turn of the century, Morocco's migration patterns attracted heightened academic and political interest, particularly in light of transit migration from Sub-Saharan Africa, and the state began to impose restrictive immigration policies in 2003. The next significant shift in migration policies took place with Morocco's 2013 immigration reform, **the National Immigration and Asylum Strategy (SNIA)**, followed by a 2015-2016 surge in asylum-seekers to Europe leading to a deepening engagement with the EU on migration management (Benjelloun 2020; Natter 2020). At this point, it is also worth highlighting how after leaving in 1984 (due to recognition of the Western Sahara), in January of 2017, Morocco re-joined the African Union, with a speech from the King implying Maghreb integration was being replaced with an African one. This speech in Addis Ababa and Morocco's readmission, have perhaps marked a strategic shift in both Moroccan and African regional foreign and development policy (Messari 2018).

Meanwhile, Moroccan state migration policies, or practices, continue to face critique, with observations as to **migrant rights' violations in border areas**, and academic consensus that migration policy remains inconsistent, or incomplete (Natter 2020; Jiménez-Alvarez, *et al.* 2020). Despite regularisation processes as a result of the 2013 law, many Sub-Saharan migrants do not meet the definition of asylum-seeker or refugee, and thus enjoy limited protections, and can become victims of trafficking both domestically, towards Europe and towards Libya (Ennaji and Filippo 2019; Lahlou 2018a). Moreover, many may continue to aspire to keep travelling towards Europe, as recorded in 2021 national and smaller qualitative surveys, detailed further below (Le Haut Commissariat au Plan 2021).

Indeed, while the 2013 reform emphasized fighting trafficking, presumably in part due to pressure from international organizations, reality on the ground reflects ongoing phenomena, both in accessing Europe, in moving into Libya or in transiting through Morocco. Firstly, trafficking can often take place in **attempts to access Libya**, with Moroccan actors operating independently, or Moroccans, Nigerians or migrants from Côte d'Ivoire running criminal organizations (Lahlou 2018a). Sub-Saharan women, meanwhile, can be exploited for prostitution along the journey through Africa

(including Morocco) by those from their community of origin. Within Morocco, research indicates that young Moroccan women can disappear in the migration process as well, with girls between 8 and 15 years (termed “petite bonnes”) from urban or impoverished areas compelled or deceived into domestic work for wealthier families in largely urban areas, work that can entail labor and sexual abuse (Melgar, *et al.* 2021). Finally, drug traffickers often use irregular migrants of Moroccan origin to transport drugs to Spain as payment for their trip (Lahlou 2018a). In addition to this, other forms of trafficking may continue upon arrival in Europe; a 2017 report in Spain finds that the general profile of sex trafficked workers includes Nigerian women between 18 and 22 years old, living irregularly (Melgar, *et al.* 2021).

At the same time, the literature has also pointed to how Sub-Saharan migrant activists or community leaders are active agents in the Moroccan migration landscape, where they help facilitate border crossings or are key players in networks, information and support to either stay in Morocco or continue to Europe (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2020). Morocco can serve not only as a transit country, but as **a destination of particularly prolonged transit for Sub-Saharan migrants**, who may aspire to migrate to Europe but in the meantime navigate legal and societal barriers during their extended stay in Morocco by making a livelihood in the informal sector (Pickerill 2011). Finally, while Sub-Saharan flows are predominantly composed of male migrants, the literature and activists have increasingly provided visibility into migrant women in Morocco, attempting to move beyond issues of trafficking and sexual violence to illustrate how gender affects mobility as a structural factor (Tyszler 2019).

Meanwhile, with roughly **10% of its nationals living abroad** (with 3,262,222 nationals living outside of Morocco as of 2020 out of a population of roughly 36,9 million), Morocco has actively and continuously pursued regional and international cooperation in designing policies for successful Moroccan emigration, has established and promoted ties with Moroccan diaspora, and has managed remittances and return (Berriane 2017; UN Population Division 2020; World Bank 2021a). In Europe, in addition to colonial ties with states like Spain and France, bilateral worker recruitment agreements in West Germany (1963), Belgium (1964) and Netherlands

(1969) resulted in the establishment of networks that became more rooted thanks to family reunifications throughout the 1970s oil crisis and the political instability (including two coups in 1971 and 1972) in Morocco (Gabrielli 2015). It follows that as of 2019, the largest groups of Moroccan nationals in Europe are found in France (1,020,162), Spain (711,792), Italy (450,557), Belgium (226,216), the Netherlands (180,879) and Germany (105,928) (UN Population Division 2019).

Some strategies and initiatives for the socio-economic, cultural and political integration of Moroccan expatriates include the Hassan II Foundation for Moroccans Living Abroad (1990), the Ministry for the Moroccan Community Residing Abroad (2000), the Council for the Moroccan Community Abroad (2007) and the “Strategy of Mobilisation of the Competences of Moroccans Residing Abroad” (2009). Apart from these Moroccan communities in Europe, somewhat feminized highly skilled workers have formed Moroccan communities residing in North America (Canada and the United States) and the Gulf States (Berriane 2017; Berriane 2019). Finally, remittances remain a continued and key support for the Moroccan economy (Lahlou 2018a).

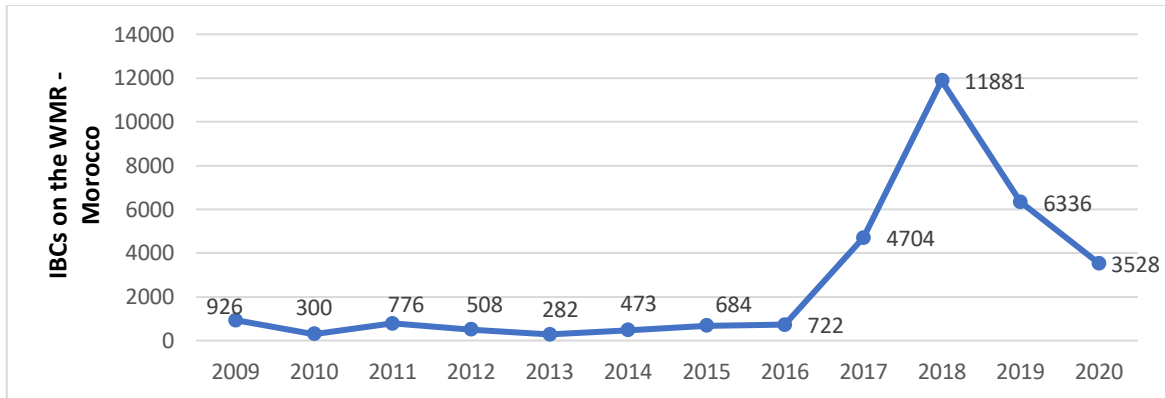
3.5.2. Recent Trends in EU-bound migration: 2009-2020

In turning towards an analysis of recent trends in EU-bound migration, for the previously indicated reasons, the WMR becomes an important consideration. For every year between 2009 and 2020, **Morocco has been among the top five countries** in terms of detections of “illegal border-crossings” (IBCs) by Frontex **on the WMR**, with the exception of 2016, when the country fell to the sixth place. In 2017, Morocco became the country with the greatest number of arrivals on the route to Spain, and from the following year onwards it remained with the second greatest number.

Over the last decade Moroccans constituted the second national group on the WMR with 31,120 detections, 17.63% of the total sum. The only demographic group with more crossings included Algerians, with 38,275 crossings, or 21.69%. On the other

hand, Guineans represented the third nationality, but remained far behind Moroccans in terms of numbers, with 21,479 detections between 2009 and 2020, or 12.17%

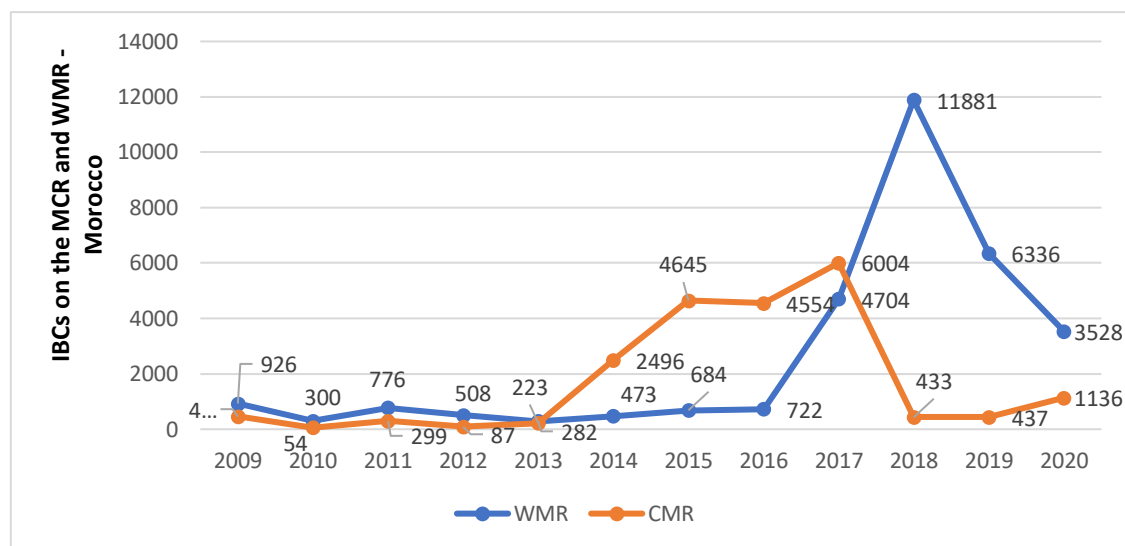
Figure 15. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the WMR, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

In comparative terms, the evolution of detections of Moroccans followed the same pattern as WMR flows overall, with the slight difference that, while arrivals through the WMR began to augment in 2014, and then rise exponentially from 2016 to 2017, the number of detections of Moroccan nationals remained steadily low until the end of 2016, when they suddenly escalated. By the end of 2017, Morocco had become **the top reported nationality on the WMR**, constituting 20.4% of total detections.

Figure 16. Detections of irregular border crossings (IBCs) of Moroccan nationals on the CMR and WMR, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

Again, when looking at the entirety of the WMR, in 2018, Morocco emerged as the main point of departure in reaching the European Union, with nationals from several countries of Sub-Saharan Africa using it as a territory of transit. Despite the heterogeneity of nationalities using the WMR, **2018 saw Moroccans rise to the second most reported nationality on the route**, a trend that continued through 2020. Given this, it is useful to further consider the monthly detections; in zooming into monthly statistics on the sea route (there is a general absence of land route detections) and understanding what time of year flows are significant, Moroccan detections seem to rise in the second half of the year, largely summer and early fall. The detections peak in the month of October 2018 (the most significant over the 10-year period at 2680 detections, again solely via the sea route), with other noteworthy peaks (in order of volume) in months July 2018 (1,631), June 2019 (1,046), September 2019 (943) and August 2017 (894). Such summer months crossings are perhaps more feasible in terms of weather conditions, as opposed to the rest of the year.

In terms of moving from the 10-year average to a yearly contextualization of percentage of Moroccan nationals on the route, while between 2010 and 2016, Moroccans made up less than 10% of total detections, they began to rise above 20% from 2016 onwards. The year 2019 saw the highest total of arrivals at 26.43%, with 2020 at 20.48%, returning to the 2017 levels. This 2018 increase might be linked to Moroccans shifting from the CMR to the WMR in that same year. Although between 2009 and 2013 there was no significant difference in use of the two routes, in 2014 the number of Moroccans opting for the route to **Italy** increased dramatically. Between 2014 and 2017, 17,699 Moroccans were detected on the CMR, with more than 4,500 reported annually in 2015, 2016 and 2017. However, during the first months of 2018, the situation reversed, and the number of Moroccans using the WMR more than doubled the number in 2017, which had already increased as compared to the previous year. Concurrently, in 2018, detections of Moroccans on the CMR plummeted to 433.

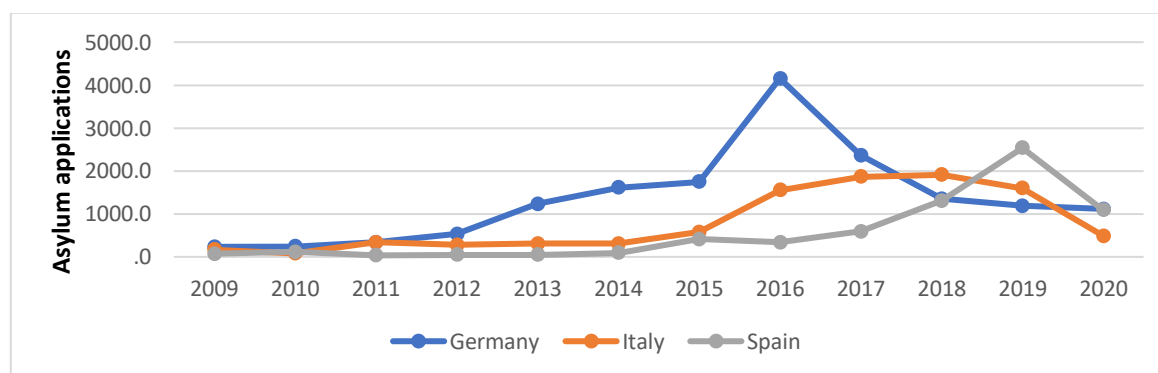
Table 9. Detections of Moroccan nationals on the WMR, 2009-2020

Morocco			
YEAR	Detections of Moroccan nationals WMR Sea&Land	Total detections WMR Sea&Land	As % of total detections
2009	926	6,642	13.94%
2010	300	5,003	6.00%
2011	776	8,448	9.19%
2012	508	6,397	7.94%
2013	282	6,838	4.12%
2014	473	5,654	8.37%
2015	684	7,004	9.77%
2016	722	9,990	7.23%
2017	4,704	23,063	20.40%
2018	11,881	56,245	21.12%
2019	6,336	23,969	26.43%
2020	3,528	17,228	20.48%
Total 2009-2020	31,120	176,481	17.63%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Frontex monthly statistics on "Detections of illegal border-crossings" (Frontex 2021a)

In turning to Europe, in spite of the fact that the two countries' close proximity might lead to the assumption that Spain would be the preferred country of asylum for Moroccans, instead, for the last ten years, **Germany has constituted their desired destination** in requesting international protection. From 2009 to 2020, the country received 16,115 applications from Morocco, followed by Italy with 9,475, and then Spain with 6,680. Moreover, it is noteworthy that over the ten-year period, Switzerland and the Netherlands do not fall far behind Spain in terms of absolute numbers, receiving 6320 and 5830 asylum requests respectively. Over the past decade, Germany has remained one of the top three countries receiving Moroccan asylum requests, constituting the first recipient of these requests in 2009 and 2010, and between 2013 and 2017. Between 2015 and 2020, Germany received more than 1,9 million asylum requests overall. In examining the data on Moroccan asylum applications to Germany, it is important to note how the percentage of women has always remained below 20%, with the figure not even reaching 10% between 2012 and 2014. This indicates that Moroccans seeking asylum in Germany have been primarily male.

Figure 17. Asylum applications of Moroccan nationals in Germany, Italy and Spain, 2009-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration based on Eurostat annual statistics on "Asylum and first time asylum applicants" (Eurostat 2021)

In absolute numbers, Germany has initially been the most requested destination by Moroccan asylum seekers in Europe. However, since 2016, the number of requests started to decrease, while **those in Spain began to grow**. The number of petitions in

the two countries was roughly the same in 2018, with 1,355 applications to Germany and 1,310 to Spain. Spanish applications rose to 2,535 the following year, making it the first intended destination country among Moroccan asylum seekers, and also remained significant in 2020 at 1,090 applications.

Over the ten-year period, asylum applications to Spain out of all those EU applications made by Moroccan nationals average out to 8%. However, in 2019, applications to Spain reached up to 25% of total applications and reached up to 15% of the total in 2018 and 2020. The gender breakdown of Moroccan asylum applications to Spain is similar to Germany, in that they are predominantly male. In the ten-year period, there were an average of 18% applications from women and 82% men; this is generally the breakdown each year. However, the gap does close significantly in 2015, when women constitute up to 37% of Moroccan asylum applications to Spain, as compared to 62% men.

Finally, with respect to the West African Route (WAR) to Spain's **Canary Islands**, it should be noted that IBCs of Moroccans registered by Frontex are significantly lower than on the WMR. At the same time, it deserves mention as Morocco is one of the WAR points of departure, and Moroccans rank within the top five nationalities each year of the ten-year period under examination, except for 2009 and 2015 (where they rank sixth). The detections remained few until 2018 and 2019, when they at least triple to almost 1000 each year, followed by an almost **12-fold increase in 2020** to 11,759 Moroccan IBCs (Frontex, 2021a). This should be considered in conjunction with the fact that, again, Frontex reports Moroccans as the second greatest number of nationals detected on the WMR as well from 2018 to 2020, practically entirely sea route detections.

3.5.3. Analysis of drivers of recent migration trends

The previous sections' observations highlight several patterns in mixed migration flows of Moroccans along the WMR and WAR (specifically out of all routes), a consideration as to the route shifts pivotal in Morocco's alleged transit country role, and trends in Moroccans seeking asylum in Europe over the 2009-2020 period. Among those, it is worth recalling an increasing trend of detections of Moroccans on the WMR from 2013 to 2018; a greater number of Moroccan arrivals on route to Spain via the WMR starting in late 2016, with Morocco becoming a top nationality on the WMR from 2017 onwards; a shift in volume between the WMR and CMR in 2018 significant for Morocco as a transit country; changing percentages of asylum applications to Germany and Italy versus Spain; and increased detections of Moroccans on the WAR route from 2018 onwards. In contextualizing these trends, it is helpful to go into further detail regarding developments in Moroccan domestic migration management and corresponding international cooperation, as well as its evolving economic development and ongoing management of the Rif crisis. These potentially inform not only outflows, but also shifts in movement and transit patterns or alternative destinations.

Also, new policy developments played an increasing role. As mentioned in the Morocco profile, the first restrictive immigration law since independence in 1956 was enacted in 2003, initiating a series of **more restrictive policy interventions** throughout the decade (Natter 2014). These included increased patrols of the Spanish borders and the reinforcement (on both sides) of the fence between Morocco and the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla (the subject of an ongoing sovereignty dispute between the two countries), a point of entry into Europe from the Moroccan mainland. In efforts to pursue further economic cooperation and knowledge sharing with Europe, Morocco may increasingly leverage its role in security and migration from Africa to Europe (Baida 2020).

The deaths of migrants on the Moroccan-Spanish borders of **Ceuta and Melilla** in 2005 in particular catalysed both domestic and international media attention

regarding flows to Europe, as well as prompted the dispatch of a European Commission delegation in October that same year (European Commission 2005; Natter 2014). While Morocco's Ministry of the Interior remained responsible for migration control, new international actors including the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissariat for Refugees (UNHCR) came on the scene, in addition to local civil society efforts (Natter 2014). On the one hand, the literature observes an increasing trend of intolerance towards Sub-Saharan migrants in media and societal discourses, including considering them a social and security threat (Gazzotti 2021). On the other hand, the 2005 migrant deaths brought about the creation of the Council of Sub-Saharan Migrants in Morocco (CMSM) and local initiatives like the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH) to support migrants in the face of Moroccan and European policies, and later, the Anti-Racist Defence and Support Group of Foreigners and Migrants (GADEM 2018; Natter 2013).

It is argued that in order to polish Morocco's international image, the monarchy increasingly has taken on a **progressive role** or positioning when it comes to immigration policy, while the administrative state maintains the prioritization of state interests over migrant rights (Natter, 2020). For example, the aforementioned December 2014 SNIA was purportedly propelled forward by the King, likely in response to the pressures of scrutiny from a September 2013 BBC documentary broadcast accusing Morocco of human rights violations against migrants, as well as an AMDH report on the same subject (Lahlou 2015; Natter 2020). SNIA measures targeted migrant regularization and integration, legal reform, and further migration diplomacy, marking a clear shift to transit migration policies (Benjelloun 2020). Such reforms signalled Morocco's commitment to international human rights, as well as could be attributed to the monarchy's attempt to respond to domestic pressure for reform, to gain legitimacy as part of the overall state apparatus, and to encourage humanitarian civil society actors' cooperation, rather than dissent (Natter 2020). As previously mentioned, these reforms may also have been an attempt at improving relations with the European Union and Sub-Saharan countries. However, later analysis indicates that the 2013 reform and SNIA have not necessarily improved the

situation for migrants. While two regularization campaigns took place, the **Moroccan state security force crackdowns** following these regularizations have swung the pendulum of migrant rights protections in the other direction (GADEM 2018; Gazotti 2021). Moreover, those migrants that were able to obtain authorization can still find socioeconomic integration very difficult, with lack of employment opportunities and challenges in accessing basic services including healthcare (Baida 2020). They can still remain willing to migrate onwards to Europe, or even Canada or the United States, even if obtaining authorization and right to work in Morocco (Lahlou 2015).

As a result of the 2015-2016 surge in asylum-seekers in Europe, unfolding at that time through other routes, further key European level agreements and interventions involving Morocco included the commitments made during the 2015 Valetta Summit on Migration between European and African partners, leading to the country receiving funds from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa “for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa” (EUTF) (European Commission 2021d; Council of the EU 2019). In terms of cooperation with neighbouring countries, **the EU holds its second largest migration cooperation portfolio with Morocco**, at a total of 346 million euro as of May 2021, with 238 million euro of this drawing directly from the EUTF (European Commission 2021). However, while these funds are meant to essentially manage irregular migration and support Morocco’s SNIA, Morocco and Spain have intermittently cooperated in border surveillance on the European end, and this, in combination with Moroccan state practices directed towards security rather than targeting migrant protections, could explain continued WMR flows (Carrera, *et al.* 2016; Kostas 2017). Meanwhile, the fact that in July and December 2019 the EU increased EUTF funding, largely for migration control rather than protections, could also partially explain the drop in WMR crossings occurring that year (European Commission 2018). Finally, while **Spain** holds a privileged **bilateral migration relationship with Morocco** (complemented by EU funding), after at least 20 years of negotiation the EU itself has not been able to achieve a readmission agreement with Morocco via its EU-Morocco Mobility Partnership established in 2013 and reaffirmed in 2019 (Council of the EU 2019). This

is likely due to the latter's attempt to maintain good relations and take on a leadership role with Sub-Saharan states both economically and geopolitically, among other factors (Carrera, *et al.* 2016).

In this sense, the transactional migration governance relationship between Morocco and the EU, an amalgamation of economic interests and migration or securitization agendas, should be emphasized, especially with regard to the socioeconomic situation informing Moroccan emigration or transit migration. Morocco has a fairly stable, market-oriented economy with continuous growth over the past decades (with the years of COVID-19 anomalous), although it still affected by high levels of unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy, especially in rural areas. In relation to this, the country has experienced climate cycle changes over the past decades in terms of precipitation rates, temperatures, drought periods and extreme events, all of which affect rural livelihoods in Morocco (Van Praag 2021). Apart from the migration funds described above, the EU is Morocco's most important economic partner, and as of 2017 represented 59.4% of its trade and 64.6% of its exports. Moroccan diaspora in the EU makes up the majority of remittances out of the global Moroccan diaspora, as well (Teevan 2019).

Given this context, in understanding origin contexts and migration management, it is important to further understand the migration control of transiting Sub-Saharan migrants since 2013's SNIA. In implementing the SNIA's new migration policy, **authorities began relocating migrants** from northern (specifically Tangier, Tetouan and Nador) to southern cities, and the literature points to cooperation between Spain and Morocco between July and August of 2018 that manifested as detention and dispersal efforts throughout the majority of Moroccan cities, relocating Sub-Saharan migrants from their chosen urban areas to smaller towns or cities (Gazotti, *et al.* 2020). These **dispersal policies** targeting transiting migrants might explain increasing detections on the WMR route starting from 2013. For example, studies note increasing immobility and insecurity that Sub-Saharan migrants encounter in Morocco, which not only result from crackdown and dispersal approaches at the hands of Moroccan state security forces, but is also interconnected with security

contractors and informal networks that facilitate irregular border crossings to Spain (Iranzo 2021). Transit migrants report feeling trapped or stranded in Morocco, subject to surveillance and persecution, forced to remain in hiding to avoid arrest, or other exposed to other insecurities like labor exploitation, destitution, or begging (Ibid).

Alternatively, Moroccan government migration control in terms of these dispersal policies may have contributed to **the 2018 spike in percentage of Moroccans** overall on the WMR route, as compared with other nationalities; i.e., the relocation of Sub-Saharan migrants may have acted as a deterrent in continuing to their final destination. These potentially contrasting consequences of a dispersal policy demonstrate the complex and multiple effects of any given migration policy on migratory trends, and the difficulty of reading such a policy's effects, especially as relates to irregular flows and clandestine or discretionary state practices.

Moreover, as the region was subject to various conquests since ancient times, Morocco is culturally and ethnically diverse, and competing historical narratives and historic tensions can affect migration flows. Tamazight is one of its official languages, spoken by the indigenous Amazigh population, with Classical Arabic then serves as the other official language; the latter forms part of the pan-Arab project in the wake of independence from France, shaping the narrative of Morocco as an Arab-Islamic state (French and Moroccan dialect Arabic are also widely in use) (Jay 2015). The more recent presence of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa has also increased religious diversity (Berriane, *et al.* 2015). In light of this context, particularly relevant for the period under study includes **the Tamazight-speaking ethnic population of the Rif region** in northern Morocco.

In particular, in October 2016 widespread protests erupted in Alhucemas in response to the death of Mohssine Fikri, reflecting ongoing social unrest due to widespread political corruption, low levels of development and the Moroccan government's neglect of economic development in this northern part of the country (Zaireg 2018). At that point in time, the Hirak Rif Movement quickly formed, with Nasser Zefzafi as

one of its prominent leaders. After months of social protests and heavy repression by state security forces, in May 2017, Zefzafi and other leading activists from the movement were detained and charged with serious accusations, including crimes against the internal security of the State. The cycle of social upheaval and violence at the hands of the police may have factored into many Moroccans' decisions to leave the country. This **deteriorating situation in the northern region of Rif** can go towards explaining how the number of detections of Moroccan nationals remained steadily low until the end of 2016, when they suddenly escalated, with Morocco becoming the top reported nationality on the WMR by 2017 at 20.4% of total detections.

It is also useful to look at policies in the European context when proceeding on to further understand the shifts in 2018 and especially in comparing the WMR and CMR routes. Again, a notable shift takes place in 2018, with a decrease in CMR and increase in WMR detections. During the first months of 2018, **the number of Moroccans using the WMR more than doubled** the number in 2017, which had already increased as compared to the previous year. There may be a twofold explanation for the shift between the two routes. Firstly, the routes were likely affected by the **sea border shutdown implemented in Italy**. Specifically, in 2017, the Italian government issued a code of conduct for NGOs running migrant rescue ships in the Mediterranean, which banned vessels from entering Libyan territorial waters, and imposed closer cooperation with the police, among other measures, threatening to bar NGOs ships from Italian ports if non-compliant (Vecsey 2019). Then, restrictive migration policies beginning in the summer of 2018 were spearheaded by the country's then Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini. Such policies went from discouraging Mediterranean search and rescue missions by NGOs to encompass all actors, including Frontex and the Italian Coast Guard (Dennison and Geddes 2021). Moreover, they also restricted migrant rights upon arrival, which could perhaps have encouraged Moroccans to choose Spain as a viable alternative route, and explain the October 2018 peak in detections of Moroccans crossing into Spain. A comparable pattern has been also spotted among Sub-Saharan migrants privileging Morocco as a transit country over Niger or Algeria in 2018-2019. For instance, migrants

interviewed around that time in Timbuktu, Mali, indicated they were intending to travel to Morocco (39%) and Spain (21%) – most of them coming from Guinea and Mali. This is a clear shift from a couple of years before, when migrants transiting in the Malian city predominantly stated Algeria (78%) as the next destination of choice in their journey (Horwood, Frouws and Forin 2019).⁷⁶

Secondly, it is argued that Moroccan authorities could have used migration practices as a **leveraging instrument in their negotiations with the European Union** to obtain funding for migration control, with 2018 measures perhaps having directly contributed to an increase in 2018 WMR flows (Rodriguez, Harris and Montalto 2018). Alternatively, it is also possible that these security and military crackdowns may not so much serve as a leveraging instrument, as much as maintaining security interests of the Moroccan state despite migrant rights' commitments. While 2018 Italian government measures allegedly redirected migrant flows to the WMR, the earlier described dispersal operations by Moroccan state authorities could also have contributed to the 2018 increases in WMR arrivals. Reports signalled that Moroccan state authorities were destroying migrant camps along the northern coast, as well as expelling migrants from the territory, outside of official declarations or legal procedures. Specifically, 6,500 individuals were allegedly either arrested or displaced between July and September of 2018 by Moroccan security or military forces (GADEM 2018).

By the end of 2019, while the presence of Moroccans on the WMR versus the CMR was still greater, the number of detections in the former had dropped from the historical record of the previous year. In this respect, Spain continuously dialogues with Morocco in a fluctuating political and diplomatic relationship with oftentimes diverging priorities, as the two states work off of **a readmission agreement dating back to 1992**, which even allows for the return of third country nationals. However, Spain and Morocco cooperation on readmission has increasingly translated into a

⁷⁶ These developments are also coherent with findings in the case study on Mali in this report, that indicate the oscillations in the use of various traits of the CMR between Mali, Niger and Algeria in 2017-2019.

series of informal arrangements (Lixi 2017). Moreover, while Morocco may accept returns of its adult nationals that entered Spain irregularly, it can be more reluctant to accept third country nationals in practice. Notably, it is argued that observation of the Spanish and Moroccan readmission agreement can breach the principle of non-refoulement, through the use of illegal pushbacks. Returns of migrants without conducting asylum procedures adequately (especially with regards to minors) has been constantly documented and reported in recent years at the borders of Ceuta, Melilla and in Canaries, thus perhaps explaining decreases on the WMR (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Martínez Escamilla and Sánchez Tomás 2019). Still, the 1992 agreement allows for legal returns as well, which, when (sporadically) implemented, could also have deterrent effects and help explain a decrease in WMR detections from 2018 onwards.

Similarly, when looking at fluctuations in Moroccan asylum applications to Europe, European policies might also inform such changes. Again, while asylum applications to Germany remained significant, requests from Moroccans began to decrease in 2016, with **increasing requests to Spain from 2016**, alongside decreasing requests to Italy from 2018 onward. Two factors might explain this. On the one hand, while Morocco did not enter the top ten of nationalities with the greatest number of petitions, Moroccans likely attempted to obtain international protection there as a result of Germany's migration policy under Merkel, along with Germany's labor market opportunities. Indeed, from 2009 until 2015, applications increased steadily, spiking in 2016. This 2016 spike can perhaps be partially attributed to public declarations of openness to asylum seekers, as in August 2015 Chancellor Angela Merkel in August stressed the capability of Germany to cope with asylum seeker arrivals (Oltermann 2020). The perception that Germany offered better possibilities of labour market access and societal integration could have served as a pull factor.

However, applications to Germany from Morocco sharply declining in 2017 and continuing to decrease going forward could parallel **a shift in German discourse on migration policies**. In particular, in early 2016 and again in 2018, several political parties in Germany, among which Merkel's CDU was included, began to advocate for

Morocco to be declared as a “safe country” alongside Algeria (Deutsche Welle 2016; CEAR 2019). In other words, public and political discourse characterised Moroccan asylum-seekers as not requiring international protection. Moreover, anti-immigrant populist parties obtained seats in German Parliament in 2016, citing events like a 2016 attack in a Berlin Christmas market as a reason for more restrictive asylum policies (Oltermann 2020).

Secondly, as previously referenced, apropos Italy, an initial increase in the number of Moroccan asylum applications had begun in 2014, with a decrease from mid-2018 onwards. In understanding this, it should be noted how the Gentiloni government policies, promoted by Interior Minister Marco Minniti, asking that NGOs stop save and rescue operations at sea, as well as engaging in cooperation with Libya, perhaps contributed to the drop in sea arrivals to Italy between 2016 and 2018 (Dennison and Geddes 2021). However, such policies may not have had such an impact on Moroccan nationals as those of the Conte government with Matteo Salvini as the country’s Minister of the Interior. Again, policies under his government could go towards explaining a decrease in Moroccan asylum seekers from mid-2018 onwards. In particular, the September 2018 “**Salvini Decree**” approved by the Council of Ministers included abolishing migrant protections, facilitated deportation, and suspended refugee application processes of those deemed “socially dangerous” or with a past criminal conviction (Cervi, *et al.* 2020). These policies may have discouraged Moroccan nationals from seeking asylum in Italy and illustrate the drop in applications from mid-2018 onward.

Still, European policies aside, Spain’s historical ties and **geographical proximity to Morocco** are undoubtedly linked to Moroccan migrants’ decisions to seek asylum there, with the majority having chosen the WMR and WAR routes to arrive. Furthermore, domestic conflicts like the Rif crisis and crackdown against social activists in the north of Morocco beginning in the second half of 2016 might have served as an impetus for the rise in asylum requests in Spain, geographically most proximate to the Rif region through the border cities of Ceuta and Melilla; not only did the total detections on the WMR significantly increase in the following year of 2017,

but Moroccan nationals formed a higher percentage than usual of total detections, at over 20%.

Finally, these considerations affecting movements from 2018-2020 with reference to the WMR might also inform the growing popularity of the WAR from 2018 onwards. In addition, increasing use of the WAR could be due to long-held migrant perceptions that the journey is relatively short, with information sharing about this increasingly facilitated by social networks (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021). Moreover, the 2020 exponential increase along the WAR could also be explained by **the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic**, further analysed in the section on future developments. The most obvious rationale includes the disruptions that COVID-19 state measures caused to mobility, including border closures, along with the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis affecting livelihoods in Morocco. In addition to this, interviews with migrants indicate that misinformation was circulating that deaths from the pandemic had increased labour demand in Europe (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021; Monreal Gainza and Paredes 2021).

Against this background, drivers contributing to shaping EU-bound irregular migration from Morocco that could be prioritized are:

- The rise of social tensions and upheaval at the local level, as occurred in the Rif region;
- The impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods in Morocco and its reflections on trends on the WAR;
- The multifaceted effects on Moroccan and Sub-Saharan migrants transiting through the country of migration policies adopted by the national government; also the gap between stated policy goals and more restrictive implementation practices;
- The consequences for emigration patterns of Moroccan nationals of border policies on the CMR, especially in Libya and at the EU external border in the Mediterranean Sea;
- The impact of the national debate about asylum in some European countries of destination, such as as Germany, on trends of asylum applications from Morocco;
- The constantly negotiated political relation between Morocco and the EU, especially Spain.

4. Conclusions

Migratory movements unfolding on the CMR, WMR and WAR towards Europe over the last decade constitute a component of much more complex mobility patterns, which have been mediated and shaped by drivers in countries of origin, transit and destination. In the concluding sections of the report, the main findings drawn from the case studies are discussed. They are framed within a ‘whole-of-route’ perspective, aiming also at drawing some suggestions on future prospects for EU-bound migration occurring on these corridors.

4.1 The Central Mediterranean Route

Over the last decade, the Central Mediterranean Route has become a key priority for European policy-making on migration, due to the intensification of irregular arrivals in Italy and Malta. The relevance accrued by the CMR in this period is easily illustrated by **the surge in the numbers of irregular arrivals detected by Frontex** in comparison to previous years: on average, almost 70,000 migrants had been detected in 2009-2020 each year (this number rises even further to over 156,000 in 2014-2017), while between 1997 and 2010 just around 23,000 per year were intercepted while trying to reach Italy by boat (Crawley, *et al.* 2016). Other studies have hypothesized that the systematic Search and Rescue operations initiated in 2013 with the launch of the Italian mission Mare Nostrum may have introduced a “breaking point in the statistics” (Fargues 2017) as the intensity of the flow crossing the Mediterranean Sea, now closely monitored, started growing significantly the next year (see section 2.1.).

Nevertheless, the ‘migration crisis’ of 2014-2017 has been a game-changer for European policies. Actually, no paradigm shift from an already established securitized approach mainly based on externalization and border controls has materialized. Rather, the European investment in such **external migration policies** has stepped up, looking at ways to restrict - or at least manage - irregular migration from Africa and across the Mediterranean Sea. As the analysis of the case studies in this report has shown, such measures are often based on biased assumptions about the drivers of

irregular migration from countries of origin and transit in Africa and beyond, and on a simplistic perspective on the functioning of the route, often framed as a linear trajectory from sending countries to Europe.

This approach is also in peril of disregarding local developments and social practices that not necessarily translate into EU-bound irregular movements on the CMR, but that play a key role in shaping the context within which migratory choices are adopted. For instance, **urban-rural mobility** patterns unfolding in certain African regions can act as a ‘first step’ before the challenging choice, especially for the young, of international migration. These internal movements, in countries as diverse but relevant for the CMR as Mali or Tunisia, can be shaped by climate-related dynamics or social attitudes on gender. **Gender-based dynamics** are significant factors working in tandem with other drivers also when it comes to international migration to Europe. The case of Eritrea shows the complex interplay between women’s position in society, their aspirations about education and the gendered effects of the national service on women’s decision-making. In Nigeria and Tunisia, the increasing economic agency of migrant women is emerging and it interacts with broader drivers, such as the lack of jobs, conflict or the marginalisation of certain regions of these countries, in mediating migratory attitudes. The dimension of gender thus can be considered as a cross-cutting factor affecting not only experiences of migrants in receiving countries in Europe, but also mediating social, political and economic drivers in the pre-departure phase and during the journey, which is usually fragmented and non-linear.

In fact, the assumption that migration trajectories along the CMR are easily conceived as linear journeys from ‘point A to point B’ is put into question by the difficulties of defining the CMR itself as a ‘route’. As already discussed in the introduction, the CMR is better understood as **an ensemble of mobility and migratory trails** originating in different regions in Africa – and even outside the continent – and **converging on the Mediterranean coasts of Libya and Tunisia**, before heading to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea. The length and fragmentation, both in spatial and temporal terms, of these trajectories exposes migratory choices and behaviours of individuals to the

influence of a multitude of social, political, economic and environmental factors manifesting in countries of origin, transit and destination.

4.1.1 Divergence of drivers in countries of origin

Such complexity is also reflected in the divergence of drivers at play in the regions where irregular flows on the CMR originate, namely the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and West Africa. These areas have presented stark differences in terms of political arrangements, economic trends and conflict dynamics during the last decade. Key institutional elements stand out, starting from the different circulation arrangements characterizing these regions. Migrants from Mali and Nigeria are able to reach the borders of Libya and Algeria exploiting the opportunities posed by the **free circulation regime of ECOWAS**. While we have shown that smuggling operations are still an option also for intra-ECOWAS movements due to the partial implementation of visa-free provisions by its Member States, Nigerians and Malians have been able to respond to violence, instability and/or economic downturns in their home countries by reaching Niger somewhat easily in their way towards North Africa, thanks to this arrangement. At the same time, not all movements from these countries have turned into irregular migration to Europe, even when conflict erupted in north-eastern Nigeria in 2009 and in northern Mali in 2012. In fact, ECOWAS free circulation regime is also rooted in an established tradition of intra-regional mobility that has persisted during the ‘migration crisis’. These mobility patterns and institutional arrangements have contributed to shaping how migratory choices have been made, as it was possible for individuals to take mobility decisions on relatively short notice and to rely on a consolidated infrastructure - not only smuggling operations, but also legitimate travel agencies and transport services. Travels from Nigeria and Mali towards a neighbour country could then turn into a longer movement towards Europe – or vice versa, dependent on the conditions encountered by migrants in countries of transit, like the disrupting effects in Mali of the conflict in the Liptako-Gourma region after 2015, the impact on smuggling activities of Nigerien policies after 2016 or the multifaceted consequences of the Libyan conflict on irregular flows.

The picture changes in the Horn of Africa, where the absence of a free circulation regime affects migratory attitudes in a completely different way, concurrently with the role played by **the authoritarian political system in Eritrea**. While the porosity of borders should always be taken into account as an important factor, it has been underlined how in the Horn of Africa migration requires more planification due to the mortal risks posed by crossing the borders, especially the militarized frontier of Eritrea. The deeply felt necessity for planning enhances also the appeal of smugglers operating on the first trails of the travel out of the country (McMahon and Sigona 2016). It should also be noted that emigration from Eritrea constitutes a particular case in the Horn region, due to the peculiarity of its political regime and institutional drivers. Actually, Ethiopians and Somalis remain the most numerous national groups on the move at regional level.

The different institutional environment faced by potential migrants in Eritrea, Mali and Nigeria sheds also some light on the difficulty to draw a deterministic link between the emergence of conflict or waves of political violence and irregular arrivals in Italy in 2009-2020, bearing in mind that, with some fluctuations, the **flows from these countries have all mainly followed the general pattern of the route, peaking in 2016**. The peculiarity of the Eritrean case as a country of origin emerges due to the persistence of structural drivers predating our period of analysis, that have not changed during the last decade. As highlighted in the study of Eritrea, the militarization of the State, the prolongation of the National Service – with its mandatory conscription – and the implementation of repressive emigration policies have not been modified by Asmara despite major developments in the geopolitical conditions in the region, and still constitute one of the most significant drivers of emigration for Eritrean citizens. In this sense, political factors act as a structural driver of emigration and thus can hardly explain by themselves the shifts in irregular arrivals of Eritreans in Italy over 2009-2020. The picture is further complicated by the decrease in the high acceptance rate of asylum applications filed by Eritreans in Italy, that could apparently shed some light on the post-2017 decrease in arrivals, but that has not been accompanied by a similar trend in other EU's member States that appear

to be the preferred destination for asylum seekers, like Germany, where the rate has remained stable and high.

In the same fashion, looking at other countries of origin on the CMR, **changing conflict dynamics and evolving political drivers** alone are not sufficient to determine the trends of unauthorized border crossings in the Mediterranean Sea. If political conditions in Eritrea are structural, they have experienced key modifications both in Mali and Nigeria in different moments of the period under analysis. However, such evolutions did not unmistakably translate into shifts of the migratory flow at the concluding end of the CMR. The instability cycle in Mali, for instance, has increased the number of asylum-seekers and refugees from the country since 2012, but arrivals through the CMR in Italy did not always follow the recrudescence of violence affecting the country, especially from 2017 onwards. The same could be said about conflict-related drivers in Nigeria, where the violence mainly linked to Boko Haram has worsened the causes of displacement, but Nigerians have arrived in Italy still accordingly with the general pattern of the route.

Moreover, it has been already discussed how emigration from West Africa seems to have been **mainly driven by economic reasons**. This take on economic drivers is confirmed by researches on individual agency and motivations of international migrants from Africa to Europe, which indicate how ‘work/send money home’ is the most important reason for coming to Europe stated by 60% of those interviewed, while another 21% report economic motivations as an additional reason for their journey. (UNDP Africa 2019). A higher proportion of women (12%) reports the importance of ‘family/friend-related’ drivers. Economic motivations are singled out four times more than family issues among men, but only two times more among women. A widespread dissatisfaction with the governance context and the general low level of confidence in institutions at home also emerge as cross-cutting drivers affecting economic and family motivations (Ibid.).

Despite this divergence of political, economic and social drivers in countries of origin as diverse as Eritrea, Mali or Nigeria, flows from these countries have shown a

comparable outcome in terms of irregular arrivals in Italy: they peaked in 2015-2016 and, broadly speaking, during the migration crisis of 2014-2017. These trends suggest that, in order to gain a better grasp on the drivers on the CMR, the analysis should look more carefully to conditions in countries of transit – mainly Niger and Libya – and how these areas have acted as amplifiers or bottlenecks for irregular migration in different moments in time.

The case of emigration from Tunisia, one of the major nationalities detected on the CMR, stands out from this broader analysis because of the country's peculiar geographic proximity with Italy, which diminish the significance of other contexts of transit, and the different pattern followed by irregular arrivals of Tunisians in comparison to the other nationalities included in this report. Anyway, while country-size political developments such as the Revolution in 2011 and different forms of **socio-economic marginalisation** suffered by Tunisian youths have shaped patterns on the CMR, it has been underlined how the first wave in 2011 might have been also precipitated by the 'simple' opportunity posed by the momentary absence of border controls due the confusion and disorganization of the police forces during the upheaval (Fargues 2017). This would reinforce the assumption that structural factors or major political developments are just one component of the explanation of Europe-bound migratory flows, that are also motivated by the opportunities and constraints to individuals' agency.

4.1.2. The role of drivers and policies in countries of transit

An extensive analysis has been devoted in previous sections of this report on the influence of secondary drivers in countries of transit on the mobility patterns of Eritreans, Nigerians and Malians towards Europe. Elements such as the arrival of Syrian migrants in Libya in 2014 and the development of an **operational smuggling infrastructure in the Sahel**, especially in Niger, have interacted with the growing instability in Mali and Nigeria, the downturn of the Nigerian economy in 2016 and the persistence of political repression in Eritrea in shaping the increase of irregular

arrivals in Italy culminating in 2016. Also, the decreasing trend spotted in unauthorised border crossings in 2017-2020 seems to have been largely affected by shifting conditions in areas of transit, such as the implementation of the EU-sponsored Anti-Trafficking Law in Niger and the multifaceted disrupting effects of the various phases of the Libyan conflict on smuggling business and irregular migration. Overall, it could be safely assumed that the flow of Sub-Saharan migrants on the CMR have been profoundly influenced by the changes occurring in the ‘alternative destination’⁷⁷ of Libya since 2011: while these evolutions have not been unidirectional in pushing migrants out of the country, they have profoundly affected the context in which migratory decisions of potential migrants have been taken, one way or the other. For instance, the recrudescence of the civil war in 2014 could have predisposed the departure of scores of migrants residing in Libya, but the conflict engulfing the Western coast of Libya in more recent years has posed new obstacles to the activities of smugglers and have potentially enhanced neighbouring Tunisia’s role as an area of transit, as the increase in departures from the country since 2017 seems to suggest. However, this increasing trend in departures from Tunisia is not only connected to the crossing of Libya becoming even more dangerous, time consuming and expensive over the years, due to the conflict and the lack of rule of law in the country.⁷⁸ It has been also facilitated by the change of EU policies in terms of **externalisation and securitization of borders**, which have turned into one of the core issues negotiated by Europe with several Libyan stakeholders at the central and local level.

Overall, European policies have mainly reacted to the migration crisis of 2014-2017. As already mentioned, the EU and its Member States have not distanced themselves from their previous securitized approach of externalisation and enhanced border controls and, on the contrary, their involvement in the countries along the CMR stepped up significantly from 2015 onwards. The regions of origin of the CMR – Horn of Africa, the Sahel and West Africa – have been the explicit targets of actions funded

⁷⁷ The role of Libya as an ‘alternative destination’ is a rather Eurocentric concept, but it is useful in explaining the attraction that the country has produced for foreign workers.

⁷⁸ The danger faced by migrants transiting in Libya varies also depending on their region of origin, as targeted surveys have underlined how asylum-seekers and refugees from Eastern Africa are four times more likely to be detained in the country than those departing from Western Africa (Lichtenheld 2019).

under the **European Union Emergency for Africa Trust Fund** since 2015. The EU intervened at all levels of the route – in countries of origin (Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria and Tunisia), of transit (Mali, Niger and Libya) and at the European border on the Mediterranean, deepening its collaboration on migration management with governmental authorities, for instance in Niger, and local actors in Libya. Interventions under the EUTF aimed at ‘eradicating the root causes of migration’ were introduced in countries like Nigeria, under the umbrella of EU’s development cooperation. Another breakthrough has been constituted – this time at the national level - by Italy’s renewed political activism under Gentiloni’s government, whose declared priority to restrict irregular immigration has been then pursued with a certain degree of policy coherence – but with shifting rhetorical tones - also by the following governments.

It is complex to assess how these European and Italian policy actions aimed at enhancing cooperation on border management with countries like Niger and Libya have impacted on irregular flows, also depending on the benchmarks assumed to measure policy success (the reduction of irregular arrivals or rather the humanitarian costs and level of protection guaranteed to migrants). For instance, it has been highlighted how the tougher European stance on Niger in 2016 pushing Niamey to clamp down on smuggling operations, despite bearing some results in terms of reduction of the flow – as analysed in the previous discussion – did not halt the ‘culture of impunity’ in the country, as the government was primarily trying not to lose access to European funding (Raineri 2018). Nonetheless, even if only in a partial fashion, the disruption of smugglers’ business model in Niger, accompanied by a **deeper cooperation between the EU, Italy and Libyan authorities** inaugurated in 2016-2017, was followed by a dramatic decrease in the arrivals recorded by Frontex in Italy from July 2017. While conditions were shifting along the route, European policies seemed to be working, at least temporarily. However, without any significant change in the framework of European actions, 2020 has seen a new increase in the number of irregular arrivals at the CMR, while governments of countries on the route were seemingly adopting a more relaxed stance, for instance in Niger.

The assessment of the consequences of policies on migratory trends and patterns – and ultimately on individuals' mobility choices – is further complicated by the limited knowledge of such policies declared by people on the move. In particular, analyses of perceptions among refugees and other migrants reaching Europe since 2015 from Eritrea and Nigeria suggest that they had a limited knowledge of migration policies enacted in countries of transit and destination met along their journey. Nonetheless, understandings and perceptions of opportunities and constraints posed by such policies have informed the destination preferences of around a third of those interviewed (Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019), at least indirectly.

European policies struggled also to grasp the inherently mixed nature of irregular flows on the CMR, as asylum-related movements have occurred alongside mobility patterns that appear related more to socio-economic reasons than to conflict, especially when originating in West Africa. These dynamics have proven quite difficult to untangle. Estimates point out that asylum-seekers have constituted the majority among those arriving by sea in Italy only in 2013 and 2014, while at the peak of the flow along the CMR in 2016 they dropped to 35.9% of the total (Fargues 2017). A decoupling between the trends of arrivals on the CMR and those of first-time asylum applications in Italy has been investigated also by more recent analyses, signaling a growing number of irregular migrants reaching Italy by sea and not applying for asylum or, conversely, more applications filed by those that have not used this route (Melachrinou, *et al.* 2020).

4.1.3. The impact of COVID-19

A final point about the importance of incorporating into the analysis the role of secondary drivers unfolding in countries of transit pertains to the wide-ranging consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in the different geographical contexts crossed by the CMR, which have predisposed EU-bound flows in unexpected ways in 2020. For instance, free circulation within ECOWAS and more broadly in the Sahel has slowed down during the first half of that year, due to the **border closures and**

containment measures put in place by several governments. IOM has reported a 39% decrease in the weekly flow at key crossing points in West and Central Africa between January and May 2020 (Horwood, Frouws and Forin 2020). Not only circulation has been hindered, but thousands of people have remained stranded at borders during those months, a new reason to stop in an already fragmented migratory trajectory. Migrants from Mali and Nigeria - among others - have reported increasing difficulty in crossing national frontiers in Niger (67%) and Mali (56%) due to the pandemic, but also in moving freely within the same country. People crossing Niger have also stated a decrease in the access to smugglers (26%), much more than in Mali (Mixed Migration Centre 2020a). In the Sahel, mobility has then recovered.

The pandemic has also impacted refugees and migrants transiting through Tunisia, with **disparities among genders**. Women – mostly of Sub-Saharan origin – have been more frequently affected than men by the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 and related policy measures, as suggested by qualitative data collected in Tunisia in 2020-21. If women and men respondents similarly emphasize the lack of mobility induced by containment measures (58% and 59% respectively), women denounce more often a loss of income (43% vs. 36%), reduced access to basic goods and services (56% vs. 49%) or increased racism and xenophobia (42% vs. 33%). Migrant women with children have experienced even more pronounced level of Covid-induced stress and anxiety than those traveling alone (Mixed Migration Centre 2021)

However, it is noteworthy to highlight once more how the Italy-bound flow through the Mediterranean Sea has actually increased in 2020, mainly fuelled by Tunisians, despite the widespread recourse by national governments in countries of origin, transit and destination on the CMR to containment measures and their consequences of the day-to-day life of residents and migrants.

4.1.4. Future prospects

Future prospects of migratory trends on the CMR, and the potential impact of European policies on them, will be influenced in the first place by **the long-lasting**

socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many African countries have introduced some sort of economic lockdown, as well as border closures, during the first phases of the pandemic in 2020. The same has happened in the first destination country of the route in Europe, Italy. In countries of origin and transit, restrictive measures to contain the spreading of COVID-19 over the course of 2020 have had significant economic consequences: Nigeria entered into recession, due to containment measures mainly affecting aviation, tourism, hospitality, restaurants, manufacturing, and trade, but also as a consequence of falling international oil prices (African Development Bank Group 2021b). The pandemic will likely continue to unroll difficult economic consequences in the medium-to-long term in many African countries, despite GDP projections in countries like Nigeria (1.5%) and Mali (4%) already signalling a first rebound in 2021 (African Development Bank Group 2021a). However, immunization campaigns are facing many challenges in the African continent and could hinder future economic prospects in terms of a slow recovery of employment and income opportunities. Moreover, the COVID-induced recession has hit several African economies already struggling with widespread conditions of poverty and, in the specific case of the continental powerhouse, Nigeria, with the deeply rooted reality of “jobless growth” described in previous sections. It could be expected that socio-economic drivers will thus gain even more importance in the near future, as the long-term impact of COVID-19 may end up exacerbating existing problems of “poverty, violence and lawlessness” (Horwood, Frouws and Forin 2020).

As a matter of fact, despite border closures and their disrupting effects on smuggling businesses – especially between Niger and Libya -, 2020 saw an increase in irregular arrivals at the CMR for the first time in three years. The projections for 2021 seem, at the time of writing, to confirm a rising trend in the numbers of detections in the Mediterranean Sea: as of August 2021, Frontex have communicated almost 42,000 illegal border crossings towards Italy (Frontex 2021a).

In order to peek into future prospects, the same approach adopted throughout this report should be privileged, by considering the CMR as a multi-leg migratory trajectory and looking into potential shifting of multiple drivers in countries of origin,

transit and destination. **Conditions of instability and economic hardship** still affects **Nigeria** and **Mali**: political violence, inter-communal clashes and fighting between different jihadist formations seem set to continue in central Mali, as the countries remain “the epicentre of the Sahel crisis” (ACLED 2021). In particular, instability in the Liptako-Gourma area will continue to influence – and eventually disrupt – previous migratory corridors towards neighbouring countries. It remains also to be seen as the situation on the ground will be affected – and with it, how drivers of displacement will eventually change – by the announcement made in July 2021 by France’s President Emmanuel Macron to withdraw the forces of Operation Barkhane over the first quarter of 2022 (France 24 2021). In Nigeria, the threat posed by Boko Haram and other security risks will continue to act as drivers of displacement. At the same time, the country has been deeply affected by the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 and its partnership on migration and mobility with the EU will need to be recalibrated according to this new reality (Adepoju 2021). Finally, the **structural drivers of displacement in Eritrea** do not seem to be on the verge of any modification or relaxation by the government.

Looking at the prospects in key countries of transit, the biggest question related to the migratory environment in **Niger** concerns the eventual reprise of **the mobility and smuggling infrastructure**, which never fully recovered from the crackdown of 2016-18 and was further hindered by the pandemic. The position of the government on smuggling, in the light of the different pressures it receives from local authorities and international partners, will also need to be evaluated in the new post-COVID context. As the durability of migratory corridors crossing the country have already clearly emerged in the past, Niger will thus remain a key country of transit to be monitored in order to understand the functioning of the CMR.

In terms of arrivals to Italy, the most significant trend in recent years has been the predominance of Tunisians among the national groups reaching Europe through this route and – not coincidentally – **the re-emergence of Tunisia as a key departure spot** for irregular journeys crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Relations between Tunisia and some EU’s Member States such as Italy and France have also been

strained in 2020-21 by the issue of returns and readmission. Moreover, the assumption of executive powers by President Kaïs Saïed in July 2021 has further divided the country. In a context of deep-rooted socio-economic marginalisation and grievances, and vis-à-vis an already rising outbound migration, a new phase of political volatility will probably play a significant role as a driver of migration and mobility in the months and years to come, while Tunisia is increasingly identified also as a country of transit.

Despite the partial shift of irregular departures to Tunisia, the situation in **Libya** still influences the context in which migratory trends on the CMR are structuring: for this reason, major political developments unfolding in the country since 2020 and their consequences on migratory patterns spanning within its territory or radiating from it will have to be carefully monitored. The swearing of **the Government of National Unity** on 15 March 2021 “represents a breakthrough” (Colombo and Cristiani 2021). The tentative political reconciliation in the country, which should mark another key step with the national elections set for 24 December 2021, would alter the environment for migrants transiting through the country and for thousands of foreign-born individuals either residing within its borders for a longer time or stranded there. In the meantime, denunciations of the brutal conditions of migrants in the country and of the systematic violation of their human rights keep on surfacing. Among the most recent ones, in September 2021 the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya appointed by the UN Human Rights Council denounced various crimes, as arbitrary detention, torture, the recruitment of child soldiers and mass killings. Migrants and refugees, alongside LGBTQi individuals, are one of the most vulnerable groups to arbitrary detention in Libya, perpetuated by both State and non-State actors with a sophisticated level of organization (UN News 2021). While the new institutional course – and the elections themselves – still face heavy challenges, it is safe to assume that a new migratory framework will emerge from this process. However, the humanitarian price borne by migrants and vulnerable categories in Libya will have to be addressed, especially when it comes to the involvement of external actors.

How will Italy and the European Union respond to the complex scenario in Libya and other developments along the CMR? European and Italian policy-makers at the moment seem to confirm their belief that a more stable and united Libya will become again **a suitable ‘alternative destination’** for migratory flows from Sub-Saharan Africa, relieving the pressure from Italy and Malta (Barana, *et al.* 2021). It is still difficult to assess the socio-economic prospects of the “new” Libya – given the obstacles that the current institution-building process is facing – but it should be recalled how the country did not completely abdicate from its role as a magnet for migrant workers even during the last decade of war.

Overall, the new government led by Mario Draghi since February 2021 has not changed Italy’s policy approach to irregular migration in the Mediterranean Sea, pushed in this direction also by some unexpected spikes in the number of arrivals, for instance in May 2021. The key words remain externalising border controls, relying on the disputed activities of the so-called **Libyan Coastal Guard** – whose role will have to be assessed in the new Libyan institutional framework – and securitizing the Mediterranean Sea, in the effort to deter irregular crossings. Italy was also able to bring back migration on top of the agenda on the European Council in June 2021: in that occasion, the EU reiterated the externalisation policies developed over the last decade and even called the countries in the neighbourhood not to instrumentalize migration (European Council 2021). In the same fashion, while the situation in Afghanistan may have limited direct repercussions on the CMR, the European reaction to it, aiming at avoiding an increase in irregular arrivals and enhancing protection capacities in countries of transit, suggests that also vis-à-vis migration from Africa the EU will not change course: externalising the European border and cooperating with countries of origin and transit on migration management will remain the norm.

4.2 The Western Mediterranean Route and the Western African Route

In considering the WMR and WAR case studies from a broader standpoint, it indeed seems evident that emerging, merging and shifting regional migration patterns on the

route through Morocco or West Africa to Spain reflect the hypothesized **conflation of different factors**, which may produce aggregate effects in acting concurrently across various stages and contexts of migrant journeys and decision-making. In this analysis, WMR and WAR mixed migration flows fluctuated over the ten-year period in a non-linear manner, albeit in recent years, their volume reached comparatively unprecedented size as characterized by 2018 and 2020 peaks in IBCs along the WMR and WAR respectively. Moreover, the routes have become significantly diversified in terms of origin, and seem to reflect a relative increase in asylum seekers.

What follows include the most relevant findings informing the past decade's trajectories, with particular emphasis on the potential but not exclusive influence of: livelihood strategies in origin contexts as affected by local and global drivers; informal networks as recourse to national, intergovernmental and trans-governmental inconsistent or lack of implementation and streamlining of migration and asylum policy regimes; both Mali and Morocco's increasing role as transit countries (in addition to origin) as pertains to a wider geopolitical negotiation; and prioritization of EU and Member State securitization interests over a more holistic, long-term view to migration governance and integrity of asylum systems, particularly resulting in gendered effects on these routes' flows.

4.2.1. Structural drivers in countries of origin

To begin, structural drivers at the point of origin appear increasingly global in nature, from international security and development interventions to climate effects. In the case of **Mali**, for example, it may be that **intensifying violent conflict** throughout the country (and particularly in the North) could partially result from destabilizing effects of international peacekeeping interventions over the past decade. This forms part of a greater international security and development nexus that could engender further violence and forced displacement, not exclusive to the Malian case, but also impacting Sub-Saharan African flows and transit through Mali overall (Boutellis and Zahar 2017; Di Razza 2018). Moreover, global climate change and its implications for food security,

socioeconomic stability and overall livelihoods has increasingly emerged as a significant factor at play in the Malian case and wider Sub-Saharan context, and climate cycle changes have affected migration patterns in Morocco as well (Hegazi, *et al.* 2021; Van Praag 2021). Even the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences for origin country economies and resulting societal well-being could be understood as part of the global effect on the local.

This is not to dismiss **local factors** like the Taureg uprising through 2009, the social and political response to Mali's 2018 election, various increasing conflicts over access to land and resources in Mali, or Morocco's 2016 Rif struggle, for example (ACAPS 2019; Haïdara and Isbell 2018; Zaireg 2018). Nor should observations as to globalization's effects detract from migrant agency as to livelihood strategies, as exemplified by the Malian history and culture of gendered mobility, or long-established Moroccan diaspora networks (Boulay 2021; Berriane, 2017).

4.2.2. The role of drivers and policies in countries of transit

In turning towards those drivers mediating migration and mobility in contexts of transit in light of the bigger picture, the degree of capacity or willingness of state and regional actors to craft and implement **migration governance**, or the disparity between purported potential for authorized mobility versus the reality on the ground, should be considered in combination with disjointed legal avenues and administrative processes between states and regions. In the case of transiting through West Africa, depending on what stage and location a migrant finds themselves on a route, their movement can be considered regular or irregular. The Free Movement Protocols of ECOWAS allow for a national to move from one Member State to another for up to 90 days with valid documentation, thus facilitating regular migration flows within the region. Still, even within ECOWAS, without following the guidelines of free movement or possessing the correct papers, movement within the region can also be considered irregular (Osagie Odobo, 2017). Moreover, upon leaving the ECOWAS region and proceeding on to North Africa and entering Morocco, movements may become

irregular, as the ECOWAS free movement measures no longer apply, and migrants find limited options for regular pathways with even further limitations when opting for crossing from Morocco or West Africa into Spain and the EU.

Such fragmented or non-robust migration regimes in turn relate to **smuggling or informal networks** that exercise significant influence on the manner and direction of migratory movements. Given the absence of recourse to the state or legal systems, it is argued that in the majority of cases individuals that form part of the mixed migration flows from Africa along the WMR and WAR routes chose smuggling entities in order to facilitate their travel (Magallanes-Gonzalez 2020). The informal and precarious nature of these networks can then expose migrants not only to more dangerous and clandestine journeys, but also trafficking and abuse with heavily gendered dimensions. These complex informal networks can be both local and international as well as legal and illegal, private or public (involving state authorities), despite varying efforts to slow or halt their operations (Ennaji and Filippo 2019; Lahlou 2018a). The vacuum in terms of formal mechanisms for mobility from state to regional and international levels undoubtedly factor into migrants' decisions to rely on informal or clandestine options.

Forming part of these previous considerations about transit is the greater geopolitical context, consisting of competing interests, diverging diplomatic overtures versus discretionary practices, and corresponding inconsistent implementation of migration strategies, all of which have important repercussions for migrants. In particular, **Morocco has become an increasingly crucial player** over the past few decades and even more so in recent years, beyond its geographical location positioning it at the crux of the WMR. Not only does it receive significant funds from the EU (the second largest recipient of EU neighbours), it also exercises its weight with Sub-Saharan African neighbours and in contesting the Western Sahara with Algeria. Any geopolitical jockeying by the Moroccan state is mutually affected and informed by the interests and corresponding actions of North African and Sub-Saharan states and regions, as well as those of the EU and Spain, all with significant impacts for transit migration. In this sense, a dichotomy has emerged between the allegedly progressive

and rights-oriented migration policy reform in 2013, positioned as spearheaded by the monarchy, versus actual practices of Moroccan authorities and in particular security forces in the form of dispersal policies and detention. These can cause immobilization that deters further journeys, or alternatively can encourage departure from Morocco at any cost (Iranzo 2021; Natter 2020).

In combination, there is a **lack of true opportunity for socioeconomic integration** in the face of these unfulfilled or non-implemented migration commitments and policies (as well as the current Moroccan economic context) (Baida 2020). Added to this is the amplified public and societal othering of Sub-Saharan migrants which can lead to their experience of further vulnerabilities and violence, a public attitudes trend that has been increasing over the past decade (Gazzotti 2021). In a similar manner, international funds and intervention in Mali over the past decade perhaps contributed to the establishment of the 2012 Anti-Trafficking and 2014 National Migration Laws. Notwithstanding Mali's continued political instability, these formal actions have not particularly stemmed irregular Malian flows or trafficking practices along the WMR and WAR.

Finally, in arriving to the destination stage within the overall route context, it is again evident that the observation and implementation of migration and asylum policies both in transit countries and in **the reception and handling of asylum requests at the European border** works in a mutually constitutive nature with migrants' initiative or response in light of this management, affecting flows. Despite civil society advocacy and public and academic critique, EU and Member State policies, initiatives and particularly informal arrangements seem to continue to largely reflect security interests that do little to protect or even dismantle migrant protections, as well as produce short-term or contradictory effects if the objective is reducing migration flows at EU external borders (Lixi 2017). There seems to be an increase in recent years on both routes in the number of asylum-seekers, which may affect the total composition of mixed migration flows; at the same time, these numbers most likely do not reflect the true amount of potential asylum seekers arriving to the borders.

In considering these state interests versus migrant rights protections, it is worthwhile to note the symbolism and relevance of how the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration was recently adopted at an Intergovernmental Conference in Marrakech, Morocco by the majority of UN Member States in December of 2018 (and endorsed by the UN General Assembly a few days later). Since its signing, there has been criticism of not only signatories' lack of implementation (Spain and Morocco are signatories), but that states may use it to legitimize practices that are not in keeping with its objectives, and that it does not provide adequate protections to migrants in the first instance (Bloom 2019; Guild 2018). While the Compact makes vague references to key human rights on which migrants may be particularly dependent, including the right to liberty, protection of private and family life, and protection against expulsion. For example, migrants are often detained in arbitrary ways, outside of the normal function of the criminal justice or public health systems (Ibid.).

In this context, frequently documented discretionary and at times illegal procedures take place at the Spanish southern border of Ceuta and Melilla, visible in the news and civil society advocacy throughout the timespan under study, including pushbacks and returns of unaccompanied minors in August of 2021 (De Vega 2021). As with similar critiques on the WMR, in terms of the WAR, advocacy organizations have condemned **migration management policies in Canaries as intentionally dissuasive mechanisms**, isolating migrants and ultimately seeking their deportation, including via pushbacks. It has been reported that shortcomings in screening and reception could mean that migrants unaware of their rights but qualifying for asylum could be deported. Finally, reception conditions have been criticized as particularly lacking this past year during 2020 with COVID-19 consequences and heightened arrivals (Monreal and Paredes 2021). Again, in terms of bilateral cooperation on border management, the Spanish and Moroccan relationship is multifaceted, including technology sharing, joint patrolling and temporary work permits for Moroccans (Lixi 2017). However, as their relationship has developed, while based in the 1992 readmission agreement, Spain and Morocco often work via informal cooperation in terms of readmission (Ibid.).

Another significant bilateral cooperation includes that of Spain and Mauritania, as, in addition to other factors, deportation from the Canary Islands is particularly facilitated by a 2003 readmission agreement between the two, and to date deportees are often expelled to Mauritania (Garver-Affeldt and Seaman 2021). In confronting the 2020 increased flows, recent Spanish diplomatic efforts have included allocating 1,5 million euros in security equipment for African countries including Senegal and Mauritania as of June 2020. Spain and **Senegal** have yet to formalize a November 2020 meeting discussing Senegal participating in a circular returns pilot program, and 2020 saw several Spanish diplomatic or military visits to Mauritania. In addition to the questionable effects of further securitization and the ways of organizing it, border policies have been cited as responsible for growing smuggling networks on the WAR (Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012).

As a final consideration, when taking into account **the gendered effects of inconsistent or alegal migration governance** and how this relates to real or perceived constraint and opportunity structures regarding asylum processes, research to date on family strategies in accessing Spain via Morocco is notable. For example, it seems possible that whether or not a pregnancy was deliberate (i.e., often possibly a result of rape), both the mother themselves or a smuggler or partner might consider this a strategy to avoid deportation and obtain family reunification rights upon arrival in Spain (Dubow and Kuschminder 2021; Tyszler 2019). It is also theorized that children can be a part of these gendered family mobility strategies: for example, Moroccan families may send their sons in attempts to clear the fences of Ceuta and Melilla with the hopes of avoiding pushbacks as minors entitled to international protection (Queirolo Palmas 2019).

However, there are many claims that minors are still not provided adequate asylum recourse in Spain, and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted a decision in February 2019 **condemning Spanish pushbacks of minors** (ECCHR 2019; United Nations CRC/C/80/D/4/2016). In particular, it related to the case of an unaccompanied male Malian minor (15 years old at the time of the events) fleeing war, and pushed back from Melilla to Morocco without inquiry as to his age, name or

protection needs. Again, this is yet another demonstration of how the consistency and integrity of migration and asylum systems, not simply at the EU border but beginning from origin countries and through transit, seem to be inextricably linked to the composition, volume and direction of flows from Morocco and West Africa to Spain.

4.2.3 The impact of COVID-19 and future prospects

In examining and estimating current and future developments on the WMR and WAR, there are several ongoing events and prospects to consider when reflecting on the above diverse contexts influencing mixed migration flows to the EU, and their governance. In brief, the most relevant considerations include: the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and future consequences; current border practices and the accompanying political will and cooperation (or lack thereof) in transnational partnerships and knowledge sharing; and the potential consequences of how European and African discourses continue to frame Sub-Saharan migrants along gendered and racialized lines, within a broader securitization and “crisis” laden narrative directed at migration flows to Europe in general.

Firstly, despite the intermittent Spanish border closures related to the present COVID-19 pandemic and crisis, arrivals continue on the WMR and WAR, with flows even shifting from other routes, given the pandemic’s effects on movement restrictions and migration decision-making. As a result, **despite and due to COVID-19 mobility complications, arrivals on the WMR and WAR continue**, and in some cases are overwhelming reception systems. As described earlier in the Malian case, the unpreparedness of these reception systems entails that potential beneficiaries of international protection are not afforded procedures or guarantees. Reports from the Canary Islands along the WAR reflect this, as in the case of migrants arriving to the Arguineguín port in 2020 indicating they did not have access to legal assistance or translation in order to understand their rights (Monreal and Paredes 2021; Hruschka 2021). While such prioritization of securitization and state interests over human

rights guarantees remains, the adequacy and preparedness for “crises” situations tasked to multilateral stakeholders goes unresolved.

The **socioeconomic consequences of the health pandemic** for origin and transit countries along the WMR and WAR also point to future migration trends. The impact of the pandemic has slowed efforts towards development goals among African countries, and there has been an estimated three percent contraction of sub-Saharan Africa’s economy in 2020 (Nwuke 2021). The ongoing pandemic and its impacts will likely lead to more poverty and unemployment, especially in the informal sector, all of which will probably impact migration flows within and going out of Africa. This has implications for already existing challenges in terms of migration governance cooperation between the EU and specifically Spain, Morocco and Sub-Saharan African countries along the routes (Lahlou 2021).

In this regard, the transnational or bilateral partnerships and commitments noted in the previous section surface once again. Such agreements remain co-opted for state interests and **frequently poorly or not implemented**, often with neglect - if not outright undermining - of migrant protections. Relationships between and among the EU, Spain and Morocco and African states, and Morocco’s growing engagement with the African Union and its members, all continue to operate via informal mechanisms, agreements and procedures. These seem to prioritize economic, political and security interests over sustainable and human rights conscious migration governance. This is despite the introduction of institutional gestures with vague migrant rights protections, including the UN Global Compact or the New EU Pact on Migration (Guild 2020; Barbero and López Sala 2021). Such informal arrangements can mean that migration management is interpreted according to the perspectives of the (many) actors involved, and strategic interests result in events like the recent stranding of migrant minors in Spain in 2021, and their subsequent legally questionable (and still ongoing) returns to Morocco.

In fact, this latest development has surfaced in addition to the ongoing returns and pushbacks highlighted earlier in the report. In May of 2021, **a diplomatic dispute**

occurred when the leader of the Polisario Front of the Western Sahara, Brahim Ghali, received medical treatment in Spain, upsetting the Moroccan government opposing the Polisario; in turn, the Moroccan authorities supposedly allowed between 8,000 and 10,000 migrants to irregularly enter Ceuta in May of 2021, overwhelming Spanish resources and leaving many minors stranded. The President of Ceuta met with Moroccan officials in July of 2021, where they agreed on returns of irregular adult Moroccan nationals, and possibly minors as well. In August of 2021, as returns of minors began, civil society advocacy and public outcry led to several courts ordering halts on returns, arguing that the minors were not being met with the appropriate legal safeguards and processes (De Vega 2021).

In this vein, **Morocco will clearly remain playing a pivotal role** regarding the WMR and WAR routes to Europe. Europe and Spain continue to **outsource border management** to Morocco, as between 2019 and 2020, Spain provided 30 million euros to Morocco from the General State Budget to improve and upgrade vehicle fleets for border enforcement, directed at stymieing irregular migratory flows towards Europe (Barbero and López Sala 2021). Moreover, it is worth underlining the earlier referenced Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, with the Intergovernmental Conference to adopt it held in Marrakesh, which was marked by the UNHCR terming Morocco a country that “has increasingly become a place of destination for refugees and migrants” (Ghani 2018). Meanwhile, no substantive political reform has taken place in terms of migrant rights, and the current “transit” migrant treatment, inaptly named as migrants become immobilized in Morocco, looks as if it will continue.

Specifically, Moroccan policy towards transit migrants has been criticized as abandonment of the state, in that while migrants may not face deportation or incarceration, they are immobilized in such a way that similarly breaches rights, while saving state resources (Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti 2020). One illustration includes **a repeatedly noted gendered phenomenon**: given how many West and Central African women in Morocco have children, they may be more limited in their mobility than males. They are not only possibly indebted to smugglers or other migrants, but

also are restricted by childcare responsibilities that may limit aspirations to move on to Europe. Such limitations and responsibilities may even go so far as to restrict their movement within Moroccan cities (Gross-Wyrtzen and Gazzotti 2020; Stock 2012).

Finally, the discourse and rhetoric surrounding black bodies and Sub-Saharan migration in Morocco, as well as migration from the African continent to Europe, maintains **securitized and racialized tones** that appear to be fomenting anti-immigrant attitudes and even violence (Buehler and Joon Han 2019; Landau 2021). This can lead to facilitating securitization policies rather than working towards long-term or substantive improvement in migration governance policy. Gendered outgroup prejudice often applies to Sub-Saharan men, particularly in the case of being made visible by blackness (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020). Again, this othering can lead to further migrant vulnerability and exacerbated violence against migrants, and is not fruitful for public dialogue as to sustainable migration governance in addressing mixed migration to Europe. In sum, the aforementioned current and future considerations serve to underline the continued, non-linear nature of these designated routes, as well as speak to unresolved political, economic, and security related structural factors that play into further constitutive elements like migrant agency.

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IV Analysis of Atlantic Route migration drivers and trajectories: Human mobilities from LAC countries to EU Member States

Colleen Elizabeth Boland, Daniel Morente, Elena Sánchez-Montijano

Executive Summary

This report seeks to identify and analyse migration drivers shaping mixed migration from Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) countries to the EU as part of a larger examination of the main migratory routes to Europe most relevant to the EU's migration policymaking agenda. It informs the ITFLOWS project's development of a predictive AI tool regarding mixed migration to the EU, with an aim to improve management of these mobilities and reduce societal tensions. As such, it couches the investigation within an understanding of how the macro and meso level drivers it identifies—taken as aggregate across origin, transit and destination contexts—can shape the volume, direction and gender dynamics of non-linear migration and asylum trajectories. Throughout, it premises that these processes are a result of mutually constitutive interaction between the identified drivers and individual migrant agency. The latter is not illustrated here, but will be provided in complementary ITFLOWS project research that includes interviews with migrants with asylum-seekers and refugees that have reached Spain during the same period examined in this report.

While providing a general overview of LAC country migration to Europe, the report proceeds in an inductive process via providing three in-depth LAC country case studies. These countries have been selected in view of their significance in terms of migration to Spain and the EU. The selection takes into account migration patterns in the past decade as well as more recently, with attention to volumes of migratory movements, particularly those of asylum seekers. Alongside a qualitative literature review, data from the United Nations Population Division, EU's Eurostat, and Spain's National Statistics Institute are provided within an analytical framework. Drawing

insights from these case studies, the report then zooms back out to the greater regional perspective, offering a series of observations and conclusions as to what drives and shapes the LAC mixed migration that ultimately arrive to the EU. Finally, it comments on some current issues, as well as contemplates future prospects relevant for EU policymaking.

1. Introduction to the Route⁷⁹

1.1 Preliminary context

From the beginning of the 21st century there has been a slight acceleration of migratory movements from Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) countries⁸⁰ to Europe. LAC nationals residing in the EU-27 totalled 4,080,277 in 2010, 3,932,524 in 2015, and 4,793,6959 in 2020 (United Nations 2020). These new arrivals, and those migrants remaining in Europe despite the 2008 crisis, have resulted in significant populations from the LAC countries residing in Europe. The vast majority are concentrated in Southern Europe with almost 59% living in Spain in 2020, where they either remain or proceed on to settle elsewhere in established networks throughout Europe. Italy then has 14% of all LAC nationals, followed by France with almost 7% and the Netherlands and Germany with 5.8 and 5.3%, respectively. The 2020 pandemic contexts impacted LAC migration in that they experienced a slight decrease, despite mobility restrictions and border closures, as people continue to search for better living conditions.

In general terms, the migratory growth towards Europe can be characterised by a young and feminized demographic profile, with many of these immigrants working in low-skill occupations, being overqualified or underemployed in European destination countries. The diversity of migration from LAC countries, in terms of socioeconomic background, tend to be diluted and homogenised as a consequence of the limits of the labour insertion, networks and opportunities provided by the European destination countries. At the same time, socioeconomic mobility can be facilitated by social networks aid in social and cultural reproduction, rights claims, employment opportunities and maintaining relationships with origin countries (Herrera 2007).

Despite the importance of this migration to Europe, it should be noted of the 43

⁷⁹ The authors note that the terms “route” and “trajectory” may imply via their definitions that migration is a linear process, as the entirety of this deliverable notes, our message is the opposite (these are complex, non-linear processes).

⁸⁰ The LAC region referred to here is defined according to the UN’s “International Migration Stock 2020: destination and origin” (retrieved 2021): a total of 52 countries.

million total population from Latin American and Caribbean who have migrated globally, almost 60% (25.5 million) reside in North America. Next, 26.3% (11.3 million) of LAC migrant stock is located in another LAC country, and only 11.2% of LAC migrants have settled in European Union Member States (United Nations 2020). However, in terms of international movement by origin, data also suggests that Caribbean and Central American migrants largely migrate to the United States with South Americans demonstrating more diversified choices (Sporlein 2018).

This introduction presents a brief overview of this LAC interregional migration, as forming part of non-linear migration that can affect the Atlantic Route. It then moves on to address migration to the EU, with Spain as the most significant destination country of all the EU Member States. It concludes with a general overview of recent Atlantic Route trends.

1.2 Latin American and Caribbean interregional migration

Latin American and Caribbean interregional movement has been on the rise since the 1970s, and by the turn of the century, 76.4% of all recorded migration in LAC region consisted of migrants from countries within the region. The data currently shows that the region has more than 43 million emigrants, with 11.3 million of which have immigrated to another LAC country (United Nations 2020).

In the past century, and particularly beginning from the post-war period, the Latin American school of thought gave rise to the development theory of structuralism, put forth by Raúl Prebisch and other thought leaders from the region (Kay 1998).⁸¹ This structuralist paradigm included underlying principles emphasizing interconnectedness of development and underdevelopment, questioning international trade regimes by pointing out they furthered inequalities that could undermine local development. A program of important substitution industrialisation (ISI) meant

⁸¹ This approach emerges from institutions such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), The Latin American Institute for Economic and Social Planning (Ilpes), and the University of Chile's Center for Socioeconomic Studies (CESO)(Kay 1998).

barriers on foreign imports and an emphasis on promoting national or state-owned businesses. Implementing ISI throughout the region led to rapid urbanisation and corresponding internal migration. In fact, this high urbanisation rate continues today, with roughly one in three Latin Americans living in a city with a million or more residents (Delgado-Wise 2014).

While the heyday of these policies continued through the 1950s, as the 1960s came to a close, growth stalled, and government borrowing as well as structural adjustment policies starting from the 1970s led to prolonged financial crisis in most countries in the 1980s (Cerrutti and Parado 2015). The endogenous context was marked by weakening welfare states and rising authoritarian regimes, followed by poor economic conditions, and labour markets marked by instability and precarity. Added to this was the exogenous situation, mainly influenced by U.S. foreign policy interventions in the region, which contributed to political instability. As a result, these decades were distinguished by increasing emigration to industrialised countries like the United States and Spain, which are largely characterised by irregular channels, temporary work visas, family reunification or transgenerational ties (Durand and Massey 2010).

At the same time, skilled emigration from LAC makes it the region with the highest relative growth of skilled migration to OECD countries, even if these skilled workers can often take up unskilled jobs in destination countries, including the United States (Lozano-Ascencio and Gandini 2012). In many cases, the migrant profile is made up of young people with economic resources and advanced education (ECLAC 2021). In this regard, the situation should be linked with structural problems related to the lack of effective, permanent avenues to residency authorisation, as well as to the various restrictions (by law or in practice) on access to employment or validation of academic and professional degrees and certifications, resulting in unemployment or overqualification. Furthermore, remittances remain fundamental to the economies and growth of many countries in the region, even during the pandemic context (ECLAC 2021). Also, for many countries in the region, return migration has significant

impact (Ibid.). Most recently, pre-pandemic, the region already had low growth rates (averaging .4% between 2014 and 2019) and what increasing social and macroeconomic vulnerabilities, and the COVID-19 crisis is described as the worst economic and social crisis in several decades (CEPAL 2020).

Further defining characteristics in terms of interregional migration includes how they have become increasingly diversified. In recent years, migration barriers in northern countries have intensified for undocumented migrants, as Latin America was the first region to have reflected a female majority among its migrants, and in Europe they remain in the majority (Kofman and Raghuram 2012; Eurostat 2021). Literature from the 1980s forward explains gendered global care regimes with feminised labour migration from the Global South (from normally low-income countries) to Global North households, particularly, women migrants from the LAC countries. However, the gendered dimensions of Latin American migration are of course more complex, as further illustrated in the country case studies.

Regarding the current state of affairs in terms of interregional migration, the Andean Community (CAN) and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) represent regional integration frameworks key for migration management. In fact, migration governance in the region is argued to take the form of a pluralist legal regime, where a migrant's status is dependent upon the relation between their country of origin and either (or both) CAN or MERCOSUR, as well as any existing bilateral agreements between their origin country and country of destination (Bernal et al., 2015).

On the one hand, CAN, founded in 1969, consists of South American countries Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru and comprises a free trade area. It has been largely working on measures to solve challenges migrants face abroad. Recently, as of May 2021, it has approved the Andean Immigration Statute, which offers reciprocal immigration benefits to each other's nationals, permanent residents and their families (Secretaría General de la Comunidad Andina 2021). On the other hand, MERCOSUR, which affords more extensive migrant rights, was established in 1999. This

organisation allows for right to residence (but not to freedom of movement, which leads to irregular entry between countries) under a 2002 Residence Agreement (RAM). Nationals from Member States, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Bolivia, as well as associated Member States Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, hold the right to work and reside in other MERCOSUR states for a period of two years (and later proceed on to permanent residency).⁸² Venezuela has not ratified the agreement (Brumat and Feline Freier 2021).

Various categories of migrants are also provided a number of rights, including to equal working conditions, family reunification, children's' education and other social, cultural and economic rights that nationals also enjoy (Acosta and Geddes 2014). With some regarding it as a migration governance milestone, the right to residence and migrant workers' rights in the RAM can be even more substantially grounded in human rights than those of the EU (Lavenex 2018). In the same vein, there are some specific regional organizations in Central America or in the Caribbean. Some examples include the Central American Integration System (SYCA), or the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), both of which have limited projects and initiatives regarding migration, focused primarily on root causes.

1.3 Route to Europe

The Atlantic route trajectory, both historically and currently, reflects a diverse history between the LAC region and European continent (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Avila-Tàpies 2019). While also clearly tied to international markets and labour dynamics, migration from LAC countries to Europe, and backwards, is highly characterised by “transgenerational” migration, understood as migration of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of emigrants occurred in the late 19th or early 20th centuries. In other words, the historical migration reflects colonial ties and networks, and consequent varying dynamics of immigration and emigration, between LAC and

⁸² As of 2017, Venezuela is suspended from MERCOSUR due to policies and practices of the Maduro regime (Lavenex 2018).

Europe. From the late nineteenth century until World War II, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese emigration to the region was prevalent (Yépez and Herrera 2007).

It was in the second half of the 20th century, in order to meet post-war labour shortages, that migrant movements from Caribbean ex-colonies to the UK, Netherlands and France were met with largely favourable immigration and citizenship policy. Throughout the 1960s to 1980s, LAC countries suffered an important deterioration in living conditions, erosion of democratic spaces and restrictions on human rights. At the same time, emigration to Europe from LAC states was largely viewed as an elite phenomenon, with political exiles, artists and academics or students migrating from Central and South America in what was imagined to be temporary immigration, and receiving countries unconcerned with politics of integration, multiculturalism or assimilation (Ibid).

Beginning from 1990 onwards, larger economic migration came first from Peru, Dominican Republic and Cuba to Italy and Spain, and later included Dominicans, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Colombians and Bolivians who often settled in Italy, Spain and Portugal (Yépez and Herrera 2007). Financial crises in 1999 in Ecuador and 2001 in Argentina spurred greater migration, followed by more arrivals from Colombia given the economic situation, displacement and violence (Martínez and Golias 2005); in fact, in the years examined, there has been a gradual increase in international protection applications. From the destination context perspective, this migration can be explained, on the one hand, by an important demand for care work and construction in Spain. On the other, it could also be attributed to potentially attractive conditions in Spain, including no entry visa requirement, common language or culture, or previous social ties.

This modern labour migration has often been characterised by feminisation, and the Spanish case in particular is described as a family-orientated welfare state with a societal preference for Latin American care workers, based on common language, among other factors (Schaeffer and Sassen 1998; Martínez and Golias 2005). The

recession following the 2008 financial crisis in Spain was thus of significant import for feminized migration patterns, in that migrant domestic workers faced increased competition and stratification among domestic workers (Hellgren and Serrano 2018). As discussed later in this report, family reunification is affecting the demographics of past decades, to currently reflect higher percentages of male migrants.

The European financial crisis, unprecedentedly affecting migrant employment in Europe, led to changes in the demographic profile of those from the LAC region. However, legal uncertainty and similarly worsening economic situations in various LAC countries, as well as increasingly restrictive immigration policy in the United States, entailed continued emigration from LAC. Some attribute these postcolonial ties, added to social ties, and globalisation or transnational networks facilitating multiple identity in particular as to why migration between LAC to Europe and, most notably, Spain, do not reflect a simplistic labour or economic dynamic (Pérez-Caramés et al., 2019).

1.4 The Spanish case

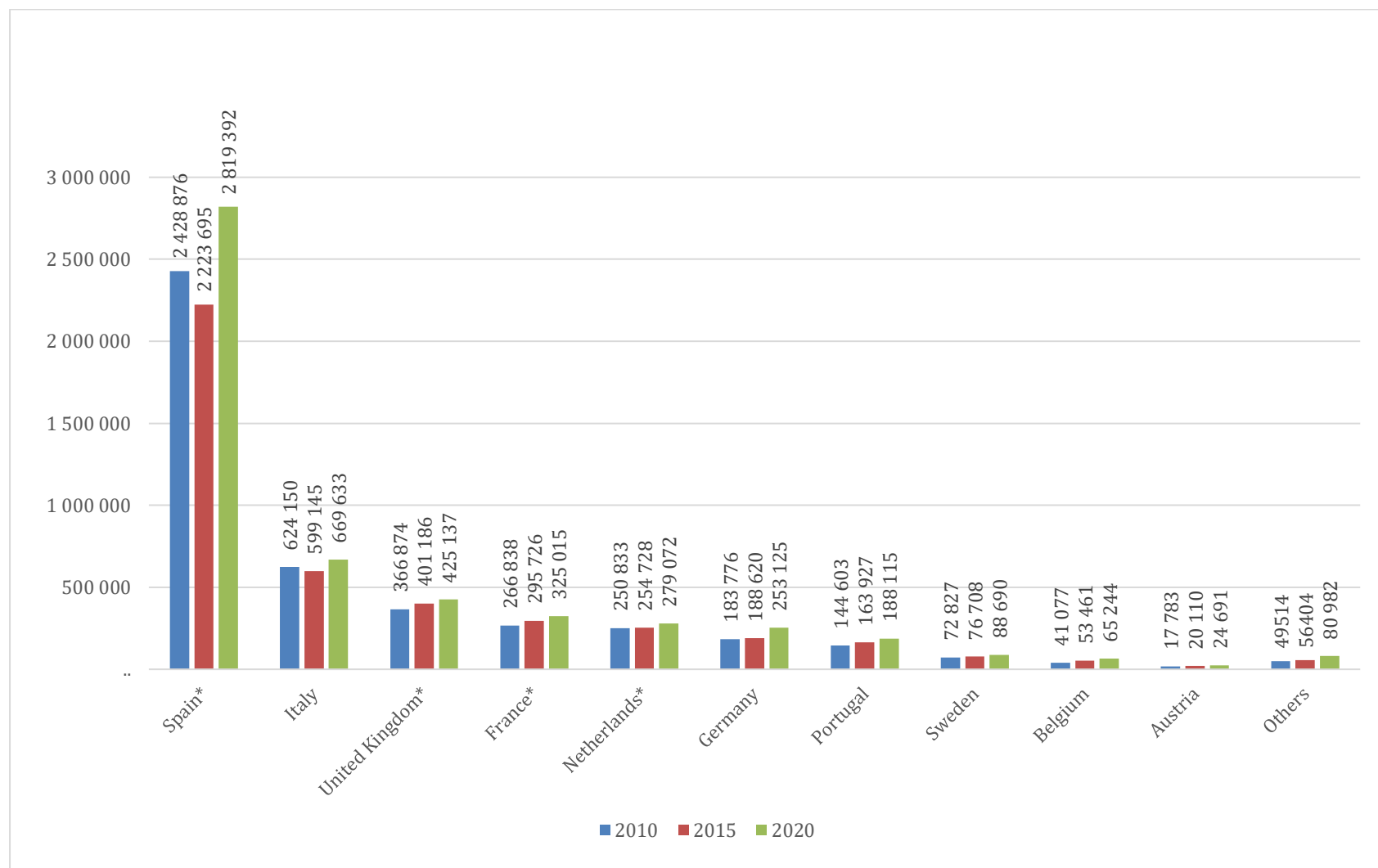
Indeed, given its historical significance on this route, it is worth briefly outlining the overall migration and asylum profile of Spain in particular in this discussion, especially in relation to colonial ties and networks that factor into contemporary migration trends. At the turn of the 20th century, Spanish nationals emigrated to the Latin America in search of work and opportunity (in particular from 1880 a 1930), with 602,081 emigrating between 1911-1915 alone (Palazón 1993). In the wake of the Civil War and due to restrictions by the Franco regime between 1939 and 1945, only 21,000 Spanish migrants and 24,000 refugees (Spanish nationals leaving from France) were have estimated to emigrate to the region, particularly to Mexico, Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Chile (Ibid.). Moreover, economic growth from oil revenues, followed by increased public expenditures (particularly in construction) and a change in migration restrictions, led to more than a half million Spanish nationals leaving for Latin America between 1946-1958 (with only roughly 162,297

returning), particularly for destination countries Venezuela and Argentina (Ibid.).

As referenced in the overall trends in Latin American migration to Europe, in tandem with the economic problems suffered throughout the region and European post-war recovery, migrants, especially those with ties to Spain, began to return to the European country throughout the 1990s. Spanish immigration policy reflected the country's reliance on Latin American labour, and public opinion was comparatively more open to immigration from that region versus others (Martínez and Golias 2005). At first, Argentines were an especially prominent demographic, before migrants from Peru, Venezuela and the Dominican Republic followed, with Colombian and Ecuadorian migration following the turn of the 21st century (Ibid.). When arriving to the present day, in country of roughly 47 million inhabitants as of 2020, Spain hosts approximately 2.8 million nationals from LAC countries (United Nations 2020). Such estimates are limited, however, as outlined in a closer look at the data over the ten-year period examined further here.

1.5 Recent Trends on the Atlantic Route

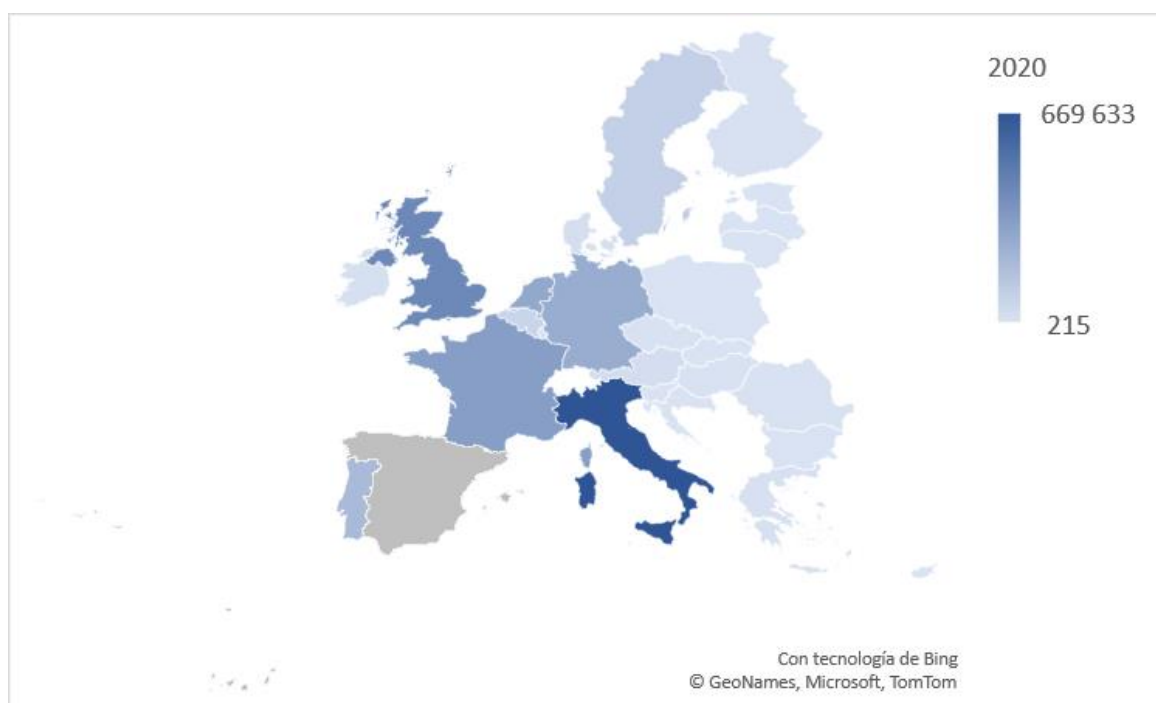
Despite the difficulties of obtaining reliable data (see Methodological Note below) to analyse recent trends along the Atlantic Route, UN Data on migrant stock from LAC in EU Member States is useful in considering the trajectory of the past decade. Again, in looking at UN data on LAC state immigration to EU Member States, the period begins at 4,080, 277 total migrants from LAC in 2010, dropping to 3,932, 524 in 2015, and rising again to total 4,793,959 in 2020, with migration to Spain making up 58.81% of all migration to the EU that year (Figure 1). The gender breakdown included 41.7% male 58.3% female. As mentioned in the introduction, Spain ranks first as destination country, roughly tripling the second ranked Italy, and followed by France, the Netherlands, Germany and Portugal.

Figure 1. Migrant stock from Latin America and the Caribbean in Member States 2010, 2015 and 2020

Source: United Nations. Own Elaboration.

Migrant stock from LAC remains below 100,000 in the EU Member States of Sweden, Belgium and Austria. After these top ten destination countries, the rest of the migrant stock in all other Member States totals only 80,982 in the year 2020. The map below demonstrates the varying stock by EU Member State if Spain is excluded.

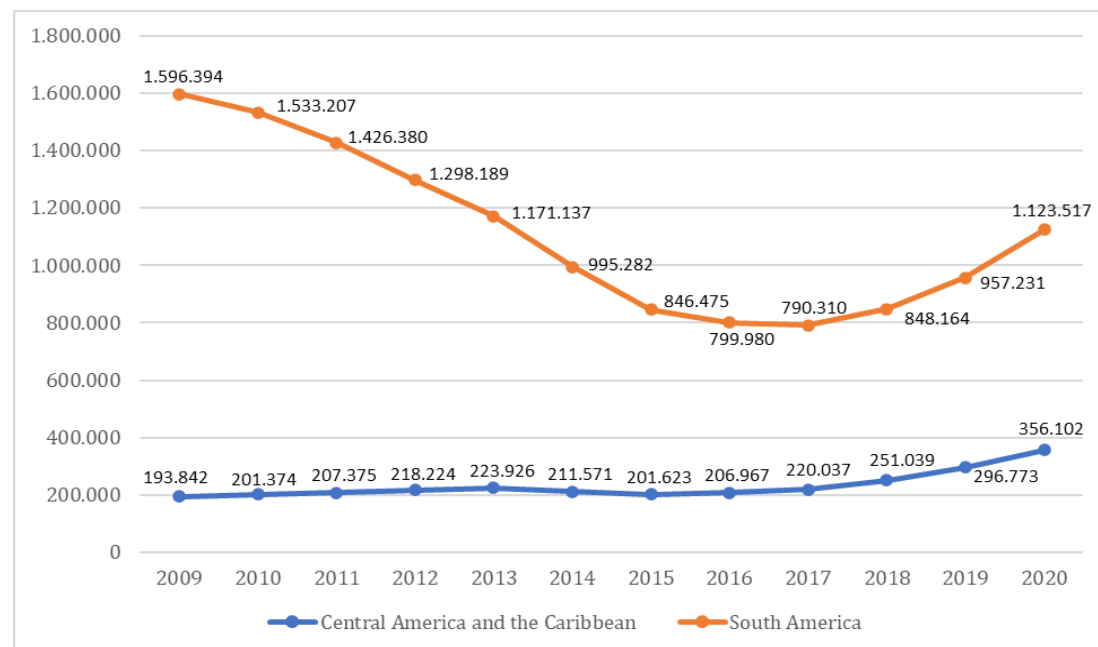
Figure 2. Migrant stock from Latin America and the Caribbean in Member States in 2020, excluding Spain



Source: United Nations. Own Elaboration.

Focusing on Spain, as the prominent case in illustrating these patterns, the Spanish National Statistics Institute provides information on nationals from Latin American and Caribbean states residing in the country (see Methodological Note). Below, this population gradually decreases over the decade in the case of South American nationals, until 2017, when the number of registrations rise again (See Figure 3). As for Central America and the Caribbean, the numbers rise until 2013, dip until 2015, and then steadily increase from that point on. These patterns could be related to how the literature observes a decrease in migration as a result of the Spanish 2008 recession and ensuing crisis, and even return migration, as well as how LAC country nationals may be adopting Spanish nationality (Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that natural born citizens of Ibero-American countries can request Spanish nationality after having resided in Spain for just two years; a Historical Memory law also allows facilitates nationality for those with Spanish grandparents (Ibid). If acquiring nationality, these individuals would no longer be categorized as migrants.

Figure 3. Foreign population from LAC residing in Spain, 2009-2020

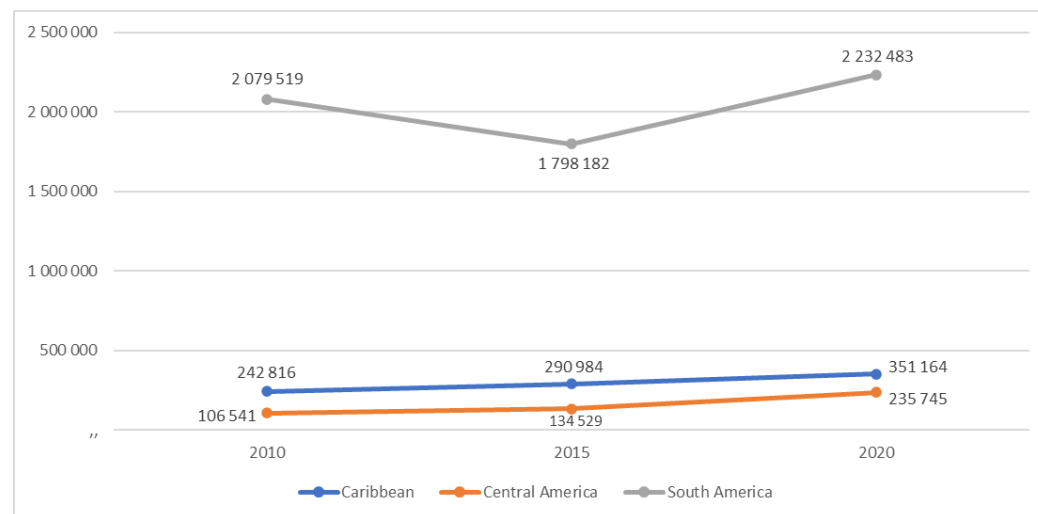


Source: INE data. Own Elaboration.

When tracking the same populations and time frame according to UN data, the numbers are significantly greater. This helps to illustrate the challenges of

estimating LAC migration. UN data is calculated by the UN Statistics Division based on national indices that it receives, and these estimations are perhaps accounting for unregistered migrants or those that have assumed Spanish nationality (and are thus no longer categorized as migrants). Still, the overall pattern in all three regions corresponds to those tracked by the Spanish INE.

Figure 4. Migrant stock from Latin America and the Caribbean in Spain, 2010-2020



Source: United Nations. Own Elaboration.

By contrast, if turning from immigration to asylum applications, the numbers do not dip in the ten-year time frame, but reflect a gradually rising trend. In terms of destination countries, when looking at the averages between the years 2010, 2015, and 2020, Member States receiving the most LAC applications from greatest to least include Spain, France, Italy, Belgium, Germany Sweden, and the Netherlands. In 2020, applications from the LAC states made up 19.29% of all asylum applications to the EU (91,020 out of 471,900) with a 50-50 breakdown of male and female among those applications recording gender. These numbers reflect a substantial increase from the earlier benchmarks, with 4240 total asylum applications from LAC states in 2010 and 7295 in 2015.

In addition, some selected Eurostat indicators can prove useful when painting an overall picture of LAC migration, even if they may not be strictly representative. Here, Eurostat provides information on those third country nationals (TCNs)

found to be “illegally,” present and are then subject to either an administrative or judicial decision declaring their stay illegal, and imposing an obligation to leave the territory of the Member State. Table 1 demonstrates how the data disaggregated into the Caribbean, Central America and South America by year from 2009-2020 varies. It seems orders to leave directed at South American nationals were highest in 2009, dropping to their lowest in 2017, before beginning to rise again in 2018. Central America also drops to the lowest in 2017 and gradually rises until 2020. Orders to leave issued towards Caribbean nationals seem to gradually decrease over the decade.

Table 1. LAC third country nationals ordered to leave EU, 2009-2020

	LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN		
	CARIBBEAN	CENTRAL AMERICA	SOUTH AMERICA
2009	4.645	4.205	58.410
2010	6.595	3.450	44.110
2011	4.180	4.000	37.245
2012	3.865	3.720	29.565
2013	2.915	2.180	17.675
2014	2.920	2.585	16.325
2015	2.770	2.620	13.515
2016	2.685	2.175	11.675
2017	1.690	1.745	10.600
2018	1.985	2.050	11.670
2019	1.730	2.715	14.465
2020	1.405	3.415	16.490

Source: Eurostat data on Migration. Own elaboration.

Note: The fact that these nationals are subject to this order does not mean that they have necessarily left the territory within that same year.

The Eurostat indicators then distinguish when a national is actually returned following an order to leave. Here, in Table 2, the top ten countries returning nationals from LAC are ranked. Spain returns the most, unsurprisingly given it receives the most of these nationals, followed by the Netherlands, in the Caribbean, Central America and in South America. Sweden also seems to return a substantial number of Central Americans. Meanwhile, Belgium, France Italy and Sweden are third, fourth, fifth and six in returning South American nationals, with significant figures as compared to the other Member States. These data may reflect more upon destination country practices than serve as representative of LAC nationals' presence in the EU Member States.

Table 2. Third country nationals who have been returned following an order to leave, 2019

	LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN				
	CARIBBEAN		CENTRAL AMERICA		SOUTH AMERICA
Spain	115	Spain	495	Spain	1.960
Netherlands	65	Netherlands	305	Netherlands	1.935
France	55	Sweden	225	Belgium	820
Germany	45	Italy	65	France	565
Italy	30	France	50	Italy	495
Austria	20	Finland	35	Sweden	465
Romania	20	Belgium	30	Portugal	280
Belgium	10	Germany	10	Germany	115
Bulgaria	10	Ireland	10	Denmark	75
Croatia	10	Austria	10	Romania	65

Source: Eurostat data on Migration. Own Elaboration.

Note: Again, this data reflects the year in which nationals were returned, which does not necessarily coincide with the order to leave.

1.6 In Conclusion

Several trends stand out when gathering data for the last ten years on the overall Atlantic route. The gradual decrease and then increase in migration and foreign nationals in residence overall, as well as the continually increasing and recently significant number of asylum-seekers stand out. Moreover, there seems to be a changing demographic in terms of gender. These overall patterns are now examined in further detail in the three case studies: Colombia, Honduras and Venezuela. These three cases have been selected because they represent the most important migrant patterns to the EU in the last five years, and are related to the significant growth of international protection applications. As part of these observations, the data and literature reflect how Spain is the leading destination in the EU for LAC mixed migration, and as such the case of Spain receives particular emphasis.

In short, the following analysis of the so-called Atlantic Route to the EU seeks to accomplish several objectives as it examines trends in mixed migration to the EU and why, when and how people move to this destination. It notes trends in the past ten years in terms of the shape, volume and direction of migration

mobilities, hypothesizing that the examination will uncover conflated macro and meso level factors that may ultimately affect the various phases and contexts of migrants' journeys and decisions. It conducts this examination within an understanding of migration as a non-linear process, and that any of these highlighted factors, especially the EU policies that come into focus, are mutually constitutive with migrant agency. Throughout this process, consideration is given to the often underdeveloped, but inherent and crucial, gender dimension.

As such, the subsequent case studies of Colombia, Honduras and Venezuela in the next three sections reflect these objectives and theoretical contextualization, before broader conclusions as to the Atlantic route mixed migration to the EU are drawn in the fourth section. Finally, in addition to the factors shaping Atlantic Route mixed migration processes and outcomes trajectory in the past decade, the fourth section notes the current context in light of this investigation's priorities, as well as offers future considerations as to currently unfolding developments and mixed migration governance.

Methodological Note:

Recent trends in this work are drawn from a combination of both Eurostat data and the Spanish municipal registry. In prefacing this section, it is important to qualify that official statistics can be unrepresentative and difficult to obtain. As migration from LAC states takes place via the air route, attempting to determine irregular migration is difficult, as many of their nationals have at least temporary, legal documentation for what may ultimately end up being a longer and irregular stay. Moreover, while migration from LAC states can be driven by fluctuating social, political and economic distress and persecution that could merit insertional protection status, the varying definitions and periods as to which receiving states define asylum-seekers as such affect who is considered refugees, which in turn impacts both asylum numbers and irregular migration patterns.

In looking at Eurostat trends, another limitation includes that the nationalization procedures established with various countries of the region, for example, the bilateral agreements with several LAC states allowing migrants residing in Spain for as little as two years to naturalize, can affect immigration statistics. In fact, each Eurostat indicator

must be qualified to an extent. For example, Eurostat's reporting on those foreign nationals from LAC countries found illegally present in each Member State; however, it seems like these statistics may be more relative to Member States' policies, rather than proportionally reflect the number of foreign nationals from country to country. For example, Spain finds a significant amount of LAC nationals illegally present in the time frame under study (34215 in 2010, 12555 in 2015, and 17925 in 2020). However, the second most substantial figures are noted in Portugal, rather than other Member States recording more immigrants or asylum-seekers. At the same time, the Eurostat data and indicators (immigration and asylum-seeker applications) that have been chosen remains illustrative and indicative of trends in LAC mixed migration to Europe.

Moreover, this report utilizes statistics on Spanish municipal registrations of nationals of this route's case studies. While the Spanish census is conducted on every ten years, Spain's National Statistics Institute (INE) must update the municipal register yearly. These figures are useful, because when residing in Spain registration with municipalities is obligatory, and in registering accessing public health and education systems is facilitated. Moreover, irregular immigrants can register as well. The drawbacks of this data include that foreign nationals are removed automatically every two years when they do not renew their registrations (Oliveau et al. 2019). The aforementioned "expedited" pathways to nationalization (two years for Latin-Americans) means that acquiring Spanish nationality eliminates registration as a foreign national, so these individuals are no longer accounted for in the numbers, even if they remain immigrants (Ibid); what makes it necessary to work with place of birth data and not with nationality.

Finally, the time frame under study corresponds to either a ten- or eleven-year span, as researchers both balanced data availability at the time of extraction, and sought to offer insight into the year 2020. Eurostat data is examined over a time frame 2010 to 2019 or 2010 to 2020. INE data is analyzed over the time period 2010 to 2020. United Nations data is examined from 2010-2020. Any use of the term(s) "migrant stock" with relation to United Nations data labels, and does not reflect the ITFLOWS authors' views that migrants should be referred to as "stock." The time frames for the various sources are noted in each Figure or Table title.

2. Colombia

2.1 Migration and asylum profile

UN WORLD POPULATION DIVISION (2019)	
Total population (millions)	50,3
<i>Male</i>	24.713.000
<i>Female</i>	25.626.000
Percentage of population	
<i>Under age 15</i>	22.6%
<i>Aged 15-24</i>	17.3%
<i>Aged 25-64</i>	51.3%
<i>Aged 65+</i>	8.8%
Crude birth rate per 1,000 population	14,7
Crude death rate per 1,000 population	5,6
Life expectancy at birth (years)	77,3
Annual rate of population change	1,2
Total migrant stock	1.142.319
<i>Male</i>	575.805
<i>Female</i>	566.514
Net migration rate (2015-2020)	4,2

WORLD BANK (2020)	
GNI per capita (\$)	5.780
GDP (\$) (billions)	271.35
School enrollment	
<i>Primary (% gross)</i>	114,50%
<i>Secondary (% gross)</i>	98%
<i>Primary and secondary (gross) gender parity index</i>	1

With a population of 50,882,884 people and bordering Venezuela, Peru, Brazil, Panama and Ecuador in northwest South America, Colombia has traditionally been a country of emigration (World Bank, 2021; Silva and Massey 2014). From a historical perspective, three waves of emigration from Colombia can be identified throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Firstly, in the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, an initial group of Colombians emigrated to the United States (US) in pursuit of more promising labour opportunities, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the US Immigration Act of 1965. Secondly, in the late 1970s and during the 1980s, whilst thousands of Colombians kept moving to the US, a considerable number of citizens turned also to Venezuela, in a moment when the country was expanding its oil industry and Colombia was experiencing an economic slowdown and a rise in unemployment. Thirdly, starting in the 1990s, during a combined national political and economic crisis, as well as the deterioration of the internal security conditions, many Colombians used former social networks developed by their ancestors to emigrate to an array of destinations that included both the aforementioned and new ones, most prominently Europe, and especially Spain, as well as certain countries of Latin America, for example, Chile (Palma 2015, 11-12; OECD 2009).

Since the 1990s, however, the migratory tendency in Colombia has progressively shifted, and the gap between the departure of emigrants and the arrival of immigrants has slowly narrowed. On the one hand, immigration to Colombia steadily decreased from 1980 to 1990, and then it recovered its 1980 levels in 2000, to slightly increase until 2010. On the other hand, emigration have consistently fallen since 1990 (Palma 2015, 14). For the last few years, Colombia has constituted a country of transit for mixed migration emanating from Latin America, but also from specific regions of Africa and Asia. The latter regions' citizens fly to countries with relatively lax visa policies, for instance, Ecuador, to then travel by land in the direction to the US and Canada, using the only country separating South from Central America—Colombia (Carvajal 2017). Simultaneously, throughout the last five years, an important influx of Venezuelans has arrived at Colombia. As a result, Venezuela now represents the country with the largest number of national emigrees and asylum seekers in Colombia; by September 2021, more than 1.7 million Venezuelans were residing

in its neighbouring country (R4V 2021). As of 2021, Colombia is the largest receptor of Venezuelans, accumulating 32.9% of the country's immigration (United Nations 2020) with a vocation of permanence, and also the territory from where 90% of that population has departed to third countries, despite the continuous and prolonged border closures and the breakdown of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Since 1985, the violence resulting from the conflict between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) and the Colombian State has displaced more than 8.2 million citizens (HRW 2020). In 1965, after the turbulent undeclared civil war period known as *La Violencia*, spanning between 1948 and 1958, during a moment of high tension between the conservative and the liberal political elites, large groups of Colombian peasants across the country armed and organized themselves to protect their land. It was in that year when the first combat between the newly-funded rebel group and the national army took place, with the former officially assuming the name FARC just two years later, in 1966 (Linde 2018). The main trigger for the eruption of the violence that would extend over the following five decades was the discontent in the rural areas of the country, due to: territorial and political marginalisation; high levels of corruption and political abandonment; and the uneven distribution of land property rights between large versus small landowners. Initially localized in certain rural areas, as years went by, the conflict progressively permeated the entire national territory (IDMC 2021).

By the time of the signing of the peace agreements between the FARC and the national government in La Habana, in September 2016, the stock of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Colombia was of 7,246,000 people (Ibid.), more than 15% of the total population. This figure had escalated to 7.7 million people by mid-2018, thus rendering it the country with the greatest number of IDPs in the entire world (Alsema 2018). As one of the cornerstones of the 2016 accords, a comprehensive rural reform was agreed upon, in order to solve the contentious subject of the distribution of land ownership. Despite the fact that tackling this issue was one of the main reasons why an agreement between the FARC and the

Juan Manuel Santos' government could be reached, as of 2021, this part of the accords had not been fully respected and implemented; in fact in 2018, the concentration of ownership of the land reached its highest point in the country's history, with 1% of elite landowners holding more than 80% of the total national land (OXFAM 2018, 13).

Community leaders and social activists in rural areas have been publicly denouncing this reality, seeking to raise visibility as to the situation of exploitation that Colombian peasants still endure at the hands of paramilitary groups and criminal gangs formed of post-2016 FARC dissidents. As a consequence, these activists and human rights defenders have been systematically persecuted by those and other non-state violent actors, with more than 1,200 of them having been assassinated in the country between the signing of the accords in May 2020 (Camprubí and Pineda 2021). The rapid proliferation of competing criminal organizations occupying the power vacuum left by the FARC and conducting illegal activities in the country's rural periphery, like drug trafficking or unauthorized mining (UNHCR n.d.), together with the inability or unwillingness of the national government to offer meaningful economic solutions to these regions, has led to the re-emergence of violence (IDMC 2021).

In the mid-1950s, large-scale emigration from Colombia to Venezuela began, in combination with an absence of economic opportunities and the armed conflict acting as structural factors potentially influencing those movements (Carvajal 2017; Álvarez de Flores 2004). For the last few decades, emigration from Colombia has been increasing steadily, with 1 million Colombian nationals having left the country by 1990, 1.4 by 2000, 2.6 by 2010, and 3 million by 2020 (IOM 2021). As of 2020, the top three countries of destination for Colombian emigrants were Venezuela, the US and Spain; ranking as the first destination country, Venezuela which had received 917,753 Colombians, which amounted to 30.3% of the total share of emigrants leaving the country. The US then followed with 817,604 Colombians (27%), and Spain ranked third with 450,377 (15%). In terms of gender, female emigration, with 1,647,831 women, which accounts for 54.48% of the total number of emigrants, has been higher than that of men, which totals 1,376,442 or 45.51% of Colombian emigration (United Nations

2020).

Since the upsurge of Venezuela's cycle of political unrest, humanitarian crisis and economic turmoil around 2015, many of the almost one million Colombians that had moved there throughout the previous four decades started to return to their country of origin. In regard to the US, the Immigration Act of 1965 overturned the quotas based on national origin that benefited European immigrants, which allowed more than 150,000 Colombians to enter the country at the beginning of the 1970s. Finally, the increasing economic opportunities in Spain and other European countries in the early 2000s, alongside the shared language and more favourable prospects of successfully integrating within the host society likely attracted many Colombians to Spain at the end of the XX century and during the following years, until the 2008 financial crisis and the economic collapse resulting from it (Carvajal 2017).

To access Venezuela and, on a smaller scale, Ecuador, Colombian migrants usually choose border areas with easy access to these two neighbouring countries, sometimes after already having undergone internal displacement. Despite the geographical proximity between these states, travelling abroad requires a certain amount of economic expenditure, which sometimes acts as a critical barrier to cross-border movements in these territories (IDMC 2019). Irregular Colombian immigrants also use smuggling networks to pass between countries. In many instances, these criminal enterprises are responsible for facilitating transit of Colombians who have falsified visas or travel documents to the US or Canada, or simply that desire to access other countries of South America, including not only Venezuela and Ecuador, but also Chile and Peru, but fear the risk of inadmissibility (Carvajal 2017).

Regarding the emigration to the U.S., it is worth mentioning that by 2015, approximately 998,000 Colombians and their children, including first and second generation, were living in the US. In terms of first generation, in 2012, approximately 601,000 Colombian immigrants were residing in the US, thus making Colombians the country's largest South American demographic group and the 14th largest group of foreign nationals overall. Regarding second generation, in that same year, around 397,000 US-born individuals had at least

one Colombian-born progenitor (MPI 2015, 1-3).

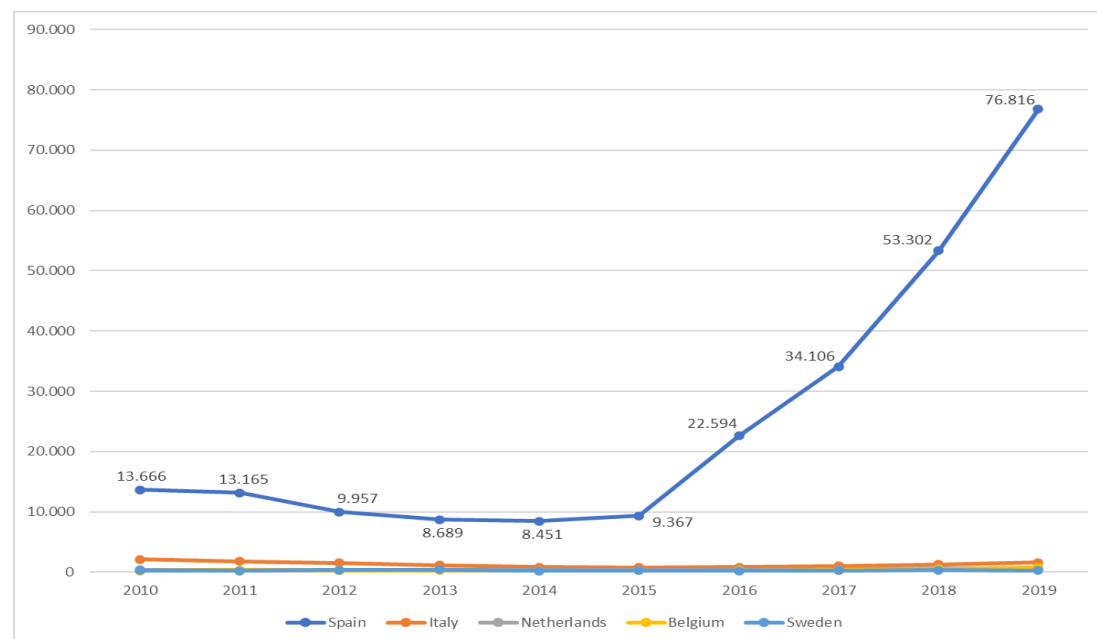
Finally, the European route. At the beginning in the 1990s and especially in the 2000s, while the trend already existed, there was a considerable increase in Colombians emigrating to Europe and most notably Spain, which rose to one of the preferred destination countries for Colombian nationals. According to Eurostat data, in 2019 there were more than a half million people that had been born in Colombia residing in Europe. Spain hosts 386,141 of those individuals, followed by: Italy (40,023); the United Kingdom (38,000); France (30,921); the Netherlands (15,127); Switzerland (13,671); Sweden (12,315); Germany (9,000); Belgium (6,733); and Norway (6,000) (Bermúdez 2021, 21). As mentioned above, in 2020 Spain constituted the third country of destination for Colombian emigrants, with Italy and France following as the eighth and ninth, respectively, as the only other two European states within the top-ten list of countries where Colombians had decided to move. Since 2015, the number of Colombia arrivals to Spain has progressively increased yearly, beginning at 9,367, augmenting to 34,106 in 2017 and then to 76,816 in 2019. After Spain, Italy is the second preferred country of destination for Colombians, but experiences considerably less volume, as *only* 1,609 Colombians arrived at Italy in 2019.

In terms of asylum, since 2017, Colombia has been within the first three nationalities of asylum seekers in Spain, and the second nationality from 2018 to 2020. When signing the peace agreements between the FARC and the Colombian government in 2016, the asylum petitions of Colombians in Spain totalled only 615, but from that year onwards applications escalated. A similar trend was evidenced in Ecuador in those years, albeit receiving little attention due to the massive displacements of Venezuelans occurring at the time. According to official data shared by the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, in 2019, 29,285 individuals from Colombia sought asylum in Spain, but only 5,226 files were resolved between January and December of that year. Within those resolved files, there were many accumulated applications from previous years. Finally, from the total of 5,226, only 48 were finalized favourably, which means that just 0.91% of those who applied received international protection (CEAR 2020).

Regarding transcontinental migration, as international transport has become more accessible in terms of reduced costs and the multiple available routes, there has been an increase in international movements of migrants from Colombia to Europe, most notably to Spain (Palma 2015, 16). To reach the latter, practically all Colombian immigrants use the air route—albeit a few of them travel by sea—via valid passport or a travel or short stay visa. Also referred to as tourist visas, these allow for a maximum stay of three months. Migrants may use them to enter Spain regularly and then extend their stay longer than the maximum allowed time, thus falling into an irregular situation (Gil Araujo and González-Fernández 2014).

2.2 Recent trends

When examining data on migration from Colombia to the European Union, Spain stands out as the state receiving the largest number of Colombian migrants. Throughout the decade spanning from 2010 to 2019, a total of 250,113 Colombians travelled to the Mediterranean country, with the figures dramatically increasing from 2015 onwards; in 2015, 9,367 Colombians arrived at Spain, whereas two years later, in 2017, 34,106 arrived, and, finally, 76,816 in 2019. Italy comes far behind in second position, with a total of 13,035 Colombians having arrived in the 2010-2019 timespan, and never surpassing the annual influx of 2,132 people of 2010. In the third, fourth and fifth position were the Netherlands, Belgium and Sweden, respectively, with 4,177, 3,391, and 2,682 migrating between 2010 and 2019 (see Figure 1). As such, in analysing the immigration trends of Colombia from the last ten years, the focus shifts into Spain. In terms of the gender division, in Spain there has been a larger share of arrivals of Colombian women throughout the entire decade, with the annual percentages moving between 55.45% to 57.46% women and 42.54% to 44.55% men.

Figure 1. Migration from Colombia to the top EU country destinations, 2010-2019

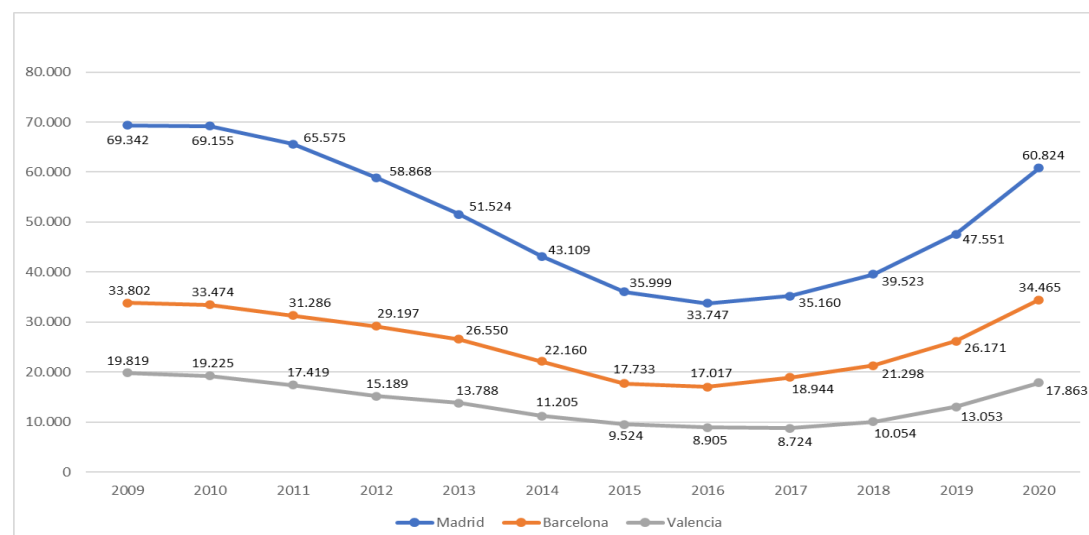
Source: Own elaboration from Eurostat data.

For the last ten years, Colombia has been within the top seven countries with the largest number of foreign nationals in Spain, ranking as the fifth demographic group uninterruptedly between 2009 and 2013, as the sixth between 2017 and 2019, and finally jumping to the third in 2020, with 273,050 nationals. Despite the fact that in 2016 the number of Colombians living in Spain began to increase significantly, in 2011 the records were already similar to the figures that would be later reached in 2020, with 273,176 Colombian residents, having slightly decreased from the 296,674 of 2009. This is due to the fact that from 2009 to 2016, the number of Colombians living in Spain steadily declined as a consequence of the global financial crisis, and then began to recover from 2016 onwards. Moreover, throughout the last decade, the only Latin American country with more nationals in Spain than Colombia has been Ecuador; this occurred from 2017 forward. Nonetheless, when analysing these data it is necessary to take into account that nationalisation processes might have reduced the recorded number of Colombians residing in the country. Within two years' time, most third country nationals from Colombia residing in Spain are nationalised and become Spanish citizens, thus disappearing from statistics on Colombian

residents in the country. In terms of the division between male and female foreign residents, there has been a larger annual share of between 54.91-55.65% Colombian women living in Spain from 2009 to 2020.

When examining the populations of foreign nationals in the cities of Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, which have been selected because of their historical relevance in terms of migration and also due to the fact that they are the largest three metropolises in Spain, the data on Colombian residents follows a similar pattern to Spain's nationwide statistics. There was a decrease in the numbers between 2009 and 2016, and then a steady rise until 2020 (see Figure 2). For the last decade, Madrid hosts 23.51% of the total sum of Colombians living in Spain, with the greatest share of 24.19% in 2017. Barcelona, as the second city with the greatest number of Colombians in the country, hosts an average of 12.02% of Colombians residing in Spain overall from 2009 to 2020, with the highest percentage in 2018 at 12.84%. Finally, Valencia constitutes the fourth preferred city of destination for Colombians, after Alicante. Valencia hosts 6.35% of Colombians located in Spain, reaching a peak of 6.68% in 2009.

Figure 2. Colombian nationals residing in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, 2009-2020



Source: Own elaboration based on INE data.

Within these three cities, Colombian nationals also rank high among all foreign nationalities. Firstly, in Madrid they comprised the fourth national group on a

steady basis between 2009 and 2013, the fifth from 2014 to 2017, and the fourth again from 2018 to 2020. As with Spain at the national level, between 2009 and 2017, Colombians in Madrid were the second largest Latin American community, only behind Ecuadorians, and then rise to first from 2018 onwards. Secondly, in Barcelona, Colombians were within the first ten foreign national groups residing in the city between 2009 and 2020, shifting between the seventh and the tenth position from 2009 until 2018, ranking seventh place in 2019 and fifth in 2020. As in Madrid, Barcelona had a higher proportion of Ecuadorians than Colombians for many years. Unlike Madrid, however, from 2009 to 2018 there was also a higher proportion of Bolivians in the Catalan city, with Colombians ranking as the first Latin American demographic group only in 2019 and 2020. Finally, in Valencia, Colombians were the sixth greatest foreign national group from 2009 to 2014, the eighth in 2015 and 2016, the sixth again from 2017 to 2019, and finally the third in 2020. Until 2016, Ecuadorians and Bolivians had a greater presence in the Spanish coastal city. Nonetheless, beginning in 2017, Colombians became its first Latin American group.

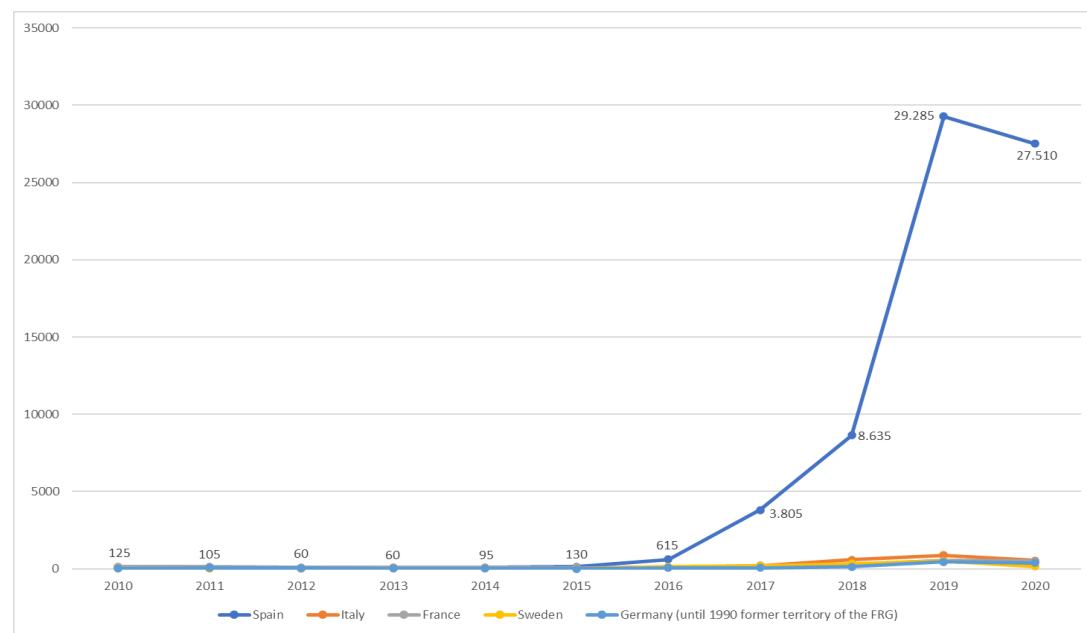
In analysing asylum applications, Spain largely remains the country of preference for Colombians between 2010 and 2020, with 70,425 applications out of a total of 79,700 processed in the entire European Union during that same period of time. In terms of percentages, asylum applications to Spain throughout the last decade account for 88.36% of the overall claims made by Colombians within the EU. In Spain, figures began to rise notably beginning with a spike in 2015, when the percentage in relation to the total applications in the European Union went from 20-30% during the period between 2010 and 2014, to 45.61%, to then increase progressively to 82.45% in 2017 and to a noteworthy 93.33% in 2020 (see Table 1). Spain was, behind France, the second country where Colombians preferred to apply for asylum until 2014, when it became the first uninterruptedly until 2020.

Table 1. Asylum applications of Colombians in Spain, 2010-2020

Spain			
Year	Asylum applications in Spain	Total asylum applications in EU	Percentage of applications in Spain
2010	125	415	30,12%
2011	105	375	28,00%
2012	60	290	20,69%
2013	60	300	20,00%
2014	95	325	29,23%
2015	130	285	45,61%
2016	615	1.070	57,48%
2017	3.805	4.615	82,45%
2018	8.635	10.245	84,29%
2019	29.285	32.305	90,65%
2020	27.510	29.475	93,33%
Total 2010-2020	70425	79700	88,36%

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data.

In regard to asylum applications, Spain is followed by Italy, France, Sweden and Germany, with 2,610, 2,220, 1,445, and 1,245 applications, respectively. As with immigration data, these numbers are strikingly low in comparison to those of Spain. As already mentioned, in 2015 there was an increase in the number of EU applications overall, with the latter four countries also experiencing a rising number of Colombians seeking international protection. However, Spain was the only country where numbers rose, jumping from 130 applications in 2015 to 3,805 in 2017, and then to the historical record of 29,285 in 2019. By the following year, in 2020, and likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and border restrictions worldwide, the numbers slightly decreased to a still significant 27,510; as Figure 3 shows.

Figure 3. Asylum applications of Colombians in EU Member States, 2010-2020

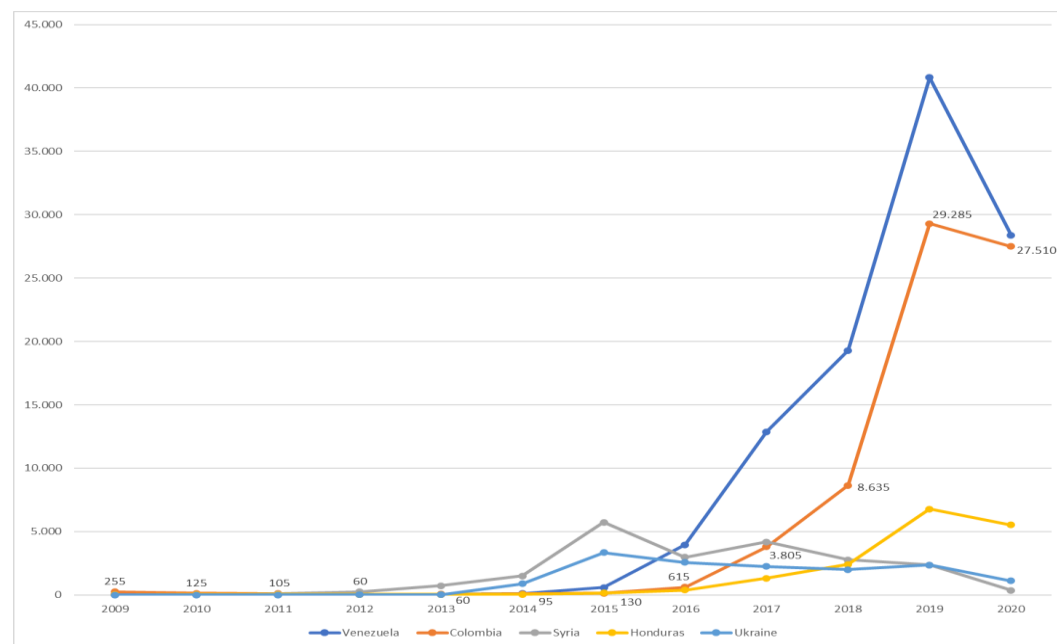
Source: Own elaborations based on Eurostat data.

As for the gender division of EU asylum applications by Colombians, it is interesting to note that the annual share can be clearly divided into two phases. In the first, ranging from 2010 to 2015, there was a clear predominance of males, with the yearly percentages moving between 61.33% and 68.42% men and 38.67% to 31.58% women, respectively. Nonetheless, in the second phase, between the years 2016 to 2020, the numbers became more balanced and the gender difference progressively decreased from between 56.54-43.46% majority of men in 2016, to an almost equal 50.70% to 49.30% in 2020. When scrutinizing the aforementioned top-five countries of Colombian asylum applications, clear differences also appear. Following the same pattern in the EU on the whole, from 2016 onwards, figures became relatively balanced, with a persistent male majority that closed to an almost 50-50% balance by 2020, with 50.55% men and 49.45% of women.

From 2010 to 2015, however, the numbers diverge, with Italy and Spain presenting striking differences in most years. In the case of the former, the percentages ranged between the 92.31% and 15.38% men versus women in 2010 -the year with the most significant gap- to a still considerable gap of 77.78% versus 11.11% in 2012, when the difference was least. Regarding Spain, from 2010 to 2012, the gender gap remained between 58.33% men and 41.67%

women, but in 2013 it jumped to a 75% versus 25% difference, marking the greatest gap. It then became 69.23% men versus 30.77% women in 2015. These numbers seem to indicate that until 2015, when the overall arrivals of Colombian asylum seekers started to increase rapidly, there was a significant male majority, but that from 2016 onwards, and especially in Spain, where most Colombian asylum seekers arrived, the gender gap progressively narrowed.

Finally, Colombians constituted the second largest demographic group of asylum seekers in Spain between 2009 and 2020, with 70,680 claims, only surpassed by those of Venezuelans, who requested 106,215 instances of international protection. After Colombia, Syria, Honduras and Ukraine appear as third, fourth and fifth countries, respectively, with 21,020 applications from nationals of the first, 16,795 from the second and 14,625 from the third. It should be noted how asylum applications start to increase in 2015, with a jump from 8,635 requests in 2018 to 29,285 in 2019, with numbers more than tripling and reaching historical figures in the latter year. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic spread transnationally, there was a slight drop in applications, but still were administered a considerably larger amount than before. From 2010 to 2015, the general numbers moved relatively steadily, shifting more in the case of immigration, but at any point reaching the records from the spike that would begin between 2015 and 2016. Until 2017, the sum of asylum applications from Colombians in Spain moved within the range of protection claims processed by other third country nationals, such as, Syrians or Ukrainians. However, from that year onwards, the stark difference between asylum applications from Colombian citizens and from all other nationalities was only nuanced by an even higher surge in the quantity of requests from Venezuelans, following a similar chronological pattern to that of its neighbour country, as Figure 4 shows.

Figure 4. Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009-2020

Source: Own elaboration based on Eurostat data

Alongside Colombia, there was also an increase in the number of asylum claims by Venezuelans starting in 2015, with an even more marked increase and progressively higher numbers until 2020. As with the case of Colombia and the other three countries, the figures of Venezuelan claims also decreased between 2019 and 2020, most likely due to the aforementioned COVID-19 situation. The third Latin American country with the most nationals seeking international protection after Venezuela and Colombia was Honduras. Furthermore, between 2009 and 2015, Colombia shifted from being the third country of origin with the largest number of asylum seekers in Spain, to the 16th on the list, with neighbouring country Venezuela and, from Central America, Honduras and El Salvador, with more asylum seekers. In 2016, however, Colombia returned to the third position, only behind Venezuela and Syria, and from the following year onwards became the second country with most claims for international protection in Spain, only behind Venezuela (see Figure 4).

2.3 Analysis of drivers

The data on migration as well as asylum applications for the last decade at the European Union show a significant increase beginning in 2015 both in the

number of arrivals and international protection claims from Colombia. This year comprised the start of a linear growth in the influx of Colombian nationals in the Mediterranean countries, that reached its highest point in 2019. This trend is particularly important in the Spanish case, where Colombian have turned out into a more predominant demographic group within migration movements; a reality also visible in the data on nationals from this country residing in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, the three largest Spanish cities. In this regard, to analyse these trends it is useful to explore Colombia's domestic situation in relation to the protracted armed conflict with guerrilla and paramilitary groups, the signing of the September 2016 peace agreements and the uneven distribution and dispossession of land in rural areas of the territory; but also elements that are more broad, mainly, the increasing demand for care services and construction labour in Spain, the lack of strict visa requirements for entry into the country during a determined period in time, or the cultural patterns (language, religion, common historical background) shared between the two countries.

The coincidence between the moment when the peace accords between the FARC and the national government of President Santos were brokered in La Habana and the surge in asylum applications from 2016 to 2017 (from 615 to 3,805 in Spain) seems to show a possible correlation between the two factors. However, the signing of the agreements needs to be considered as one potential driver within a wide set of factors that might have fuelled such increase in international protection requests. The arrival of Iván Duque at the presidency substituting Santos in August 2018 represented a policy shift in regard to the fulfilment of the agreements, particularly in relation to one of its cornerstones, a comprehensive rural reform that was supposed to distribute land ownership rights more fairly between large and small landowners. The administration change in the presidency concurred with the increase in asylum applications in Spain of 2019 (29,285 in total). The influence of these factors and other elements on internal migration policy and international agreements need to be analysed to shed some light into the development of migration movements from Colombia to its neighbour countries and to Spain. At the same time, it should be once again emphasized these are approximated, possible factors which may affect or not decision-making by individuals.

The armed conflict between the FARC and the Colombian state spanned 52 years, from the inception of the guerrilla in 1965 until the signing of the peace agreements in 2016. The civil war has played a crucial role in the displacement of millions of Colombians, having had direct repercussions in the demographic structure of the country and the political relations between its urban centres and the rural periphery. Since the end of the 1950s, armed violence had resulted by 2012, the moment when President Santos announced an approach to set up peace dialogues, in the death of 218,094 people, 81% of whom were civilians and 19% combatants (CNMH 2013). According to the Victims Unit of the National Information Network (RNI), 1985 marked the beginning of a significant increase in the expulsion of people from their households, with figures moving from 14,666 in that year to 56,119 in 1994, and then dramatically augmenting to 109,457 in 1995.

By 2002, a historical record of 772,255 annually displaced people was reached. Nonetheless, from that moment onwards and after a period of stabilization spanning from 2003 to 2008, internal displacements slowly decreased until the signing of the peace agreements (RNI 2020). These victims were the consequence of a wide array of types of violence, like gender-based, with 1,714 victims between 1985 and 2012 (CNMH 2013), with women being targeted in some instances as a way to drive populations out of their homes; or the proliferation of right-wing paramilitary groups with links to the state security forces in the 1980s, that emerged as a response to the violence at the hands of the guerrilla and that fed from displacing and extorting small peasants to harvest coca crops (Felter and Renwick 2017). In this regard, the demographic groups that still today tend to be more at risk of being forcibly displaced are indigenous communities and African-Colombians, due to their lands being in rural areas rich in resources that can be highly lucrative for criminal organizations.

During those years, that coincided with the creation of the United Self-Defences of Colombia (AUC), a far-right and drug trafficking group unifying paramilitary organizations that were very much active in the conflict by engaging against the FARC, the levels of inequality in the Andean country were strikingly high. In 1990, the gross national income per capita was of 8,013, which slowly improved

until reaching 14,257 by 2019 (UNDP 2020). However, this upgrade did not translate into poverty vanishing from the country; quite the opposite, the presence of inequalities was still perpetuated across all regions of the territory, but most notably in rural areas. In 2018, the urban-rural divide was distinctly acute, with 36% of the rural population living below the national poverty line, in comparison with the way lower 15.7% of people residing in urban regions that did so (IDMC 2020). Particularly affected by poverty in the rural periphery are the indigenous communities; between January and November 2018, 43 children under the age of five -the majority of whom belonging to Wayuu communities- died in the region of La Guajira, as the result of a lack of access to clear water or malnutrition (HRW 2019).

Drawing attention to the management of the internal conflict in the decade of the 2010s, in 2011 the national government enacted the Victims and Land Restitution Law, to restore millions of hectares of workable land that had been abandoned or taken from Colombians who had been driven out of their homes and suffered internal displacement during the previous decades (HRW 2011). By that moment, the Santos government understood the need to offer an institutional tool to the thousands of Colombians that had been forcibly displaced through threats, gender-based violence and assassinations. This reality was underscored by the fact that displaced populations asking for restitution of their property had been systematically targeted by criminal groups and subjected to threats and intimidation. At the beginning of the 2010s, forced migration in Colombia mainly generated internal movement to the metropolitan areas and the urban centres (Ruiz 2011, 142), leading to a progressive increase of the stock of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) that went from 5.2 million in 2010 to a record 7.2 million in 2016 (IDMC 2021). A considerable segment of forced displacement in Colombia is intra-urban, with people shifting between neighbourhoods within a unique city to try to get away from violence.

Despite the growth in internal mobility, during the first half of the 2010s immigration arrivals and asylum applications to the European Union and in Spain remained relatively stable, with immigration numbers progressively decreasing and the sum of international protection requests moving between 60

and a maximum of 130 in 2015, as an effect of the global financial crisis. In this context, Colombians remained either within their own territory or moved across the region, using neighbouring countries like Venezuela or Ecuador, and at a lower scale Brazil and Peru, as destination. Moreover, all these states saw themselves affected by a conflict spillover in the form of an increasing presence of FARC combatants within their own borders or the arrival of Colombian asylum seekers, fleeing from regions like Nariño, Cauca, Chocó and Valle, the four of which accumulated 40% of the overall forced displacements in 2015 (*El Espectador* 2016), and with the first two, alongside Antioquia, comprising the three regions wherein almost half of the total sum of victims from the armed conflict were located.

Political interactions with neighbouring countries had been seriously affected during the previous decade. On the one hand, diplomatic relations with Venezuela deteriorated since 2004, when the Colombian executive of President Álvaro Uribe internationally denounced the sheltering of the FARC combatants in the Bolivarian country, leading to tensions that did not de-escalate until the arrival of Santos at the presidency, but that re-emerged with the beginning of the administration of President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, in April 2013. On the other, relations worsened with Ecuador, when President Rafael Correa declared a stance of neutrality in the Colombian fight against the FARC shortly after the beginning of his tenure, refusing to declare the guerrilla as a terrorist or warmongering organization, a situation that got exacerbated after multiple Colombian military incursions in Ecuadorian sovereign territory to persecute members of the FARC, for instance, in *Operación Fénix* of March 2008 (Moreira, Forero and Parada 2015).

The signing of the peace accords in September 2016 was supposed to bring peace to Colombia, with the five-decade long conflict officially concluding and the FARC reconvertng itself in August of the following year into a political party called Commons, having changed its name in January 2021 from the original Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (*Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común*, FARC). Since that moment, the party and the Colombian government have maintained a line of dialogue through the National Reincorporation Council

(CNR), designed to monitor the process of integration of former FARC combatants to civilian life. Nonetheless, critical elements of the peace accords have not been yet implemented, mainly the comprehensive rural reform agreed upon by the two parts, an indispensable element and likely the most contentious subject of the agreements. In regard to land property rights, the peace accords had a dual goal: first, develop a land fund with about three million hectares for the peasantry, and second, formalise seven million further hectares of farms to be owned by families that did not hold any land ownership titles, with some of them having been driven out of their regions years earlier (OXFAM 2018). As a response to the infringement of the agreements, social and human rights activists, as well as community leaders in rural areas, have denounced the corruption and failure of the government, arguing, among other things, that the lack of meaningful economic alternatives to vulnerable collectives such as small farmers growing coca keeps exacerbating both the conflict and forced displacement, for which they have been heavily targeted by organized crime (IDMC 2021).

The killing of hundreds of activists after 2016 represents a potential driver of displacement in Colombia, and not only at the internal level, but also in the form of asylum seekers leaving the country and attempting to find international protection abroad. According to the Ombudsman of Colombia, 753 social leaders were assassinated between 2016 and 2020 (Ombudsman 2021), most of whom were attacked in the aforementioned departments of Nariño, Cauca and Antioquia, but also in Córdoba and Norte de Santander. All of these are mountainous and jungle areas that attract criminal organizations like the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, ELN), a cluster of FARC dissidents that abandoned the guerrilla after the peace agreements, or groups like the Clan del Golfo, whose leader, Dairo Antonio Úsuga David, known as Otoniel, was arrested in El Cerro del Yoki, in the West Andes, by the Colombian state security forces in October 2021, or Los Pelusos, all of whom are waging a war for the control of undivided territories (*Reuters* 2019).

The limited presence of the government in these regions of the country has been used by non-state violent actors to expand their territorial grasp. Furthermore,

their rapid proliferation to occupy the power vacuum left by the FARC to conduct illicit activities like drug trafficking or unauthorised mining (UNHCR n.d.), together with the inability or unwillingness by the national government to offer meaningful economic solutions to these regions, has led to the re-emergence of violence, constituting in 2020 the main driver behind the 106,000 conflict displacements recorded in the country (IDMC 2021). To those who remember the targeted assassination of more than 3,000 militants of the left-wing Patriotic Union (UP), together with two presidential candidates, in 1985 at the hands of far-right paramilitary groups, the current assassination campaign of human rights activists and community leaders makes them fear that such terrible episode might end up repeating itself.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), within the social activists that had been killed between 2016 and 2019, 36 of them were women, and 6 belonged to the LGBTQ+ community (OHCHR 2020). A great deal of effort was put into providing a gender approach to the 2016 peace agreements, but as of August 2019, 42% of the commitments with a gender perspective had not yet been initiated (Instituto Kroc 2019, 11). Furthermore, between 2011 and 2013, at least 219 assassinations of LGBTQ+ people were registered across the country, with a rise in the latter year in the number of murder complaints of this collective in comparison to those of 2012 (CIDH 2015, 93). In 2019, the year when asylum applications in Spain rose significantly, the OHCHR documented the killing of 108 social leaders, almost an increase of 50% than the previous year (OHCHR 2020), and a figure that would jump to an even higher 297 assassinations in 2020 (IDMC 2021).

Particularly worrying has been the situation for the local population of northern Cauca since the end of 2018 and having worsened during 2019, when FARC dissidents declared that they would regain control of the region. This area is highly desired by criminal actors linked to the drug trafficking business due to having large parts of cultivable land. One of the main problems accompanying this violence is that the Colombian government does not recognize it as a systemic phenomenon, to which the communities that are suffering from it answer by demanding an increased presence of the State in the

form of public investment and initiatives defending the respect of fundamental rights (Duarte and Vargas 2020). In February 2021, however, Human Rights Watch denounced that the administration of President Duque had left security and protection policies for rural communities at a standstill, whilst also stating that the government had reacted slowly and poorly in the implementation of policies to prevent targeted assassinations and persecution of men, women and children (HRW 2021).

Moreover, the geographical location of Colombia in the north-west extreme of South America turns it into a territory of transit for immigrants and asylum seekers from countries like Haiti, Cuba, Chile, Senegal, Ghana or India, usually crossing several borders within the continent with the final aim of reaching the United States or Canada (Ramírez, Zuluaga and Perilla 2010). To access Central America by land, tens of thousands of migrants annually use the Darién Gap, a 266 km long jungle corridor stretching between Colombia and Panama. This is one of the most dangerous irregular migratory routes in the region, due to the high temperatures, long jungle sweeps and large presence of criminal armed groups located there. According to data provided by the United Nations, around 24,000 people of more than 50 different nationalities, including India, Somalia, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Bangladesh, whose citizens often reach Latin America by flying to Brazil, crossed the long route in 2019, with 16% of them being children and teenagers, half of whom were under six years old. Moreover, according to the Panamanian government (Panama borders the Darién Gap described further below), around 49,000 people have crossed the dangerous route throughout 2021 (*El Espectador* 2021). When arriving to Panama, migrants from those nationalities, and also Colombians abandoning their country, are received at the Migrant Reception Station, a shelter in La Peñita, in the Darién Province, one of the regions with the lowest levels of development in the country (UNICEF 2020). This centre in La Peñita has effectively been used by the Panamanian government as a detention facility, which has led the Inter-American Court of Human Rights to establish some principles on the measures that the country should implement in regard to the respect of the fundamental rights of migrants in transit detained there.

Some of the people crossing what is known as the “Darién Gap” enter Colombia from neighbouring countries like Brazil, Peru or Ecuador, in addition to other people doing so from the states of origin mentioned above. Depending on the place, human smugglers and other criminal organizations, like the paramilitary group Cartel del Golfo, may charge between 2,000 and 3,000 dollars to go through the route, extorting people that usually travel with heavy luggage and children (Pardo 2021). In July 2021, there were about 10,000 migrants, most of whom were Haitians, stranded in the Colombian municipality of Necoclí, of only 21,000 inhabitants and located near the Gulf of Urabá, at the Atlantic coast (Torrado 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic situation and the closing of the Panamanian border exacerbated the gridlock of those people in the small Colombian village, with local authorities calling for alternative solutions and asking for help to the central government. In 2016, Panama already hardened its border control policy to deter potential migrants from attempting to cross the country to the United States (Ocampo and Arboleda 2016, 96), a commitment that has only seen itself reinforced with the conjuncture of the pandemic.

Some of the routes that migrants use to reach Colombia are located in its borders with Venezuela, Ecuador and, to a lesser extent, Brazil. When crossing from Ecuador, migrants enter the country through Ipiales, to then move to Pasto, Cali, Medellín and Urabá; or, instead, they use an alternative itinerary going through the Pacific Ocean. Concurrently, the routes exiting Venezuela are located across the Atlantic coast, ultimately reaching Arboletes and Montería (Ibid., 102). In regard to the entrance of immigrants from third countries, Colombia, together with Ecuador and Brazil albeit at a lesser extent, is the recipient of a great deal of Venezuelan migrants, with at least one million people having moved from the latter to the Andean state between March 2017 and June 2018, and around two million people putting together the three mentioned countries of destination (Marston 2019, 11; HRW 2019).

As explained before, until 1990 Colombia was largely a country of expulsion, starting to receive immigrants progressively and at a low level only from that year onwards. Nonetheless, in 1999 the war between the FARC and the Self-

defence forces of Catatumbo, bordering Venezuela, acted as a driver for the forced displacement of more than three million people to the Venezuelan border. This was one of the first instances wherein the real scope of the refugee situation in Colombia was appreciated in its neighbouring state (Álvarez de Flores 2004, 198). In terms of immigration, Colombia started to receive third-country nationals recently, acting as a transit country for migrants from neighbour countries in the region, for instance, Ecuador, that suffered from a severe economic and political crisis in the beginning of the 2000s. It is not until the start and hardening of the socio-political turmoil in Venezuela in 2015 that Colombia starts to experience an important number of entrances in its territory.

Nonetheless, political turmoil, rampant crime and economic instability in Venezuela since the mid-2010s has reversed migratory trends, and now Colombia represents the main country of destination of Venezuelan migrants and asylum seekers. In July 2017, in the face of thousands of arrivals, President Santos' government approved a special permit to allow Venezuelans who had accessed the country regularly but had overstayed their visas to regularise their residence status and thus try to acquire a work permit and have access to public services (HRW 2019). After a rapid surge in the number of Venezuelan nationals residing in Colombia after 2015, when in the span of two years the records increased from 48,714 citizens in that moment to 550,000 in 2017, the government implemented the Special Permit of Permanence (PEP) explained above, but also an Administrative Registry of Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia (RAMVC) one year later, in 2018, to design a comprehensive national public policy of humanitarian care for arriving Venezuelans. Despite these initiatives, in the following years the number of Venezuelan citizens residing in Colombia kept augmenting, to 1,408,055 in 2019, to 1,742,927 in 2021 (R4V 2021). Simultaneously, however, a process of securitization and the strengthening of borders also took place, in the form of the deployment of more security operatives and a militarisation of the key entry points (Gissi *et al.*, 2020).

Besides from analysing the main drivers of displacement shaping migration in Colombia, together with the role that the country plays as a territory both of origin, transit and destination for migrants and asylum seekers, it is also

necessary to evaluate the impact that migration policies implemented in Europe and in Spain have had on the shaping of migratory movements originating in the country. The considerable increase in asylum applications and immigration numbers in Spain that begun in 2015 coincided with the suppression of short stay visas for Colombians to travel to most countries of the European Union, announced in December of that year (Fernández-Huertas 2021, 23). On December the 2nd, the European Union signed an agreement with Colombia in relation to an exemption of this type of visas, a ceremony conducted in Brussels with the presence of President Santos. This new visa regime allowed EU citizens visiting Colombia, and Colombian nationals visiting the Union to travel without the need to ask for a visa for a stay of 90 days over a period of 180 days. This decision arguably led to an increase in the arrival of Colombian migrants that accessed Spain regularly, through the airports of Barajas, in Madrid, or Josep Tarradellas, in Barcelona-El Prat, with the intention of overextending their stay and looking for employment.

According to a recent report, by 2020 in Spain there were around 100,000 Colombians residing in a situation of irregularity, with their presence, along that of Venezuelans and Hondurans, amounting to around 60% of the total sum of third country nationals irregularly staying in the country (Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta 2020). Accompanying the aforementioned exodus of tens of thousands of Colombians to Venezuela in 1999 due to the worsening of the conflict with the FARC, but also as a result of the 25 January massive earthquake that heavily affected the city of Armenia, in the Quindío department, thousands of Colombians travelled to Spain looking for new opportunities. Since then, the arrivals moved relatively steadily until the economic crash of 2008, when many of them lost their job and decided to return to their country of origin. The heavy crackdown of the Uribe government against the FARC and other guerrilla groups encouraged plenty of Colombians to go back, perceiving the situation as more secure than a few years earlier. In 2005, the government of President José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero initiated a process of regularisation of irregular immigrants, which led to the accession of thousands of them to the Spanish labour market. However, the current administration of President Pedro Sánchez does not contemplate developing a similar process, as stated in mid-2018, a

decision that has not likely changed considering the economic downfall since the beginning of the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zea 2018).

Regarding the processing of asylum applications in Spain, in recent years many people have fled Colombia due to suffering from death threats, extortion and exploitation at the hands of armed criminals permeating rural areas of the country, that have been for years now emptied of their former FARC presence and that serve as competing territory among newly-emerged criminal organizations. Nonetheless, what most asylum seekers encounter when reaching Spain is that the Spanish authorities reject them, arguing that there is no longer an armed conflict in the country, and thus not deeming persecution suffered at the hands of criminal actors as political, but instead as common crime. Even though the government of President Duque talks about a post-conflict situation, violence in the country is still rampant, with a widespread lack of availability of public services, especially among the indigenous communities; high levels of poverty; human rights violations at the hands of the paramilitary and the state security forces; and an elevated criminality index.

As mentioned earlier, despite the fact that since 2017 Colombia has been within the first three nationalities of asylum seekers in Spain, constituting the second from 2018 to 2020, out of the total of 5,266 requests that were resolved in 2019, with some of them being from earlier years, just 48 were granted a favourable outcome. This means that only 0.91% of Colombian applicants received asylum rights (CEAR, 2020). Moreover, this also indicates that the change in the Spanish Presidency in June 2018, from the conservative Popular Party (Partido Popular, PP) to the more left-leaning Spanish Socialists Worker's Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE), did not translate into an immediate policy variation in terms of asylum, albeit some voices still hoping for the regularization or irregular migrants referenced earlier. However, with the current socio-political and medical conjuncture, this seems highly unlikely on a short-term basis.

Simultaneously, it is important to point out that the low acceptance numbers of asylum seekers have not deterred Colombians from attempting to ask for international protection in Spain, as the records that have been increasing

uninterruptedly since 2015 demonstrate. In Latin America, while the numbers of recognition have not been lowering as much as in Spain, many Colombians have accessed relatively easily a regular status due to permanent avenues for residence under regional migratory agreements. Despite the low numbers, plenty of Colombians could have also been attracted to Spain due to factors like their inclusion in the municipal census, which offers the possibility to access public services, like health, education or economic aid, despite a situation of irregularity; the small aid provided to those who have requested international protection and are awaiting resolution; or the abovementioned possibility of nationalization after two years of residence, or the access to nationalisation by ancestry of historical memory.

Finally, the drop in both asylum applications and immigration numbers in 2020 might be attributed to the restrictive measures applied worldwide in the form of limited mobility and border shutdowns as a response to the transnational spreading of COVID-19. On the 27th of July 2021, due to the high incidence of the virus in most regions of Spain, a temporary restriction to the entrance of travellers from several countries, among which Colombia was included, was implemented. There were people exempted from these restrictions, mainly third country nationals with residence permits, but still expected to comply with the health measures and security controls deployed to contain the spreading of the disease (MAEUEC 2021). The lack of proper infrastructure and strengthened capacities to follow proper medical guidelines has led to the hoarding of migrants and asylum seekers, who find themselves in a situation of vulnerability by putting their physical integrity at risk due to being exposed to a potential contagion from the virus.

3. Honduras

UN WORLD POPULATION DIVISION (2019)	
Total population (millions)	9.746115
<i>Male</i>	4,868,994
<i>Female</i>	4,877,121
Percentage of population	
<i>Under age 15</i>	31.2
<i>Aged 15-24</i>	21
<i>Aged 25-64</i>	43.1
<i>Aged 65+</i>	4.8
Crude birth rate per 1,000 population	21.3
Crude death rate per 1,000 population	4.5
Life expectancy at birth (years)	75.3
Annual rate of population change	1.60%
Total migrant stock	38,933
<i>Male</i>	20,440
<i>Female</i>	18,493
Net migration rate (2015-2020)	-0.715

WORLD BANK (2020)	
GNI per capita (\$)	2,200
GDP (\$) (billions)	23.83
School enrollment	
<i>Primary (% gross)</i>	91.50%
<i>Secondary (% gross)</i>	66%
<i>Primary and secondary (gross) gender parity index</i>	1

3.1 Migration and asylum profile

Honduras is a Central American country bordered by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, with the Pacific Ocean to its south and Caribbean Sea to its north. A country of 9.9 million and with a population including combined Spanish and indigenous descent, it is a case study for the Atlantic Route as it became a country of significant emigration from the 1990s forward. It currently has a negative net migration, albeit also experiences significant and sometimes forced return migration (United Nations Population Division 2020). Poverty, inequality and violence are cited as influencing this emigratory turn, in combination with fragile institutions, political instability and corruption (Gutiérrez Rivera 2018). Its nationals' main countries of destination include the United States, Spain, Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Canada, although it can also serve as a transit country given its geographical location en route to North America (United Nations Population Division 2020).

In parallel with overall regional trends in LAC states' history, Honduras was initially a country of immigration in the first half of the 20th century, with immigration policies that encouraged foreign investors or professionals in engaging with industries like the banana industry (Lopez Recinos 2020). The Central American integration process was the first of those processes in the LAC region, with support from CELAC and at the initiative of the Costa Rican, Salvadorian, Guatemalan, Honduran and Nicaraguan governments (Cordero 2017). The trade and migratory ties between the U.S. and Honduras account for some small-scale migration of Hondurans to the United States, up until the more voluminous migratory movements in recent history (Ibid.). For example, the Afro-indigenous Garífuna community, began to establish diaspora communities well before recent migration (Agudelo, 2021). On the other hand, further immigration to Honduras also occurred in the 1970s with Salvadorians in search of land and work, and various nationalities from the Central American region fleeing conflict in the 1980s (Léon Araya et al., 2016). In particular, in the second half of the 20th century, political will for integration in Central America has been variously expressed, and Costa Rica has remained resistant, and migration

policies are not particularly streamlined (Solano Muñoz 2017).

Indeed, throughout the century, until the 1990s, migratory movements of Hondurans largely remained within the country. The Honduran population was mainly distributed in rural areas (and a large portion continues to remain in these areas at the present time) with the majority involved in agriculture. A combination of factors meant that most disenfranchised land renters or agricultural workers had to rely on mobility, although the distribution and manipulation of land use by an elite few exercised and continues to bear great influence (National Research Council 1993). Boom and bust cycles of export commodities, in combination with decisions as to land use by these elite economic interests, translated to impoverished or unemployed rural populations that had to engage in cyclical or permanent migration to urban areas, or depend on family remittances (Ibid.).

In addition to the hierarchical land ownership complicating the rural economy, development in the country was further affected by a shift in economic policies at the end of the end of the Cold War in particular, heralding international emigration. Here, the Common Central American Market agreement, initiated in the 1960s and of which Honduras was a member, has allowed for some positive changes in the Central American region, and despite interruptions by crises in the 1980s, proceeded from the 1990s forward to coordinate interregional economic integration and free trade policies that (Cordero 2017). Neoliberal restructuring of the Honduran economy can in particular be traced to early 1990s legislation under President Rafael Leonardo Callejas, as the Honduran state became decentralized and shifted towards market-friendly neo-liberal policy (Hernández Rodríguez 2020). It is also argued that U.S. involvement under Regan, in restructuring the Honduran economy to deregulate and arguably destabilize the coffee trade, had repercussions for traditional forms of agriculture (Nevins 2016).

The deterioration of living conditions in the past several decades is a common situation throughout the Central American region. Honduras is no exception with

a lack of government prioritization for social protections like housing, health, education, and aid for populations like the elderly and disabled. With a vacuum in social services for Hondurans, international NGOs began to and still take on the responsibility of providing social services and addressing a destabilized social welfare. Increasing 1990s Honduran emigration is particularly cited as economic and development related, and linked to a search for social and economic security. Emigration outside of the country became agricultural workers' increasingly frequent option, and remittances a key resource for those who remained. In fact, between 1990 and 2005, it is notable that remittances had become the single largest source of foreign exchange in the Honduran economy (Reichman 2013). Social protections continue to reflect short-term, partisan policies that lack universal coverage or institutional coordination, financing, implementation and evaluation, thus having little impact for vulnerable populations (Martínez Franzoni 2013).

As such, this historical overview prefaces this century's recent Honduran international migration, which can be attributed to intertwined factors of socioeconomic and political instability, violence, and climate change or disaster, as the largely rural makeup of Honduras is particularly susceptible environmental changes. Concurrently, while rural to urban migration represented a significant phenomenon pre-1990s, this internal migration is it still prevalent today (Lamiño Jaramillo et al., 2019). Again, there is substantial and frequently forced return migration to Honduras (IOM 2021). Finally, Honduras sometimes serves as a transit country, in what seems to be an increasingly permanent trend, primarily for Haitians as well as Cubans and some African nationalities (International Federation of Red Cross 2016; Displacement Tracking Matrix 2021).

In a further examination of the origin context in Honduras, after having provided a brief sketch of the development situation in the country, it follows to detail how the socioeconomic situation is inextricably linked with political instability and corruption, with the weak state consequently leaving violence and crime largely unchecked. Political conflict has been rife in particular since the coup

d'état of 2009. Since then, the conservative Nationalist party has remained in power amidst allegations of corruption, with contested Presidential elections taking place in 2013 and 2017 (Greene 2020). President Juan Orlando Hernandez, presiding since 2014, is under U.S. investigation for links to drug trafficking organizations, and his government has been most recently accused of graft in hurricane relief (Angelo, 2021). Compounding this political corruption, in the last few years, the economic policies enacted under President Orlando Hernández have been argued to worsen the economic situation. Government neglect, incapacity or corruption in the face of other crises, including humanitarian disaster and climate-related forced displacement, thus can often partially serve as a driving factor in Hondurans' decisions to move (Wrathall et al., 2014).

Meanwhile, in addition to the intertwined political unrest to be further detailed in the section on drivers, the extreme levels of violence in Honduras can drive both international migration, as well as cause forced displacement internally (Nelson-Pollard 2017). While not exclusively carried out by them, violence is often perpetrated by the maras, criminal groups originating from the 1980s United States West Coast, and currently expanded to extensive organizations in Central America, which operate via local groups. In Honduras some of these groups include the Salvatrucha or Barrio 18, and primary activities include extortion, kidnapping, murder and drugs, weapons and human trafficking (Obinna 2021). These organizations exercise powerful social control, and state authorities have little control over them, and may even collaborate with them (CEAR 2018). Apart from organised crime triggering emigration, prevalent criminal deportation of Hondurans from the United States and Canada adds to instability (Burt et al., 2016).

Honduras' aforementioned political, social and economic crisis, alongside weak social protections, can be exacerbated by climate disasters, with highly visible examples including Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020 (Beltrán 2021; Wrathall et al., 2014). Approximately 45% of Honduras' nine million inhabitants live in rural areas, and the majority of households in

these areas are dependent upon small-scale subsistence agriculture for food security (Dodd et al., 2020). These climate disasters destroy homes and schools, cripple health care networks and roads, entail loss in crops, and mean a transfer of workers from the formal to informal economy (Quijada and Sierra 2018). Repeated droughts also cause crop losses and increased food insecurity (Bermeo and Leblang 2021). Essentially, climate change scenarios and natural disaster can radically alter or destabilize rural livelihood systems in Honduras (Wrathall et al., 2014).

In light of this origin profile, while it is difficult to document and likely underestimated, Honduran emigration is often classified as irregular (Hernandez Rodriguez 2020). In 2010, the World Trade Organization estimated 330,000 Hondurans resided in the U.S. without authorization, while other studies indicate that roughly a third of Hondurans in Canada reside there without authorization (Burt et al., 2016; Hernandez Rodriguez 2020). International protection may not be sought due to administrative barriers: either migrants may understand that few receive international protection for reasons like gang violence anyway, or it is easier to report seeking economic opportunity or family reunification when undergoing administrative or deportation procedures (Nelson-Pollard 2017). At the same time, Hondurans also engage in regular migration pathways, primarily in applying for asylum or family reunification, but also via work permits and other avenues (Reichman 2013). As later described in more detail, how receiving countries or regions define international protection as relates to Honduras, including the EU and its Member States, particularly impacts the nature of Honduran migration.

Before turning to Honduran migrants' destinations and the European context, two populations within the more general Honduran migration and asylum profile are important considerations. Notably, emigration from Honduras has become increasingly feminized, especially emigration to Europe (Hierro 2013). Gendered violence is cited as causing Honduran women's migration, and while factors like organized crime can form part of this, domestic violence factors in as one of the leading causes of child migration (Obinna 2021; Swanson and Torres

2016). Moreover, it is important to note the aforementioned ethnic Garífuna minority, an Afro-indigenous population historically linked to migration in their founding, dispersal and fragmentation. From the 18th century onward, they have migrated back and forth in cyclical labor migration (Agudelo 2019). They continue to remain mobile both within the region as diasporas in Belize, Nicaragua and Guatemala, and in the past decade their primary international destination outside of other countries in Central America has especially been the United States, where diaspora networks were established in the first half of the 20th century (Agudelo 2019; Obinna 2019; Wrathall et al, 2014).

Hondurans' destination countries can somewhat be explained by historical ties. In modern history, the United States is an important actor to consider when detailing Honduras' migration and asylum profile. U.S. military presence and involvement is argued to be historically and currently related to the roots of Honduran emigration. As a destination country, the United States hosts more than 773,045 nationals as of 2020, making up 78.5% of Honduran immigration (United Nations Population Division 2020). At the same time, notably, by 2010, it had deported more Hondurans than any other group from Central America since 1980 (Blanchard et al., 2011). The U.S. has been present in the country since the late 1800s, when American companies (banana-based) arrived, and U.S. interests gained significant ownership of Honduran land (Nevins 2016). Further heavy U.S. involvement includes when the Regan administration then oversaw substantial intervention, including military presence and overall militarisation and restructuring of the Honduran economy (Ibid.).

In essence, commercial ties throughout the 20th century and the first trickle of migration to the U.S. aided in establishing Honduran diasporas, which increased with family reunification and the emigration uptick at the end of the century (Gonzalez 1988). Continual demand for low-paid labor in the U.S. over the past decades takes place with a lack of regularisation policies, contributing to the irregularity of migration, including those motivated by family reunification that could potentially take place via regular routes (Musalo et al., 2015).

Migrant caravans from Central America have been a recent pattern, moving via land route to Hondurans' primary destination country of the United States. Honduran migrants may select to travel in a caravan in order to visible root causes of their migratory decisions, to gain more protection via safety in numbers, and receive assistance from governmental and non-governmental organization (Astles 2021). Migrants in these caravans may lack required mobility documents, and their movement may thus be characterized as irregular as they encounter entry, transit or residence regulations along their journeys. Still, whether in a caravan or opting for a solo journey, Hondurans face dangerous journeys in transit to the U.S.-Mexico border, which often take between two and six weeks (Obinna 2019; Quijada and Sierra 2018). The danger and violence, including risks of kidnapping, rape, disappearance, assault, trafficking and murder is present not only throughout the journey in Central America but also when transiting through Mexico (Astles 2021). The risk of detention and deportation there can mean choosing more alternative, dangerous routes in order to avoid migration checkpoints. This is illustrated by a high-profile case of the kidnapping of 102 Honduran migrants in Tamaulipas state on the northeast Mexican-U.S. border in 2013 (Reichman 2013). Irregular migration is often facilitated via a smuggler, or coyote, which costs thousands of dollars, although costs can be mitigated if travelling in a caravan (Astles 2021; Quijada and Sierra 2018).

When analysing Europe as a Honduran destination, the history between Spain and Honduras can account for the prevalence of migration to Spain in comparison to the rest of the EU Member States, in a similar manner to several other LAC states. An object of Spanish conquest since the 16th century, Honduras gained independence from Spain in 1821, and Spanish continues to remain the primary language today, along with Roman Catholicism serving as the main religion. Spaniards made up some of the investors and migrants to Honduras in the early 20th century, and a Spanish diaspora currently exists in Honduras (United Nations Population Division 2020). The two countries engage in a close diplomatic relationship, and an agreement that allows for double nationality was also signed in 1966 ([Official Spanish State Bulletin] BOE-A-1967-7305). Spain

and Honduras also signed an agreement of “Social Cooperation” that allowed for reciprocal right to work in the two countries, which has been followed by several agreements and frameworks since, including the most recent allowance of temporary Honduran work permits in 2021, as a result of a 2019 visit by Honduran President ([Official Spanish State Bulletin] BOE-A-1979-30179; Gobierno de Honduras 2021).

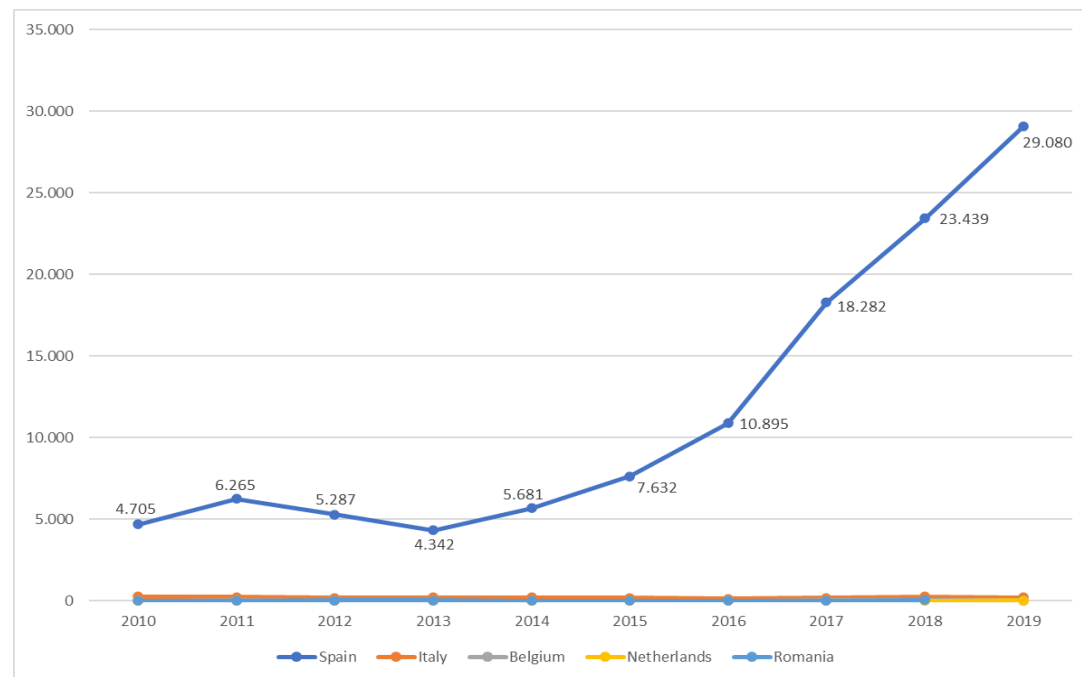
In this sense, Honduran migration may start regularly. However, given that Hondurans are permitted to enter Spain via a visitor’s visa of up to three months, an irregular path includes arriving by air route to Spain and remaining after this visa expires (Gil Araujo and González-Fernández 2014). Hondurans also request asylum in Spain, albeit the Spanish state generally does not recognise the situation in Honduras as meriting international protection, as further explained in the section on drivers (CEAR 2018). In recent decades, the literature notes the highly feminized patterns of migration from Honduras to Spain (Gil Araujo and Pedone 2014; Gil Araujo and González-Fernández 2014).

3.2 Recent trends

When analysing the data on immigration from Honduras to the European Union between 2010 and 2020, Spain clearly stands out as the country where a considerable sum of Hondurans decided to move. During this decade, a total of 115,608 individuals from the Central American state landed in Spain. Far behind, Italy represents the only other significant country of destination, with 2,159 arrivals in that same timespan. Belgium, the Netherlands and Romania were respectively the third, fourth and fifth country of destination, with 241 entrances for the former and 187 for the latter two. Considering these data, it is thus necessary to focus almost exclusively on Spain when examining Honduran immigration to Europe during the decade of the 2010s. Starting in 2013, there was a positive trend of arrivals from the country, that lineally grew from 4,342 in that year to 29,080 in 2019. However, prior to that moment the figures were already considerably high, with 6,265 Hondurans reaching Spain in 2011, but started to decline from that year until a tendency shift in 2013. Regarding the

gender division of immigration from Honduras, in Spain there was an overwhelming predominance of women, with a share moving between 66.40% in 2019 -the only year when the percentage was less than 70%- and 77.25% in 2011.

Figure 1. Migration from Honduras to most important received EU countries, 2010-2019



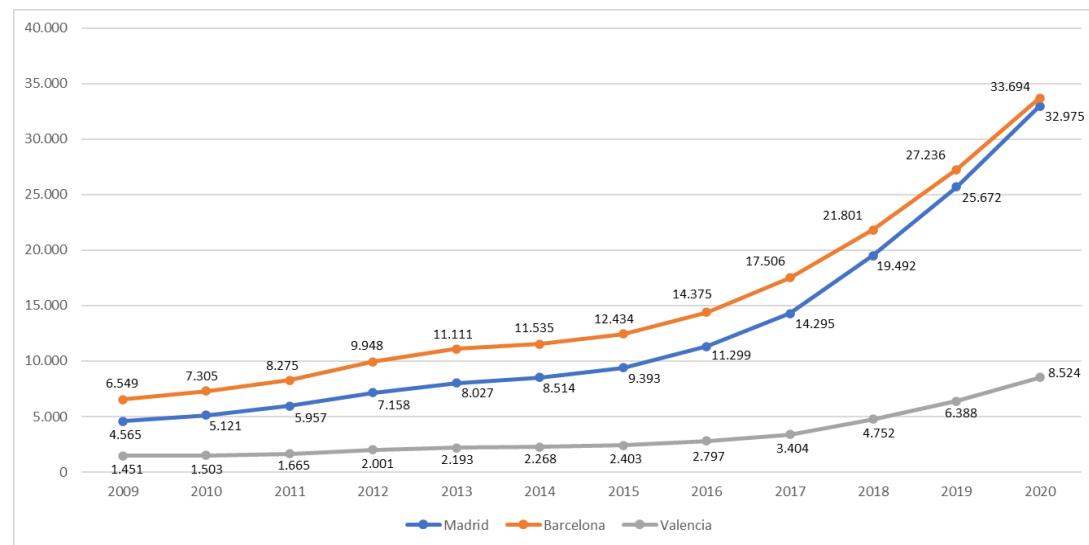
Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

For the last decade, Hondurans only appeared within the top-ten list of foreign nationalities living in Spain in 2020, precisely in the 10th place. In 2009, they comprised the 33rd demographic group of residents from a third country, a position that progressively and interruptedly escalated until reaching the number ten in 2020. Throughout those years, there was a much larger presence of other Latin American nationals in Spain, for instance, of Ecuadorians, Colombians or Bolivians, to mention those that appear within the first ten larger groups for every year, but also of Argentinians, Brazilians, Dominicans, Venezuelans or Peruvians. Until 2017, the increase in the presence of residing Hondurans in Spain was quite linear, significantly augmenting in 2018 in relation to the previous year. Afterwards, the tendency grew again lineally until 2020; the current population as of 2020 totals 99,418 Hondurans (United Nations Population Division, 2020). In terms of the difference between male and female

residents from Honduras, there was a regular difference similar to the one corresponding to immigration, with an annual share of women that moved between 67.47% and 73.69% over the 2010-2020 time frame.

When the attention focus is shifted to the populations of foreign nationals in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, the three larger cities in Spain and also those that, among others, have a historical relevance in regard to migration movements, the trend in the presence of Hondurans closely resembles Spain's overall data. From 2009 to 2020, there was a constant rise in the number of Honduran nationals living in the three metropolises, with the largest one being found in Barcelona, this fact contrasting with the usually higher presence of other Latin American nationals, for example, Venezuelans or Colombians, in Madrid, Spain's capital. For the previous decade, Barcelona hosted 28.18% of the absolute number of Hondurans residing in Spain, with the greatest share of 29.74% in 2017. Madrid, as the city with the highest national population of the country and the third of Honduran nationals until 2013 -since Girona, in Catalonia, stood as the city with the second largest accumulation of Hondurans until shifting with Madrid from 2014 onwards- held an average of 23.64% between 2009 and 2020, with the highest share in 2020 at 27.04%. In the fourth position on the whole and the third within the three selected cities, Valencia hosted 6.10% of Hondurans residing in Spain in that same timespan, also having its highest share in 2020, with 6.99%.

Figure 2. Honduran nationals residing in Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia, 2009-2020



Source: INE, 2021. Own Elaboration.

Within the three cities, the presence of Hondurans in the ranking of foreign populations also resembles closely to their presence in Spain. Starting with Barcelona, Hondurans only represented one of the top-ten nationalities from 2017 onwards, having escalated from being the 30th demographic group in 2009. The highest spot in the ranking was reached in 2019, as the 6th national community and the only year that Hondurans constituted the 1st Latin American nationality of foreign residents in Spain. Subsequently, in Madrid Hondurans only appeared as the 10th and 9th position within the rank of foreign populations in 2019 and 2020, respectively, having previously constituted the 28th in 2009, to then rise from 2012 onwards. Moreover, at any point Hondurans have represented the 1st Latin American group of residents in the Spanish capital, being the 5th in 2020, behind Colombians, Venezuelans, Peruvians and Ecuadorians. Finally, in Valencia the trend repeated itself, with the slight difference that there was a decrease in 2010 in respect to their presence in 2009, when Hondurans descended from the 33rd place to the 34th, to then become the 31st in 2011 and then climb steadily until reaching their highest location in 2020, as the 11th foreign nationality, and never entering the list of the first ten communities. Nonetheless, in that year Hondurans comprised the 3rd Latin American nationality in Valencia, only behind Colombians and Venezuelans.

Regarding asylum applications, Spain was also clearly the preferred choice for Hondurans from 2010 to 2020, with a sum of 16,780 applications out of the total number of 18,360 administered in the whole European Union. At a considerable distance, the other four Member States chosen by Hondurans to seek international protection were Italy, Germany, Sweden and France, the second, third, fourth and fifth respectively, with 930, 190, 155 and 100 asylum claims. Similarly to the data on immigration, the difference between Spain and the other four countries was notable. Overall, asylum applications in Spain processed between 2010 and 2020 accounted for 91.39% of all the claims made by Hondurans in the European Union. Until 2015, the share of applications moved between 47.06% and 66.67%, only surpassing these figures in 2013, with 72.73%. Nevertheless, in 2016 Spain accumulated 81.05% of applications, a number that rose to 92.88% in 2019 and to an even more overwhelming 96.51% in 2020. At all times between 2010 and 2020, Spain comprised the first country of preference for Hondurans to ask for asylum, with the other four countries shifting their positions regularly, but with Italy consolidating itself as the second from 2016 onwards (Table 1).

Table 1. Asylum applications of Hondurans in Spain, 2010-2020

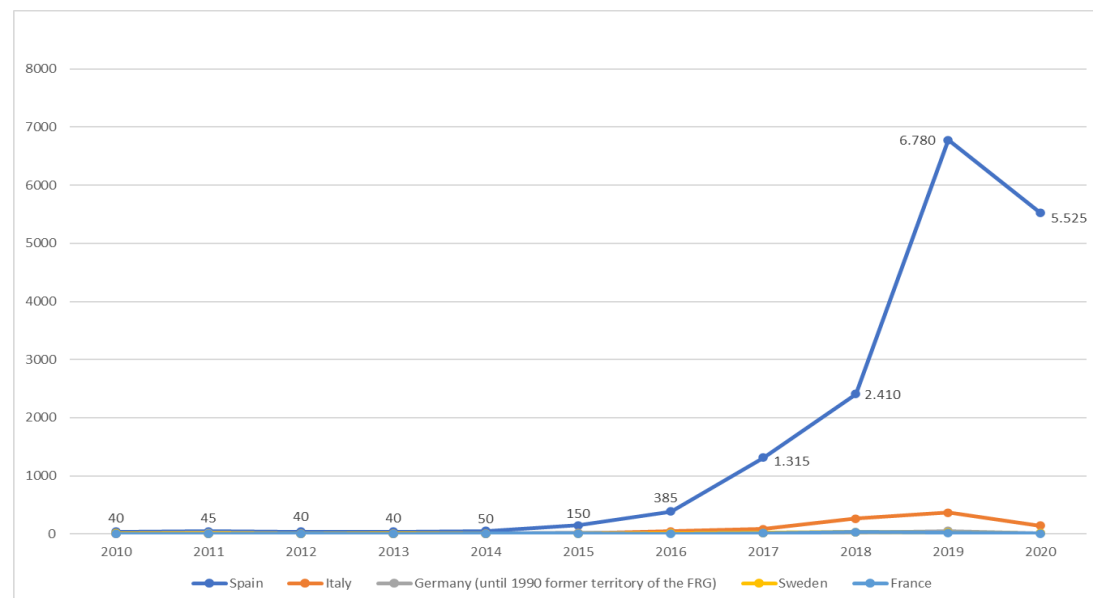
Spain			
Year	Asylum applications in Spain	Total asylum applications in EU	Percentage of applications in Spain
2010	40	85	47,06%
2011	45	80	56,25%
2012	40	60	66,67%
2013	40	55	72,73%
2014	50	80	62,50%
2015	150	225	66,67%
2016	385	475	81,05%
2017	1.315	1.490	88,26%
2018	2.410	2.785	86,54%
2019	6.780	7.300	92,88%
2020	5.525	5.725	96,51%
Total 2010-2020	16780	18360	91,39%

Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

From 2010 to 2013, asylum applications from Hondurans in Spain ranged between 40 and 45 per year, but in 2014 they started to increase, slightly

augmenting to 385 until 2016, after which there was a considerable jump to 1,315 in 2017. Subsequently, there was a significant rise in 2019 in relation to the numbers of 2018. In the year prior to the transnational spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic and the application of political measures restricting international and intranational movements of people worldwide, protection claims for Hondurans in Spain reached their highest point, with 6,780 applications, to then descend to 5,525 in 2020, figures that still surpass by far those of 2018 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Asylum applications of Hondurans in EU Member States, 2010-2020

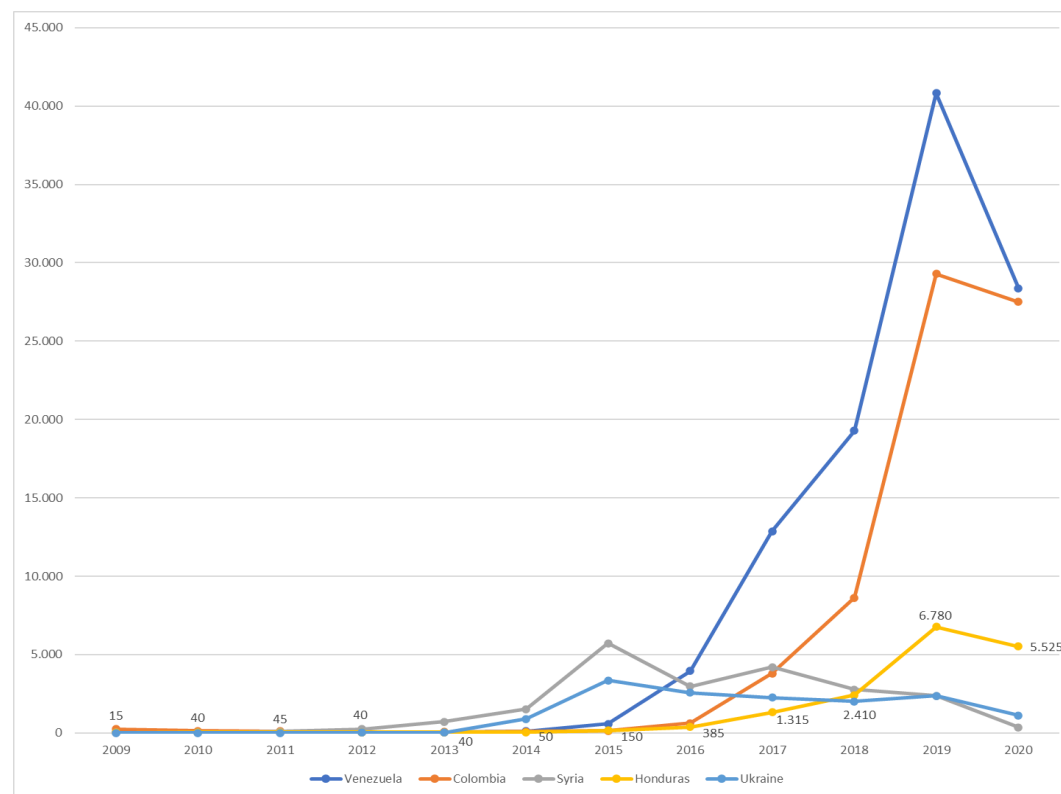


Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

In terms of the gender division of Honduran asylum applications in Spain and in the other top-five European Union countries, from 2010 to 2020 there was a generally balanced situation between women and men, except in those instances wherein the number of asylum applications was especially low, the result of which was that the percentages diverged significantly. Nonetheless, passed a minimum amount of claims, the general share was close to a 50-50% division. In the case of Spain, the annual percentage of women moved between 44.44% and 60.00%, a share only reached in one instance, in 2014. Concurrently, the data corresponding to applications processed by men moved from 40% in 2014 to 55.56% both in 2010 and 2011, thus never reaching the border of 60% of

applications. Besides from 2014, there was only one other year when there was a larger share of women than men, in 2015, with a division of 46.67% men and 53.33% women. As can be discerned from this information, the years when the gender gap was least acute were 2010 and 2011, with a difference of 55.56% men and 44.44% women in both instances. In other Member States there were more marked differences between the share of Honduran women and men soliciting asylum, but in most cases due to the aforementioned fact that the total sum of claims was considerably lower. In that sense, in many years there was a 100-0% division, due to a country only processing 5 asylum applications for Hondurans, all of which were either male or female.

To conclude, Honduras was the fourth country with the largest number of asylum applications processed in Spain between 2009 and 2020, with 16,795 claims (Figure 4), after Venezuela, Colombia and Syria, first, second and third, respectively, with 106,215, 70,680 and 21,020 applications. Closely behind Honduras, there was Ukraine, with 14,625 solicitudes of international protection. Out of the total of 349,410 asylum applications requested to Spain throughout the last decade, Venezuela and Colombia together amounted to 50.63% of the sum.

Figure 4. Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009-2020

Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

Honduras stands as the third Latin American country with the largest number of asylum applications in Spain between 2009 and 2010, way behind Venezuela and Colombia. All the top-five countries whose nationals applied for the highest number of international protection claims in Spain experienced a decrease in petitions in 2020, possibly as the result of the aforementioned restrictions applied across the globe to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in the case of the three Latin American countries, the data from that year still surpassed the number of applications from two years before. Finally, in 2009 Honduras comprised the 43rd country of origin in the list of asylum applications processed in Spain. In the following year, however, the Central American state jumped to the 17th position, to then descend slightly to the 20th in 2012. From that moment onwards, the country permanently escalated in the ranking, reaching the top-ten list in 2016, as the 7th state whose nationals requested the largest number of international protection claims in Spanish territory. In 2018, Honduras became the 4th country on the list, consolidating itself as the 3rd both in 2019 and 2020, only behind Venezuela and Colombia, that had been within the top-ten list since

2014, in the case of the former, and 2009, excluding from 2012 to 2015, in the case of the latter.

3.3 Analysis of drivers

In light of the previous section, important trends in Honduran migration to Spain that stand out include a significant increase in Eurostat-recorded immigration starting from 2018 (and consistent increase over the ten-year period when looking at municipal registration), asylum applications rising from 2016 onward until slightly dropping in 2020, feminized immigration, and the significant presence of Hondurans in Barcelona versus the more populated Madrid. To begin, in exploring these trends, further explanation of the Honduran sociopolitical context, along with the closely related economic and security situation, can offer insight.

A key event includes the 2009 coup, where the National Congress, Supreme Court, Public Ministry and Armed Forces forcefully removed elected President José Manuel Zelaya, given his socialist agenda and attempts to enact a new Constitution (Loureiro 2018). Following this, among other factors leading to further destabilization, criminal groups usurped state power in several strategic locales, and could be even described as providing more semblance of public services than the state (Altamirano 2021). Following the coup, it is alleged that there has been pervasive repression and misuse of government funds, as along with loss of working rights, real wages and civil guarantees (Portillo Villeda and Torres Zelaya 2014).

Subsequently in 2012, the National Congress stacked the country's Supreme Court to support the conservative Nationalist ruling party, and in early 2013 it revised the Constitution to authorize a military police force (Jokela-Pansini 2020). In light of these political machinations, snowballing government corruption and neglect, and a tumultuous election year in 2013, here it should be noted that the Eurostat figures on immigration begin their yearly increase starting in 2013. President Juan Orlando Hernandez took power in 2014 under

this same party, which allegedly controls Honduran politics and squashes any dissent (Ibid).

Subsequently, in 2015, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court ruled in favor of unlimited presidential reelection. A series of protests led by self-titled “indignados” (“the indignant”) called for accountability after it came to light that top government aides had embezzled hundreds of millions from the Honduran social security institution, and that the President had used some of this money in his 2013 presidential campaign (Beltrán 2021). This can perhaps go towards elucidating both the continued rise in immigration, as well as the significant increase in asylum applications to Spain beginning from 2016 onwards. Moreover, a contested election took place in 2017 wherein Orlando Hernandez was reelected amid allegations of electoral fraud, with the General Organisation of American States (OAS) calling for a re-election. This led to popular protest and clashes with military and police forces, as citizens viewed these procedures as illegitimate (Beltran 2021).

Indeed, Honduras’ ruling political party has been repeatedly and consistently linked to corruption, including membership in or collusion with organized crime, both generally and with regard to certain instances. For example, over the timeframe studied, many environmental activists were killed protesting corruption in government mining and dam contracts (Beltran 2021). More specifically, President Orlando Hernandez’s brother had been cited as a co-conspirator in drug trafficking and money laundering, and his brother faced these charges and was in fact convicted in 2019 in the US (Oxford Analytica 2021). Demonstrations and strikes peaking in April of 2019 in protest of the President’s alleged corruption, as well as in response to proposed health and education regulations, resulted in forceful crackdowns between March and July of 2019 (Human Rights Watch 2020). This possibly sheds light on the 2019 spike in asylum applications to Spain (as well as a less significant but noticeable increase in those to Italy).

In combination with the political corruption and weak state is the continued

erosion of the public sector, brought about in part by the neoliberal restructuring of the 1990s. Among other sectors, the healthcare system is extremely lacking, and the education system similarly poor (Portillo Villeda and Torres Zelaya 2014). As such, various protests form part of a wider trend of demand for democratic participation and representation in recent years from all sectors of society, including indigenous, Black and women's groups (Loperena 2016; Obinna 2021). In tandem with the political turmoil, drug harvesting and trafficking results in land transfers or "grabs" that are in turn shared with corporate interests or corrupt state actors, all of which significantly affects the dispossession of these underprivileged, indigenous or Afro-descendent populations (McSweeney et al., 2018). Essentially, both legally and physically, these groups are coerced to cede resources. Furthermore, mining industry exploitation in recent decades has affected these groups, and the greater Honduran population, in similar ways (Bebbington, Fash and Rogan 2019).

In addition, Honduras, and its neighboring Central American countries, is classified as one of the most violent countries in the world, with the most recent data from 2016 indicating a murder rate of 59 out of every 100,000 people (Obinna 2021). Some data suggests that violence decreased after 2011, thus perhaps serving as a factor in the slight decrease in Eurostat immigration numbers from 2011 (Landa-Blanco et al., 2020). However, while over the ten-year period under study the homicide rate may have been declining, Honduras still ranks highly for overall violence and crime, and includes some of the world's most violent cities (Bermeo and Lelang 2021). This can go towards partially explaining the continual rise in immigration to and municipal registration in Spain, as such violence perhaps precludes internal (rather than international) migration due to additional factors like climate or environmental shocks.

The way violence affects certain groups in Honduras is important to examine. Gendered violence in Honduras, observed frequently by both human rights organizations and scientific studies, provides further understanding of feminized migration beyond the more typical explanation of Spanish demand for domestic care work (Hierro 2016). In particular, this issue could pertain to the greater

percentage of women asylum applications over the ten-year period. Apart from the Autonomous University of Honduras' Observatory on Violence reporting 224 femicides in 2020, literature and advocacy groups note that GBV is normalized and structurally endemic, with increasing gang violence and militarization (especially during 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic) (Amnesty International 2021; Jokela-Pansini 2020; Menjivar and Walsh 2017). Enforced disappearances during and after the 2009 coup are accompanied by overall rape, kidnapping and systemic domestic violence during the period under study (Obinna 2021).

These considerations as to political, social, economic and security factors help to explain the consistent increasing trend in municipal registrations in the selected most populated cities in Spain over the ten year period. In referencing this data, it bears mentioning that the notable Honduran presence in Barcelona versus Madrid and Valencia could be explained by the ties established by Catalan businessmen in the 19th century, as part of the Spanish immigration to Honduras described earlier; Catalanian immigrants in Honduras still exist to this day (Delgado Ribas 1982). This diaspora can also be compared to the transnational Palestinian community present in Central America; Palestinians first arrived in Honduras in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and after over a century of immigration of merchants and entrepreneurs the community has established itself as an economic and political elite (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013). However, it is also likely that it relates to the more inclusive immigration and integration policies in the Catalanian region (Falguera and Serra 2021).

Finally, while the data examined in the trends does not speak to LGBTQI+ individuals, and though they are not officially recognized in Honduran statistics, it is important to emphasize that they have been reported by various rights organizations as particularly subject to abuse and violence (Amnesty International 2021; Portillo Villeda 2012). Finally, migration of minors, especially along the corridor to the United States, is characterized by various interventions, including efforts by UNICEF and temporary measures by the Honduran governance; for example, a program was enacted in response to the Zika virus of 2011 (Hernández Rodríguez 2020). However, again, continued

migration to Europe may reflect how there is no prolonged strategy to assist Honduran children suffering from endemic structural problems in the country (Ibid).

Given this general outline of the situation in Honduras itself, the most significant consideration in terms of transit influences includes the U.S. President Donald Trump's administration from 2017 until 2021, as well as his declarations as President Elect in 2016. Trump's immigration positions and policies markedly denounced or placed stricter control on Central American caravans arriving through Mexico, and as early as 2016 Honduran migrants were recorded as having turned to Spain as an alternative option to the US (Reuters 2018). Again, as migration to the US are estimated to make up almost 80% of total Honduran immigration, the highly visible Trump administration rhetoric (and later actions) regarding Central American and Mexican immigration could play into the significant number of asylum applications to Spain in 2017, 2018 and 2019 (Eurostat 2021).

Again, there is U.S. demand for flexible migrant with lack of immigrant regularization or enforcing regular migration and asylum programs. Both the U.S. and Mexico engage in restrictive migration policies with preventive or punitive measures, and sometimes discretionary practices. For example, U.S. (under both the Biden and Trump administrations) and Mexican officials recently expelled Central America migrants at the border outpost of El Ceibo, Guatemala, citing COVID-19 authorized emergency action to address health risk (Cuffe 2021). While the land route through Central America and Mexico to the U.S. is one of the most dangerous for irregular migration, it is chosen more frequently than paths to Europe by Honduran and Central American migrants. It is more accessible for those with less resources, with irregular channels resulting given the exclusion from regular migratory programs, lack of visas and passports, limited financial resources, and lack of knowledge of regular migratory processes, among other factors. Strategies utilized instead include reliance on smuggling and trafficking networks that can allow for delayed or non-monetary payment, information sharing via word of mouth, and family ties

in the destination country.

In turning to the destination context and considering factors that may have impacted Hondurans choosing Europe, and primarily Spain, it should be noted that these asylum measures or lack thereof may affect both number of asylum applications and irregular migration. Despite the structural and democratic decay of the Honduran state, high political and economic instability and systemic violence of organized crime, and compounded ramifications of climate shocks, it is difficult for Hondurans to meet the requirements of international protection in Spain and Europe. For example, while Honduran nationals may be clearly targeted by organized crime and certain to risk their lives if they stay, the Spanish state does not normally classify this as a type of violence based on the grounds of race, religious affiliation, nationality, belonging to a specific social group or holding a particular political opinion, which would allow them refugee status under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention (CEAR 2018).

For instance, in 2019, out of the 6,780 asylum applications to Spain that year, only 226 Hondurans received favorable resolutions (Eurostat 2021). At the same time, the Spanish National Court did rule in November of 2017 that Honduran victims of the maras, or international organized crime groups, should be granted international protection in that the Honduran state security forces were unwilling or unable to protect its citizens, and given how these groups are intricately implicated in all levels of the Honduran societal fabric and political system (ECLI:ES:AN:2017:5110). This could also contribute to the significant increase in asylum applications beginning from the year 2017.

In concluding this overview of drivers, it is worthwhile to reemphasize the qualification that while the data reflects a slight decrease from 2011 to 2013 in immigration, the municipal registrations in Spain consistently rise. Again, this is significant as even those Honduran nationals residing in Spain for two consecutive years can be eligible to apply for Spanish citizenship and may no longer factor into these rising numbers. And of course, the lack of data available on irregular migration means the volume and characteristics of migration may

not be completely accurate, and are no doubt underestimated. Moreover, despite the stark evidence of the relatively consistent levels of poverty as well as economic and political uncertainty, Honduran migration decisions must be understood beyond the structural, to also reflect individual level drivers.

Again, considerations as to Honduran migration are complex, and they are characterized as composed of include agricultural workers, internal and international migrants, and asylum seekers, in the context of systemic poverty, inequality, land concentration or dispossession (from seizing land for drugs trafficking, mining or extractive industries), climate vulnerability, varied forms of violence, lack of social protections in combination with neoliberal policies and U.S. presence or intervention and its effects. Migration is notably non-linear in that there is often forcible displacement within Honduras before moving on to a third country. The combination of factors outlined that often prevent regular migration pathways result in varied strategies Significant Honduran emigration at the turn of the century and its continued volume now translates a transgenerational migratory project as well, already taking place in Honduran migration to the U.S., but also becoming distinctive to Europe.

4. Venezuela

UN WORLD POPULATION DIVISION (2019)	
Total population (millions)	28,435,943
<i>Male</i>	13,984,932
<i>Female</i>	14,451,011
Percentage of population	
<i>Under age 15</i>	27.40%
<i>Aged 15-24</i>	16.30%
<i>Aged 25-64</i>	48.70%
<i>Aged 65+</i>	7.60%
Crude birth rate per 1,000 population	17.6
Crude death rate per 1,000 population	7.1
Life expectancy at birth (years)	72.1
Annual rate of population change	-0.8
Total migrant stock	1,375,690
<i>Male</i>	685,975
<i>Female</i>	689,715
Net migration rate (2015-2020)	-22.327

WORLD BANK (2020)	
GNI per capita (\$) in 2010*	11,810
GDP (\$) (billions) in 2010*	393.19
School enrollment	
<i>Primary (% gross) in 2017</i>	97.00%
<i>Secondary (% gross) in 2017</i>	88%
<i>Primary & secondary (gross) gender parity index in 2017</i>	1

4.1 Migration and Asylum Profile

Venezuela, a federal presidential republic with a population of roughly 28,435,943 as of 2020, is located on the northern coast of South America (United Nations 2020). It is composed of both continental territory and islands, and is bordered by the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean as well as Colombia, Brazil and Guyana on the continent. It is distinctively marked by its ongoing political, economic, and social crisis, which has garnered international attention, specifically with regard to migratory movements (Mazuera-Arias 2020). Beginning with the 1998 election of President Hugo Chávez, academic, political and human rights spheres have noted massive emigration trends, with even further exacerbation in the ongoing exodus identified as starting in 2015 and 2016, under the contested government of President Nicolas Maduro (Edson Louidor 2018).

For the most part, in these most recent migratory movements, Venezuelans move to neighboring countries or the general Latin America and Caribbean region, with the largest concentration specifically residing in Colombia, followed by the countries of Ecuador, Peru and Chile, and key extra regional destinations include the United States and Spain (Chaves-González and Echeverría-Estrada, 2020). The Platform for Interregional Coordination of Migrants and Refugees estimates that currently, there are 5.9 Venezuelan migrants and refugees globally (R4V 2021), with 4.8 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela remaining in Latin America and the Caribbean. Colombia hosts 1.7 million, Peru 1.3 million, Ecuador 482,900, Chile 448,1000, and Brazil 261,400. At the international level, countries that host significant Venezuelan migration include the United States with 465,200, Spain with 415,000 and Italy with 59,400. Experts cite the state's political and economic failure, alongside added COVID-19 economic hardship including food, medicine and medical supply shortages, when claiming that the current Venezuelan emigration represents an unprecedented migration crisis in the region, particularly given the relatively short period of time in which it has taken place, and the significant inter and intra regional displacements.

While emigration has been rising over the past two decades, particularly since 2016 it has been identified as both asylum-related, given the claims relating to political upheaval, as well as economically motivated, with many leaving in search of basic rights (access to health, food, work) given the state's collapse. Initially, a great number of migrants were considered highly educated and skilled, drawing from the upper and middle class, with their absence further contributing to the country's economic troubles (Garcia Zea 2021). However, the snowballing humanitarian crisis has been contributing to a shift in this profile (García Arias and Restrepo Pineda 2019). As described in the Atlantic Route summary, whether Venezuelans are afforded refugee status largely often depends on the migration policies and practices of each receiving country.

While Latin America has a history of openness to humanitarian protection and migration, most countries in the region are unequipped to meet Venezuela's asylum needs (Staedicke 2018). Though when the crisis began, these countries offered a more or less "open door" approach to Venezuelan migrants, and several countries established reception programs, policies are becoming more restrictive (Wallace and Mortley 2020). As of December 2020 and according to the most recent data, 851,119 Venezuelans are subject to pending asylum applications, and only 171,127 refugees received recognition, the majority in Spain (75,600), Brazil (46,700), the United States (17,300 thousand), Mexico (13,00) and Canada (3,500). Regional states such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Chile account for about 58% of applications, but the process of status recognition is slow (R4V 2021). Lack of resources and infrastructure in humanitarian response is punctuated by bureaucratic roadblocks and disjointed regional coordination on migration governance, in addition to insufficient response from the Venezuelan government itself (Centre for International Governance Innovation and Inter-American Dialogue, 2018).

In light of involuntary migration patterns, those Venezuelans that cross into bordering Latin America and the Caribbean can be subjected to human and sex trafficking (John, 2019). Indeed, the most recent migration from Venezuela often do not have a valid passport, and thus could not initiate visa processes even if

they were less restrictive (Ibid.). In the case of emigration to Europe, family reunification or asylum claims can be a means to regular migration. At the same time, the current humanitarian crisis and new visa restrictions often leads to irregular migration both within the Latin American region and further abroad.

Meanwhile, throughout the 20th century, Venezuela has also served as a significant country for immigration, for migration from Europe and primarily Spain, as well as from neighboring countries in the CELAC region. Post-war emigration from Europe to Venezuela was prevalent, not only due to Spanish colonial ties, but also given a refugee program that encouraged emigration from other countries in Southern Europe, including Portugal and Italy (Huhn 2020). Moreover, the Venezuelan government sent three post-1945 missions to France, Italy, and Germany, in order to recruit specific migrant profiles, including agricultural and domestic workers (Ibid). Oil reserves discovered in the 1920s led to Venezuela's economic growth throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with accompanying immigration continuing from Europe. Exceptionally high economic growth rates due to the international price of oil is cited as driving this immigration, which also drew from the greater LAC region (Sassen-Koob 1979). Immigration from neighboring Colombia has been emphasised in the literature and is described in this report's Colombia profile, albeit given the nature of some irregular migration, the extent of Colombian migration to Venezuela remains difficult to capture (Doocy et al., 2019).

However, a decline in oil prices in the 1980s and ensuing financial crisis after Black Friday, among other factors, caused economic and political stability in the country. This occurred in parallel with wider social, political and economic crisis in LAC. At this point, Venezuela began transforming into a country of emigration, with emigration from Venezuela to Spain constituting the most significant migration to Europe. It is argued that initial Venezuelan emigration from the 1990s was motivated by a desire to avoid the loss of economic, political and social status. Chavez's socialist government established from 1999 onwards accompanied further emigration, and was characterized by a leftist ideology, nationalization and a resistance to United States hegemony until 2013. While the

literature and data reflect a majority of women as compared to men among Venezuelan migrants to Europe, it is notable that these patterns were and continue to be comparatively less feminized than those drawing from other countries in the LAC region (Dekocker 2018).

Again, the majority of Venezuelans emigrate to neighboring countries, with Colombia and Brazil serving as choices due to geographical proximity as well as cross-border ties, and Peru, Ecuador and Chile serve as further regional destinations (the latter three receiving more Venezuelans than Brazil) (United Nations, 2019). Peru in particular was considered accommodating in its refugee policies at the start of the Venezuelan crisis, as well as continues to be perceived as offering the best employment opportunities in the region (Morales and Pierola 2020; Doocy et al., 2019). It is accessible by foot through transit via Colombia, as is Ecuador, which serve as both a transit and destination country for Venezuelan migrants. The Peruvian government recently announced it would reopen a dialogue between Peru and Venezuela, possibly signaling border closure, tightening immigration policies or an increase in deportations (EFE 2021).

Internationally, apart from Europe, the United States is historically and increasingly a main destination as well. While studies estimate that the Venezuelan population in the United States is not fully accounted for, as of 2018, they were the fifth largest immigrant group from South America, with a median age of 38 and higher levels of education as compared with foreign and U.S. born adults (García Arias and Restrepo Pineda 2019; Hassan Gallardo and Batalova 2020).

During the period from Chavez taking power in 1998 until roughly 2013, Venezuelan migration to Europe and Spain were noted to substantially begin, and in particular consisted of largely regular migration. Given that Venezuelan migrants often could claim Spanish descentance thanks to colonial ties or due to post-World War II Spanish emigration to Venezuela, those with Spanish parents or grandparents benefitted from an allowance for dual nationality (Spanish and EU); this policy lasted until 2013. This, along with the economic, professional and

cultural capital, facilitated regular migration and integration. Moreover, Venezuelans migrating to Spain also consisted of students 25 and older arriving to complete graduate degrees and enter the labor market, usually individually, with an increase in student visa applications and renewals from 2012 to 2015 (Dekocker 2019).

Indeed, it should be emphasized that the Venezuelan profile migrating to Spain can be distinctive from the profile migrating to the LAC region. Second or third generation migrants and binational families have been able to nationalize in European countries like Spain, Portugal and Italy, and are difficult to represent in migrant stock figures. The costs and regulations involved in transatlantic journeys from Venezuela have meant that migrants with valid passports and with high and medium-high socioeconomic and educational profiles, some of them request international protection from the Member States of the European Union.

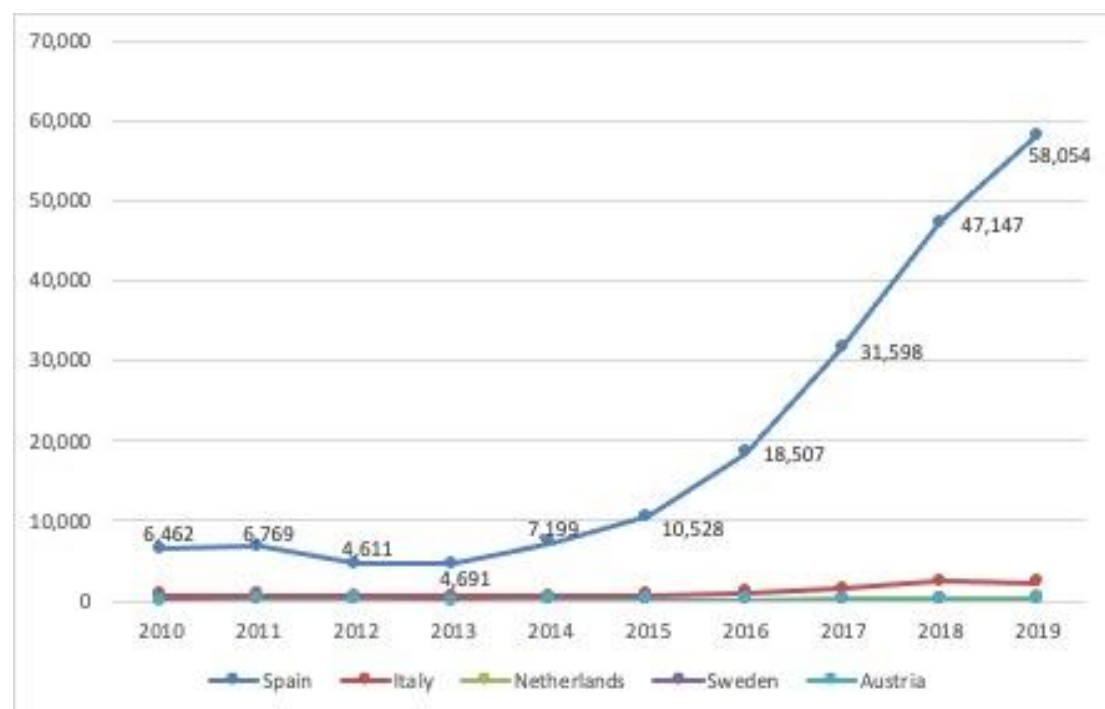
However, the profile of regular migration to Europe has slightly altered, particularly in parallel with another decline in oil prices between 2013 and 2016 that contributed to Venezuelan economic crisis operating in tandem with political instability and corruption (Van Praag 2019). Arriving at the past ten years under study (2009-2020), Eurostat data on asylum applications and Spanish municipal registration helps to flesh out recent trends in Venezuelan migration to Europe. This data in particular is chosen because the majority of Venezuelan migration to Europe are to and through Spain, via air route to the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid, to which Venezuelans arrive after often having departed from transit country Colombia.

4.2 Recent trends

In examining trends at the European Union level over the course of years 2010 to 2019, Eurostat data on Venezuelan immigration indicates that Venezuelans most frequently chose Spain as a destination country. While immigration numbers dip in the years 2012 and 2013, they rise from 2014 forward and significantly

increase beginning in 2017. In particular, in the year 2017, 31,598 Venezuelans immigrated to Spain, followed by 47,147 in 2018 and 58,054 in 2019, the latter of which reflects nine times the amount of immigrants as compared to 2010. From the years 2010 to 2019, the average male versus female gender makeup of recorded immigration is 42.81% versus 57.18%. This general division remains similar to the average over the years, without any significant variation. Venezuelan migration clearly increasingly becomes a more significant portion of overall immigration it peaks in 2019, as Venezuelan immigration to Spain makes up 4% of all immigration from CELAC states 2010, 9% in 2015 and 52% of in 2019.

Figure 1. Migration from Venezuela to the top EU country destinations, 2010-2019.



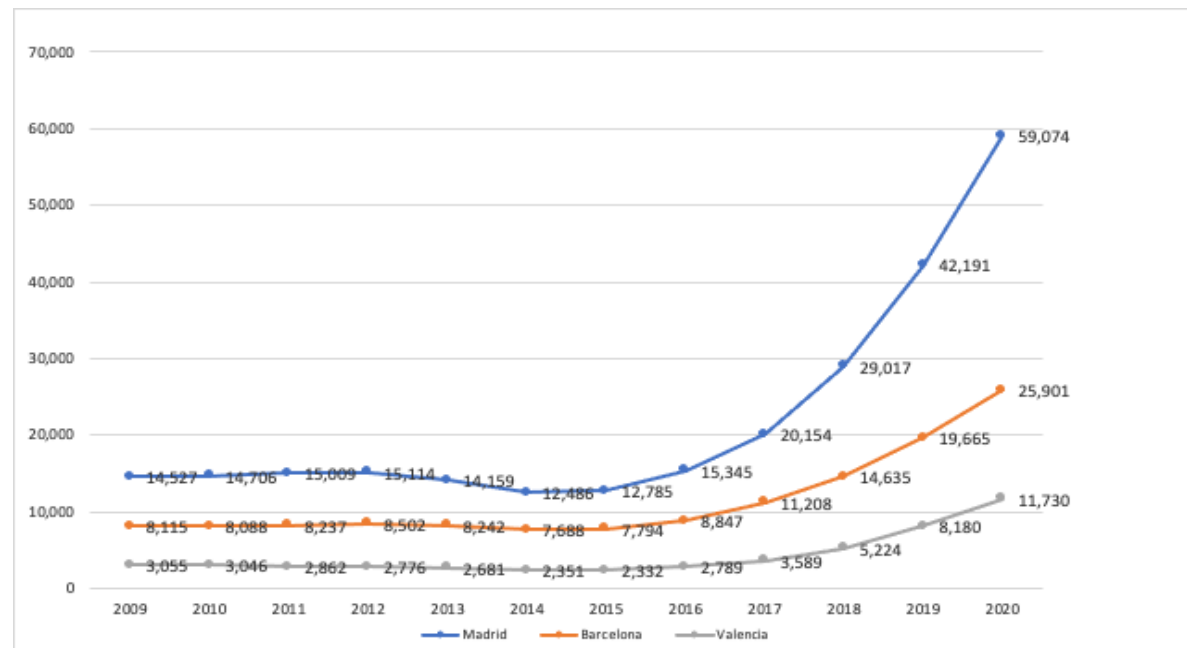
Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

Meanwhile, other EU destination countries receiving Venezuelans migration over the ten-year period include Italy, followed far behind by the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria. While not receiving nearly as many Venezuelan nationals as Spain, Italy receives significantly more Venezuelans as compared with the following three countries over the ten-year period. It also reflects the same dip in

numbers in 2012 and 2013, as well as a substantial increase beginning from 2017 onwards. The percentage of women versus men also remains consistent in Italy over this period, with an average of 37.04% male and 62.96% female over the selected period. The greatest discrepancy occurs in, with a difference of 32.70% male and 67.29% female in 2012.

Data from the Spanish municipal registry, described earlier in the Atlantic route introduction as the official statistics on all residents (including foreign) collected on a yearly basis and compiled at the national level, corroborates the Eurostat information. The breakdown ranges between 57.08% and 58.97% percent majority Venezuelan women, depending on the year in the ten-year period. The Spanish census data records higher numbers in terms of Venezuelans present in Spain, and is illustrative in that it reflects a yearly count of registered residents in a given city, regardless of legal status. For this analysis, as with the other case countries Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia have been selected based on their historical migrant populations and size as the largest three municipalities in Spain. Displayed here are Venezuelans registered in the communities of Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia from 2009 to 2020.

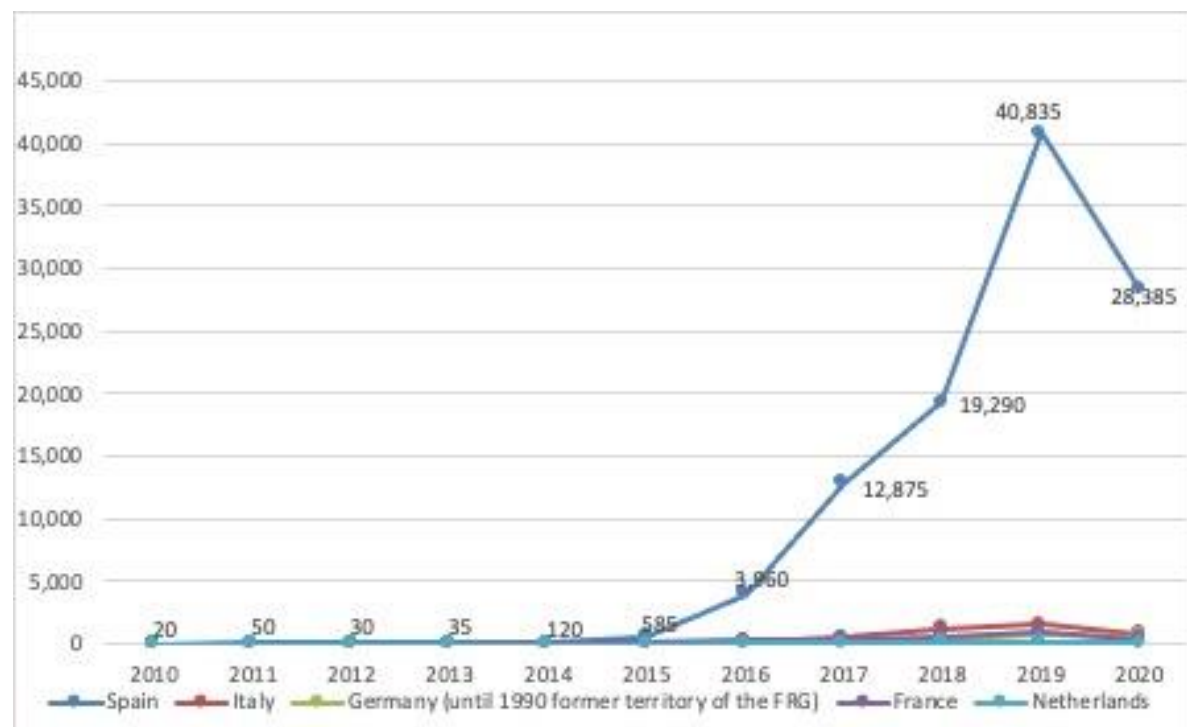
As demonstrated in the figures below, while the population remains fairly steady until 2012, there is a slight decrease in the numbers between 2012 and 2014. This reflects a similar trend captured in Eurostat data on immigration. Apart from this one dip over the course of the three-year period, the population steadily increases. Most notably, however, includes how Venezuelan registrations begin to increase starting from 2015 onwards. By 2020, the population has quadrupled in Madrid and tripled in Barcelona.

Figure 2. Venezuelan nationals residing in Spanish cities, 2009-2020

Source: INE, 2021. Own Elaboration.

Within these three cities, Venezuelans do not rank highly in the total of resident nationalities until the year 2018. In Madrid, for example, they between the remain the 16th and 18th greatest number of foreign residents from 2009 to 2015, then rising steadily until climbing to 6th place in 2018, and remaining the 5th greatest nationality (second greatest of the CELAC countries, after Colombia) in 2019 and 2020. In Barcelona, they remain outside of the top 20 foreign national residents until 2018, where they rank 14th, followed by 12th in 2019 and finally placing in the top 10 behind Colombia and Honduras in 2020. They similarly remain a less significant foreign population out of the overall foreign population residing in Valencia over the ten-year period, albeit finally reaching the top ten in 2019 and 2020, with Colombia as the only other CELAC country ranking above them over these years. Again, these resident registration numbers are useful in validating Eurostat information on immigration statistics.

In turning back to Eurostat data for asylum data, first time asylum applications are again illustrative of Spain as a primary destination. In an examination of first-time asylum applications, the bulk are submitted to Spain, followed by Italy, France and Germany, with requests to Spain totaling 106,215 over the ten year period.

Figure 3. Asylum applications from Venezuela to the EU, 2010-2020

Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

In observing asylum trends, it is notable the applications spike at the beginning of 2016, rising from then forward. In terms of the height of requests over the ten-year period, the year of 2019 marks the greatest number of asylum applications from Venezuelans to Europe, again to Spain, Italy, Germany, France and the Netherlands. These drop slightly in 2020. As can be viewed below, Venezuelan asylum requests to Spain make up the majority of all Venezuelan asylum requests to the EU from 2015 onward, making up 92% of Venezuelan applications to the EU in 2020. In 2020, Venezuelan applications make up 6.5% of asylum requests from all nationalities to the EU.

Table 1. Venezuelan asylum applications to Spain

Year	Total asylum applications in EU	% of total applications to Spain
2010	70	28.57%
2011	90	55.56%
2012	75	40.00%
2013	95	36.84%
2014	285	42.11%
2015	780	75.00%
2016	4,670	84.80%
2017	14,480	88.92%
2018	22,440	85.96%
2019	45,405	89.94%
2020	30,805	92.14%
Total 2010-2020	119195	89.09%

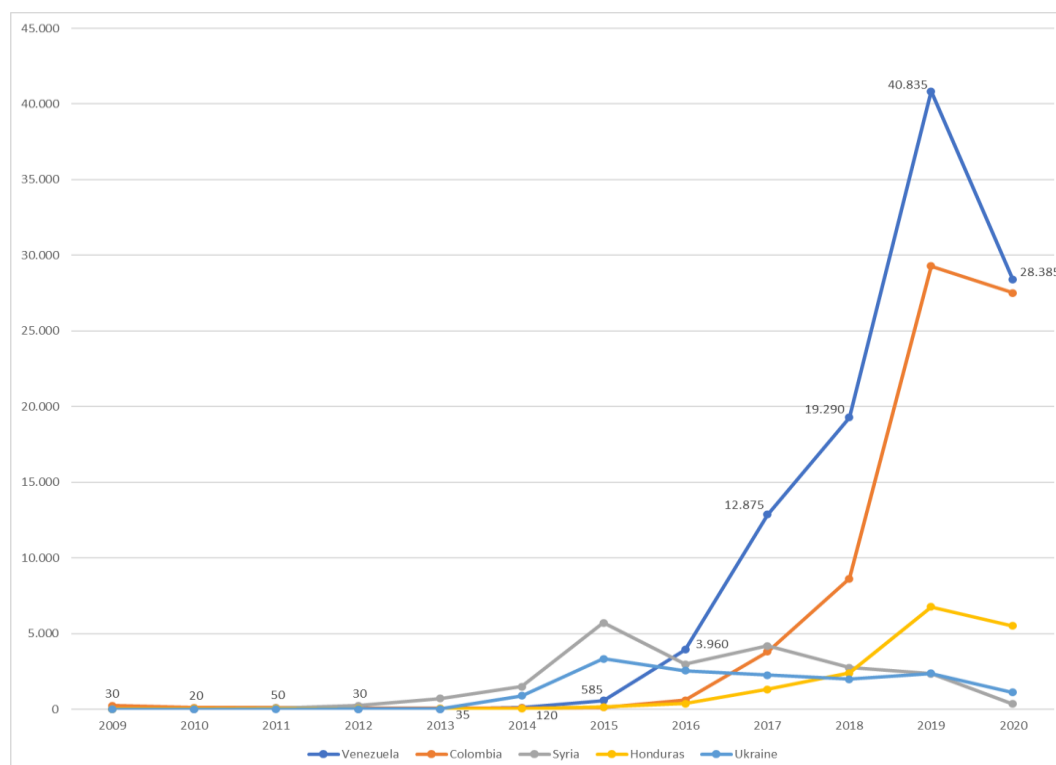
Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

However, as briefly noted in the description of the Atlantic route, given the current situation and mass exodus from Venezuela, these applications are likely unrepresentative of a greater number of nationals that could qualify for international protection, including under human rights treaties beyond the 1951 Convention, and anti-trafficking protocols. As currently, Venezuelans are exempted from a visa when travelling to Spain for a short stay (after having arrived in Spain via air through the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid), they may remain in the country and thus eventually take on irregular status.

While applications remained fairly low from 2010-2015, they begin to rise in 2015 and start to increase from 2016-2019. As can be noted here, beginning in 2016, asylum applications from Venezuela surpassed all other nationalities, whereas until then, they had remained equal to or less than those from Colombia and Syria. The 2019 peak in asylum applications from Venezuela is significant, with 2020 reflecting a drop in applications, but still totaling the second most

number in any year in the period. While asylum applications to Spain remain balanced between male and female on average over the period, 2011 is notable in that it is the year with the greatest percentage of male applicants (60%), and while the gender breakdown of applications remains balanced or at a male majority from 2011-2016, from 2017 onwards female applications make up a slight majority.

Figure 4. Asylum applications in Spain by nationality, 2009-2020



Source: Eurostat, 2021. Own Elaboration.

The asylum applications from other countries apart from Venezuela demonstrate that some of these asylum trends may be specific to Venezuelan asylum-seekers and are not reflective of asylum demand overall. For example, in 2018, as applications continue to increase dramatically as relates period under study, and they also increase from other LAC countries like Colombia and Honduras, but Syrian and Ukrainian applications slightly decrease this year.

4.3 Analysis of drivers

Before speaking to the more specific trends observed in the previous section, a general outline of the overall origin context that Venezuelans have experienced in the past years 2009-2020 largely relates to alleged political instability and accompanying economic and humanitarian crisis. A starting point lies with the Chavez government, as outlined in the earlier migration and asylum profile, which already oversaw a population facing serious hardship. After former President Chavez died of cancer, his successor Nicolas Maduro took office in March of 2013 in a narrow and contested election. Since then, political unrest as well as claims of corruption, political oppression and Maduro's illegitimacy have persisted.

While immigration to Europe slows and even slightly decreases between 2012 and 2014 in the trends previously observed, the rise again in 2014 forward could be attributed to yet another fall in oil prices, further economic crisis, and stringent repression of significant civil protests that took place in 2014, as the people voiced their concern over the country's situation (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018). Continued political events undoubtedly shaped migratory movements. In particular, in December of 2015, the opposition party won control of the legislature, in the first parliamentary election to take place since Chavez's death, and the first time that the ruling party lost since 1999. The ruling National Assembly then proceeded to illegally stack the Supreme Court, which declared the opposition win fraudulent, and denied calls for a 2016 referendum of Maduro's government. In July 2017, the Supreme Court ordered the takeover of three leading opposition parties, appointing Maduro government supporters to the National Electoral Council. In the same year, Maduro government supporters won two-thirds of the National Assembly seats, in an election boycotted by the majority of opposition all institutions except for the legislative branch. After another contested re-election of Maduro in May 2018, Juan Guaidó, National Assembly president, declared himself interim president of Venezuela in January 2019, bringing the country to a political impasse (Singer 2020). In July of 2020, ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for December 2020, the Supreme Court ordered the takeover of three leading political opposition parties by

Maduro government supporters, with less than a third of participation among registered voters (Moleiro 2020). Several neighboring regional and wider international governments declared the elections were neither free nor fair. International support is divided, and Maduro continues to attend CELAC summits, including the Sixth CELAC Summit of the Heads of State and Government in September of 2021 in Mexico.

In looking at the dramatic increase in immigration from 2017 forward, as well as the asylum spike from 2016 onwards, these political events help to contextualize the political instability faced by Venezuelans. In addition to the 2014 protests, denial of the 2016 presidential recall referendum, and the convocation of the national assembly in 2017, unrest fomented to lead to further protests in 2017 that resulted in 165 deaths (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018). As protests continue, it is worth noting how a recent 2021 UNHCR report indicates that security operations and suppression of protests particularly resulted in the deaths of young men and boys from marginalized neighborhoods (UNHCR 2021).

Related to political instability is the overall insecurity generated by compounded crises, and what is considered the political and economic failure of the Venezuelan state. As of 2020, the Venezuelan Observatory for Violence estimated that Venezuela remained the most violent country in the region and one of the most violent in the world, with 11,891 violent deaths at a rate of 45.6 for every 100,000 inhabitants (Observatorio Venezolano de Violencia 2020). Criminal groups and drug traffickers also destabilize any state security authority and contribute to the general insecurity as well as the vulnerability of the overall Venezuelan population (Edson Louidor 2018). There is argued to be an increasing complicity between these criminal groups and the National Guard, as well (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018).

In fact, the human rights situation in terms of political oppression may serve as a driver for the more privileged of Venezuela's population, including those that are able to migrate to Europe. There have been reports of ongoing political oppression, confirmed by human rights watchdogs (HRW 2021). The number of

political prisoners have allegedly skyrocketed, with many jailed without access to due process (Biderbost and Nuñez 2018). Media censorship also takes place alongside the widespread corruption (Mijares and Rojas Silva 2018.)

As of 2019, Venezuela was the OPEC member with the largest proven crude oil preserves (OPEC 2020). However, its economy has been described as in collapse. Since the 2014 oil crisis, the government has defaulted on foreign debt, the productive sector has been crippled by exchange and price control policies, the oil industry is collapsing, and hyperinflation has eliminated Venezuelans' purchasing power (Durán and Cuevas 2018). An illustrative example of the dire situation includes how in 2017, the average Venezuelan lost 10 kilograms due to lack of food (Ibid.). According to the National Survey on Living Conditions 2021, 94.5% of Venezuelans are in a situation of poverty, and of these 76.6% are in one of extreme poverty (UCAB 2021). The data also indicates that only 5.8% are not experiencing food insecurity (Ibid).

Within this context, the volume of asylum applications in 2019 is perhaps due to the deepening crisis, and the subsequent drop in 2020 likely due to the COVID-19 induced national border closures in Spain as well as restrictions on entry to the entire EU, and thus, shutdown of the Atlantic air route principal point of entry. In fact, the 2020 numbers remain high in light of the period of time the Spanish and EU borders remained closed in 2020.

In relation to the pandemic, most recently, in CEPAL's 2020 economic overview, it ranked the drop in Venezuela's GDP as the greatest in the region, three times greater than the following countries on the list including Peru, Panama and Argentina (CEPAL 2020). In addition to the economic duress, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the health system could be described as collapsed, with an increase in maternal and child mortality, diphtheria, and malaria outbreaks, those with chronic diseases unable to access treatments, deterioration in health infrastructure and shortage of medicine, medical supplies, and surgical equipment, as well as a great deal of medical personnel having migrated in search of improved conditions (Mazuera-Arias 2020).

Apart from the situation at home, currently policies within the region and among other LAC member states might also influence Venezuelans' decisions to ultimately choose Europe. Again, it is argued that interregional agreements including MERCOSUR boast some of the most human rights compatible migration policies globally, and many countries in the region interpret the definition of refugee broadly, comparatively (Lavenex 2018). Despite the humanitarian openness of its neighbors, however, in practice, applications for international protection are not largely or consistently granted, with the exception of by Mexico (Gandini et al., 2019). Moreover, it should be noted how while some countries like Argentina and Uruguay grant easier access to residency due to the Mercosur agreement, other states listed earlier (Colombia, Ecuador, Chile and Peru) serve as main destination countries in the region (Ibid.). For this reason, both the intraregional migration dynamics and any relation to migration to Europe must be considered in light of factors including family ties, lack of resources, socio-economic conditions and extreme vulnerable circumstances as well.

Moreover, the extended nature of the Venezuelan crisis is a challenge. For example, neighboring Ecuador expanded its policy temporarily between 2009-2010 to absorb Colombian asylum-seekers in a regularization of 30,000 Colombian nationals. However, these policies have not been extended to the ongoing applications of Venezuelans (Gandini et al., 2019). Another example includes how in 2019, 10,479 Venezuelans sought asylum in bordering neighbor Colombia, with only 145 of these accepted as of 2020 (Ruiz del Río and Hoyos Bula 2020). At this same time, a regularisation process has been announced in September of 2021 that could regularise 450,000 Venezuelans (UNHCR-IOM 2021).

Given these considerations to contextualize the latest Venezuelan emigration from the point of view of origin, including the rise in asylum applications beginning in 2015 and increasing from 2016 onwards, policies in Europe and specifically Spain help to illustrate recent patterns as well. Firstly, again, Spain allows for regularization based on descentance, which may serve as a draw, and

Portugal and Italy have similar policies (Dekocker 2018). However, with the deepening crisis in Venezuela, young migrants who did not meet the requirements for double nationality began to arrive (Ibid.). From 2013 onwards, it became more difficult to arrive to Spain with a student visa, and as previously noted, the 2016 surge in humanitarian applications changed the migration and asylum profile up until that point (Ibid.).

In Spain, while the majority of Venezuelans request asylum after arriving, some already request it at the border at the International Airport of Barajas in Madrid (Dekocker 2018). Once again, in this sense, the exceptional nature and magnitude of the Venezuelan crisis begets varying and perhaps reactionary asylum policies. For example, in 2018, a Spanish Commission on Refugees (CEAR) report explained that only 65% of all asylum petitions for international protection were granted in the year 2017, below the EU average and below the year before in Spain (Dekocker 2018). Of those, 99% of Venezuelans were rejected. At the time, Spanish Ministry of the interior, overwhelmed with asylum applications, announced in February of 2019 that it would issue temporary residence to Venezuelans based on “humanitarian reasons.” As a result, in the year 2019, out of the 40,906 Venezuelans applying for asylum, 39,667 were issued these temporary permits, albeit only 48 received official refugee status (CEAR,2020). The 2019 spike in asylum applications in the previous observed trends could be partially accounted for by this 2019 policy.

Given the irregular nature of current mobility patterns and they very recent volume, which still remains to be exhaustively analysed and understood, several qualitative studies conducted with Venezuelan migrants also help to shed light on the drivers of migration to Europe. Historical migration from Venezuela and even up through the decade under study may have encompassed students and skilled labor, including migrants with economic, professional, and cultural capital as mentioned earlier. However, the profile has become more heterogeneous with the mass exodus, with populations accessing Spain and Europe via asylum seeking and immigration regimes as well as irregular channels.

This changing profile could explain gender variation in recent trends, and shifting dynamics in women's and family migration. Until recently, migration from Venezuela had not reflected the same degree of feminization as other countries from LAC; this could be attributed to the fact that rather than migrating as part of global care chains, Venezuelan migration included elite flight and skilled workers with a more balanced gender profile. However, the most recent years (from 2016 onwards) have demonstrated a slight female majority in migration and asylum applicants. This may be a result of the "en masse," collective nature of current flight: a study using IOM data presents a regional profile of Venezuelan migrants and refugees traveling through and to a selection of American and Caribbean countries during 2019, and reports that the vast majority traveled with family members. This family migration perhaps explains the trend in both Venezuelan immigration to Spain and asylum-seekers to Spain reflecting higher percentages of females in the second half of the period under study, versus the first half (Chaves-González and Echeverría-Estrada 2020).

Colombia serves as a key country of transit, as it shares a difficult to control border of approximately 2,219 kilometers with Venezuela, and receives around 30% of Venezuelan migration as well as serves as a transit for 90% of the Venezuelan population that migrate to another country (Ramos et al., 2019). This is despite ruptures in diplomatic relations and periodic border closures between the two countries, which often influences the choice of irregular passages across the border (Ibid). Moreover, Venezuelans may repeatedly cross the border in seeking access to food or medical supplies. The border areas can be insecure, and spaces where carinal organizations operate and control irregular routes, in the absence of institutional stability, with populations made invisible and revictimized at these borders (Ibid). Upon leaving Colombia, another precarious route that Venezuelans can embark on along with other nationalities towards the United States and Canada includes through the Darien jungle area of Panama, where Colombian National Police and Interpol estimate the migrant trafficking business earns one million USD weekly (*El Espectador* 2021).

As such, a demographic profile at the border is useful in observing self-described drivers for Venezuelans. A study conducted in 2018 surveying almost 15,000 Venezuelans arriving to Colombia explains that motivations to emigrate include finding a better livelihood or employment and support their family via remittances, or due to insecurity; it argues that the profile of those emigrating represents a significant loss of economically active populations in Venezuela (Mazuera-Arias et al., 2020). At the same time, as referenced earlier, it should be emphasized that the uptick in migration from Venezuela particularly beginning in 2016 has meant a diversification of the migratory profiles. There are families with children, unaccompanied minors, and elderly with chronic diseases, among other vulnerable populations, forming part of the mass migration (Ramos et al., 2019).

Moreover, while the literature notes Venezuelan migration is not exclusive to those with Spanish heritage, this still factors into the current Venezuelan migration to Spain and Europe. Thus, those Venezuelans that reach Europe in the current prolonged crisis may diverge from the more vulnerable migrant profiles that remain in the surrounding region or border nations of Venezuela, for example (Gandini et al., 2019). By way of example, a recent 2019 study notes how second and third generation Spanish women (born in Venezuela) “returning” for work. The majority did not have children in Spain and had family or friend networks in Spain already, which allowed for their integration, but it was not always easy to find work (even with Spanish nationality) (Rodicio-García and Sarceda-Gorgoso 2019).

In summary, decades of political, economic and social complications have resulted in a compromise of Venezuela’s democratic system and deterioration of the country’s institutional, economic and productive capacities. Gathering official information related to these considerations has been difficult, as the Venezuelan government stopped producing official reports and data around the year 2013. Ultimately it is clear that a humanitarian crisis has remained ongoing, with generality food and medicine shortages, the collapse basic services and lack of access to electricity, drinking water, the internet, transport, the internet,

education and health services (Provea 2020). This heavily influences trends in the period under study. However, Venezuelan migration to Europe reflects a complex and interconnected history and trajectory, which should be considered in looking to future trends.

5. Conclusions and Future Prospects

5.1 Conclusions as to main drivers

Recent trends on the Atlantic Route illustrate how the volume, direction, gender composition and forms of migration are shaped by varying combinations of macro and meso level factors that produce aggregate effects on non-linear migration and asylum trajectories. The Atlantic Route demonstrates many context-specific characteristics, but in particular manifests the ways in which configurations of drivers in the transit context are inextricably linked and operating in parallel with the contexts of origin and destination. Of course, the most marked trends are observed in migration from the LAC region to Spain, described earlier and further detailed here. In zooming in on this EU Member State in particular, the first half of the period under study does not demonstrate significant increases in migration patterns or asylum requests, rather even some decreases, likely due to the effects of Spain's 2008 financial crisis in combination with other factors (Bayona-i-Carrasco et al., 2017).

However, the second half of the decade registers a substantial increase in LAC country asylum requests to Spain (and Europe) notwithstanding a comparatively slight drop from 2019 to 2020 attributed to COVID-19 consequences; moreover, Spain rose to one of the top asylum-seekers receiving countries in the EU during this time period as a result. Additionally, immigration from the LAC countries to Spain and Europe particularly increased in the latter part of the period, as did municipal registrations of LAC nationals in Spain. Again, such registrations aid in reflecting overall human mobility, as the nature of mixed migration from the LAC region to Europe is more complex than simply detecting "illegal" border crossings, given how, via the air route, LAC nationals can often enter Spain via a temporary visa. Of course, this highlights the fluidity and changeability of the very definition of migration. This section continues to go into further detail as to overall trends as well as offers conclusions as to why and how these recent Atlantic Route patterns have emerged, consolidated, or shifted, understanding observations from the three country case studies within the context of the entire LAC region, the overall route, and through the mutually constitutive effect of

European policies.

In light of this, what follows are the most relevant observations as to key drivers, trajectories and policies informing the Atlantic Route in the period under study, namely: 1) local to global precipitating and predisposing drivers, including deteriorating social protections and humanitarian crisis within the region, in combination with U.S. interventions and policies, all of which inform both origin and transit contexts and trajectories; 2) the air route as a former limitation on mobility and as a socioeconomic constraint on demographic profiles, as contrasted with a shift in demographic profiles in light of cheaper air travel combined with volumes of human movement; 3) the ancestral and historical ties between Spain and LAC states affecting both the nature of migration and policies that interact with them; 4) both in the LAC and EU contexts, diverging and evolving definitions and policies as to who and what merits international protection directly affecting the way migration and asylum systems accommodate human mobility and ultimately the shifting or irregularity of these patterns; relatedly, a lack of consistency in asylum system procedures or real practices at Member State and EU levels that has important ramifications for irregular migration; and finally, 5) gendered dimensions of LAC state nationals' migration not only reflected in global care chains, but also in the increasingly endemic structural violence against women in the origin and transit contexts, which cannot be decoupled from the role of historic or current interventions and policies in destination countries.

To begin, in looking at the case studies, a very general and simplistic understanding could point to proximate drivers of persistent and gradually deteriorating economic, political, security and environmental conditions, with predisposing factors including political instability as well as lack of security in the context of weak states and government corruption, alongside deepening inequalities brought about by interconnected economic instability. For example, Colombia is largely characterized by armed conflict and its repercussions, including the persecution of activists and community leaders by criminal organizations protesting the marginalization of huge collectives in land

ownership distribution as part of the ensuing peace accord agreements of 2016. Honduras is cited for its violence and organized crime, experiencing deteriorating conditions since the 2009 coup but characterized by precipitating drivers like contested elections, government crackdowns and hurricanes Iota and Eta. Meanwhile, Venezuelan migration is primarily understood in light of the current humanitarian crisis and political repression, precipitated by the overall predisposing conditions described above.

In combination with this and as referenced in the case studies, social protections can be limited or entirely lacking in several LAC states. What social protections that are put into place can often be short-term, partisan policies without universal coverage and long-term impacts, especially for vulnerable populations. As a result, migration dynamics reflect more transit and unstable migration, as traditional labor migration has been replaced with survival migration and forced migration, or in the case of Europe, migration for social reproduction. This migration is non-linear as the case of Europe illustrates; for example, Venezuelans may transit through and stay for long periods of time in countries within the LAC region before moving on to Spain.

However, closer inspection reveals that conditions in the origin countries cannot simply be considered outside of the migration, security and development nexus, particularly in light of U.S. intervention, and later restrictive and fluctuating migration policies. To begin, the advent of neoliberal globalization from the 1980s forward, led by the U.S. among other actors, was based in implementing structural adjustment programs in regions including that of the LAC states, arguably leading to unequal development and deteriorating conditions regionally, impacting forced migration (Delgado-Wise 2014). At the same time, migration policies in receiving countries like the U.S. have not always accommodated consequent, or even initially invited, migration. Moreover, significant U.S. foreign policy intervention is witnessed in the case studies. For once, there is the U.S. involvement in the Honduran economy in the 1980s, alongside U.S. military presence and support for allegedly corrupt political leaders through to the present (Nevins 2016). Meanwhile, Venezuela's so-called

failed state and collapsed economy can be attributed to multiple factors, although U.S. trade sanctions undoubtedly play a role, and could be contributing to exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and displacement (Weisbrot and Sachs, 2019). Colombia similarly has received controversial U.S. military and securitization aid from the 1980s forward articulated in terms of a drug war, marked by a shift in this framing and bilateral cooperation in a post 9/11 context (Crandall 2003).

Meanwhile, regional migration is characterized by complex, diverse, and non-linear migration, rather than the transborder patterns that characterized the region in the past. Both regionally and within states, in addition to the vacuum in protections outlined, infrastructure projects resulting from interventions described above, as well as environmental crisis, contribute to internal displacement. Any destabilization in the region how it affects mixed migratory movements in particular have been influenced by transit and destination countries that implement a discretionary use of any refugee protection norms, like those included in the 1950 Convention or Cartagena Declaration instruments, for example. In addition, there have been policies increasing penalizations for border crossings, border removals and deportations under the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations (Chisti et al., 2017). In the period under study, Obama and Trump inherited the comparatively most robust migration enforcement regime both legally and in terms of resources (Ibid). Most recently, however, migration policies under the Trump administration, both restrictive, preventative and punitive, in combination with strong anti-immigration rhetoric towards Central American migrant caravans, could possibly go towards explaining an increase in Central American migration to Spain and Europe as diverted from the U.S. from 2016 onwards (Ojea 2021).

Secondly, all of this has implications for migration to Europe, both as influencing origin contexts as well as possibly presenting Europe as an alternative destination to the U.S. Here, it is important to highlight potential mitigating effects of air travel, more or less necessary in accessing Europe. For example, before the ten year period under study and in the previous century, migration

patterns were either less voluminous as in the case of Colombia or Honduras, or composed of more elite populations as in the case of Venezuela (Dekocker 2019). However, increasingly reduced costs and a greater variety of available routes in recent decades could go towards explaining the past decade's increased migration from LAC countries to Europe (Palma 2015). This may also have gendered effects in terms of family migration patterns, as instead of prioritizing women migrants reaching Europe as a livelihood strategy, families may perceive it is possible to bring additional family members, thus affecting the feminization of migration to Europe.

For example, while women remain in the majority in immigration numbers and resident nationals from the country case studies, it seems that (generally) the gap narrows between women and men in recent years, or at least the breakdown fluctuates (Eurostat 2021; Padron, 2021). Moreover, regarding asylum, the gender division in all three countries during the period seems to remain more balanced in the past five years, perhaps reflecting increasing air travel accessibility or the highlighted transformations in configurations of drivers, dynamics in return migration, or differentiated effects of the destination country labor market (Eurostat 2021).

At the same time, it is important to reiterate that the majority of migration remains regional among LAC states, and air travel can continue to be cost prohibitive, affecting demographic profiles in that those with more resources have access to both requesting asylum, or migrating to Europe overall. The U.S. continues to generally be the first destination country outside of the LAC region for LAC nationals, accessible by land travel, albeit in often dangerous or risky journeys (Cerrutti and Parrado 2015). The case of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic repercussions also helps to illustrate the distinctiveness of the air route in this sense. The drops in asylum applications and immigration numbers of LAC nationals from 2019 to 2020 no doubt can partially be attributed to the limitations on mobility and border shutdowns in Spain and Europe that took place from 2020 onwards. Some of these entailed that those LAC nationals that could usually enter Spain on tourist visas were no longer afforded this method of

entry.

Thirdly, this in turn relates to the historical and ongoing relationship between Spain and LAC countries that demonstrate how configurations of drivers, at the route and international level, can alternate back and forth between origin, transit and destination. To begin in illustrating this, it seems to be the case that Spain proves a preferred destination country among the Member States, much of which could be traced back to colonial ties in terms of historical context, but no doubt primarily to Spanish emigration in the 20th century and current ancestral ties with the LAC region. Integration of LAC state origin migrants may be improved thanks to family ties and diaspora networks, common language, greater acceptance of certain migrant ethnicities by Spanish society, and accepted international care regimes, among other factors (Hierro 2013). Apart from labor market and migrant integration policies and programs, part of this relationship is also built into Spanish nationalisation policies. In addition, the Spanish provision for expedited nationality by residence after two years (versus ten) for those from Ibero-American countries may allow for the regularization of irregular migrants, depending on the ease and duration of the process, and if migrants perceive that this is a viable option. In this sense, despite whatever historical groundwork lies behind them, it is the current and developing EU and Spanish migration policies that apply to migrants from the LAC region that undoubtably shape decision-making.

Fourthly, a primary issue in considering asylum seeker and mixed migration from LAC states regions to Europe and Spain is the context in which LAC nationals seek international protection, and their ultimately limited protection in this sense. Precarious social protection systems in Latin America have been put under further stress with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Vera Espinoza et al., 2021). Most notably, life-threatening security and crime conditions in their origin countries, which their respective governments are unable to protect them from, may not be considered sufficient to meet international protection requirements in Spain and in Europe. For example, in the case of migration from Honduras to Spain, even as the Spanish justice system

ruled in 2017 that victims of the maras could meet requirements for international protection, in 2019 only 226 of 6,780 Honduran asylum applications to Spain received favorable outcomes (Eurostat 2019). The Colombian case is also striking, as in 2019, only 0.91% of those Colombian nationals whose cases were resolved received a favorable determination in receiving international protection (CEAR 2020). These low acceptance rates may influence whether those LAC nationals who entered via a tourist visa weigh the opportunity cost of attempting the asylum process at all, versus remaining in an unauthorized capacity. Moreover, asylum procedures consist of long wait times. By way of example, even in order to register for applying for asylum, 2019 appointment waiting times in Spain could reach up to a year, with an average of 6 months wait time (AIDA 2019). The length and consistency of asylum procedures can thus serve as a “deterrent” in practice, even if not consciously written into policy.

These limitations in administrative procedures or real practices are not limited to the Spanish and EU context, again demonstrating how consideration of these patterns requires a non-linear understanding of the connections between origin, transit and destination. International human rights frameworks and intergovernmental or transgovernmental agreements still do not sufficiently fulfill legal obligations. In terms of interregional cooperation, the LAC states region has some notable mechanisms in place, including the migrant rights provided under MERCOSUR (Lavanex 2019). At the same time, the Venezuelan example can demonstrate how nationals simply do not have access to documentation that they are legally entitled to, thus leading to their mobility taking on an irregular nature in crossing any international border, regional or not (John, 2019). Moreover, met with overwhelming demand resulting from humanitarian crisis, some countries within the region have tightened their reception and regularization provisions for Venezuelans, with originally human rights-oriented asylum regimes implementing more restrictive policies (Wallace and Mortley 2020). In this sense, and in light of recent policy changes in several countries, progressive legislation and regional agreements largely are not applicable to these new patterns of increasing migration, which are managed

with presidential decrees and ad hoc policies like temporary permits that relegate migrants to a secondary juridical status (Acosta et. al, 2020). This demonstrates the variable and sometimes conflicting effects of migration and asylum policies, as restrictions within the region can either: affect whether arrivals to Europe become irregular (due to policies in transit countries); lead to consideration of Europe as an asylum destination if it had not been before; or preclude ever reaching Europe.

Finally, the systemic nature of human trafficking growing within the region has amplified migrant vulnerability. In that sense, in considering the wholistic view to these patterns, it is important to stress the gendered characteristics of Atlantic Route migration and how it speaks to the overall arch of globalised processes, transactions and mobilities that configures it. Again, this of course relates to the gendered nature of movement in terms of feminized global care chains and family livelihood strategies characterizing LAC country migration to Europe, mentioned earlier in this brief in relation to fluctuating migratory movement composition. The Global North, including the EU, benefits from this transnational labor system, which can often take place outside of formal arrangements and subject laborers to compounded vulnerabilities, including involvement in smuggling and trafficking networks (Sassen 2008). Such phenomena are interrelated with the case study observations of increasing structural violence against women in origin and transit contexts. In particular, in the Central American case, violence against women and other minority groups is observed to be worsening, as those committing the violence operate with impunity continue these practices alongside the state's inaction or lack of protection (Menjivar and Drysdale Walsh 2017).

Given the transnational nature of these processes and human mobilities, this amplified violence against women and other minority groups in the LAC region should not be decoupled from the policies and interventions of destination countries that may have played a role in shaping this systemic violence. This is a trend that can be witnessed throughout any observations made as to shifts and patterns as to the direction, composition and volume of migration along the

Atlantic Route in the 10-year period under examination. In particular, the irregular nature of mobilities seems to be inextricably linked to fragmented or inconsistent migration and asylum governance, with not only the U.S. implicated in the origin and transit contexts, but the integrity of systems in Spain and the E.U. factoring significantly into shaping migration to Europe. Ultimately, of course, all of these observations as to the Atlantic Route must be understood within a more nuanced picture of complex migrant decision-making processes couched within fluctuating real and perceived constraint and opportunity structures.

5.2 Current considerations and future prospects

Again, both the case studies and more general regional observations serve to illustrate the volume, direction and characteristics of mixed migration from LAC as a region of origin to the EU as a destination. They reflect non-linear migration processes informed by diverse, aggregate and entangled contexts. While recognizing the complexity of trends and that these migration processes and their outcomes operate in a tandem relationship between structure and agency, this section more broadly summarizes current developments, and makes some projections as to future possibilities in LAC to EU mixed migration. Specifically, they relate to: the COVID-19 pandemic creating new or compounding preexisting vulnerabilities, especially as pertains to the earlier described local to global precipitating and predisposing drivers; the growing prominence of the land route as part of an overall diversified, non-linear LAC transit migration and asylum profile; the EU and Spain's continued and future role as a destination country, particularly as relates to inclusion policies affecting LAC migrants; and finally, the evolving definition or application of humanitarian protections in developing LAC contexts, as part of a wider understanding of irregular migration or mixed migration.

Firstly, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic surfaces as one of the most obvious ongoing developments, as well as demonstrates clear future implications. Of course, as described earlier in the report, the pandemic has had profound public and population health as well as socioeconomic impacts. With

1.5 million lives lost to the pandemic from February 2020 to October 2021, LAC accounts for nearly 20% of confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally and about 30% of deaths worldwide, although it only makes up 8.4% of the world's population (ECLAC and PAHO 2021). There continue to be significant gaps in health access and vaccine coverage. This evidently augments earlier described inequalities in the region. Indeed, the continued repercussions in the LAC region, including economic impacts, certainly precipitate future migration. LAC experienced the worst economic performance of all developing regions, with its most serious economic contraction in 120 years in the year 2020, and it is not expected to bounce back to 2019 figures in 2021. It is estimated that 22 million more people fell into poverty in 2020 (Ibid.). Vulnerable populations were hit hardest, which can include women, children, indigenous people, persons of African descent, LGBTQI+ persons, rural populations, persons with disabilities, and crucially, migrants, who can intersect with several of these categories.

In that respect, migrants likely faced further loss or breach of human rights. The pandemic witnessed authoritarian regimes become emboldened or further bolstered in the region, with human rights violations multiplied or manifested in new ways (Voces del Sur 2021). Migrants' human rights were further compromised in that those already in precarious situations were subject to further exposure, with authorities in transit and destination countries relegating migrating to situations of overcrowding and not acting in compliance with COVID-19 protocols. Critically, many migrant groups have been left stranded by border closures (Manetto 2021). In November of 2021, after 19 months of border and mobility restrictions cited as pandemic related, the U.S. reopened the land border with Mexico to vaccinated individuals with regular documents. Given the tensions and humanitarian crises created by such restrictions, the U.S. and Mexican governments continue to hold informal discussions, but have not really outlined migration policy. They instead have agreed together on the "U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health, and Safe Communities," which cites combatting human trafficking and smuggling, but essentially relates to securitisation policies (White House 2021).

Again, this underlines how state securitization interests are prioritized over crafting long-term, sustainable migration policy, both within the region and further abroad. The power and extent of international criminal organizations and levels of public corruption do not promise to subside. This entails further human rights violations and life-threatening journeys on the land route, with critical exposure experienced by those vulnerable populations cited above. Migrant caravans continue to attempt this route, without avenues to regularize their situation (Manetto 2021). This route does not clearly lead from one point to another: the case studies have demonstrated the fluctuating and intricate dynamics of transit migration in recent years, versus historical LAC transborder migration with more linear origin to destination paths. Migrants that left their country of origin without documents authorising their mobility may be able to obtain this documentation in countries like Chile, and can then proceed on to their preferred destination (Manetto 2021). The continued emigration from the Caribbean region with countries like Cuba, Dominican Republic and Haiti (having diaspora communities of over a million emigrants each, the majority of which are in the U.S.), may involve passage through several countries before taking up a place of residence (IOM 2017).

Not only can migration routes be indirect, as well as involve long residences in several countries, they are characterized by the immobilisation of migrants due to abandonment by the state, or patterns of consistent preventive and punitive measures. A clear example of immobilization includes those migrants stranded at the U.S. and Mexican border. Most recently, many Central American migrants have been expelled from Mexico to Guatemala, and thousands of Haitian migrants at the border in Rio, Texas were expelled back to Haiti. Indeed, U.S. and Mexico detention and deportation practices continue, regardless of changes in government administrations. In these examples, the direction of migratory routes is also differentiated by multiple attempts to cross borders, despite deportations. It is also important to take into account (in addition to the multiple forms of violence they may already experience) rising anti-migrant violence and sentiment, not only in Mexico and the U.S., but also in other significant regional transit or destination countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile (Guizardi 2021).

Given the danger and risk of the land route and the lack of regular or safe regional migration pathways, Europe can present itself as an alternative, albeit perhaps more costly. Asylum applications to Spain have been rising, and the slight drop in 2020 could be attributed to pandemic border closures, with the figures due to rise again. The case studies also demonstrated an increasing trend in the presence of LAC migrants in Europe, again notwithstanding the 2020 pandemic dip. In looking towards Europe, deficient social protections highlighted in the origin context in the previous section should also be addressed at destination, especially given post-pandemic situations and heightened anti-migrant attitudes and discourses. Of course, EU Member States may be chosen as an alternative to lack of or inadequate social protections in the LAC region. Migrants can confer informal social protection via remittances to the origin country (Faist 2016). In acquiring social protections in the European context, they may access them via authorised residency or recognized legal status, but also may obtain them informally via capital, with an example including the case of LAC origin migrant women in care work (Bilecen et al., 2019; Castellani and Martín-Díaz 2019).

However, the pandemic underlined how those migrants performing care and domestic work, as well as those working in the health services industries or in “essential” jobs, were particularly exposed and vulnerable. In the cases of many Member States, migrants were not afforded the same protections, including access to compensation, that the rest of EU citizens enjoyed (Martiniello and Triandafylidou 2021). This can in part be due to the unprotected nature of work conducted by LAC migrants in the EU and Spain, as noted in the case studies: domestic and care work within homes can be part-time or informal, and there is evidence that other gendered migrant occupations such as construction entail that workers must declare themselves self-employed (Bilecen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, their jobs put them at increased risk, exposure and vulnerability (Martiniello and Triandafylidou 2021). As destination countries continue to require flexible or low paid migrant labor, they should also offer avenues to regular migration or inclusive policies. It remains to be seen the visibility that

the pandemic afforded to these migrant workers, instruments like the EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum, or the social protection systems of different EU Member States will result in new pathways to regularizing employment and offering adequate social protections.

Finally, as emphasised several times throughout this document, the issue of access to and implementation of basic human rights pertains very significantly to future LAC to EU migration. The patterns noted in the three case studies of Colombia, Honduras and Venezuela project that the human rights situation will most likely worsen in the respective countries, as well as in others in the LAC region, reinforcing the urgency of reevaluating understandings of mixed migration and international protection. There is clear national, regional, intergovernmental and trans-governmental fragmentation in upholding human rights guarantees, as well as discretionary practices in this respect or lack of implementation rights implementation. While the trends from the LAC region demonstrate an increase of seeking humanitarian protection, the vast majority of these requests to Spain are not met with favorable decisions (Eurostat, 2021). At the same time, Spain has recently demonstrated at least the propensity to facilitate regular migration pathways from the LAC region. In the case of Venezuela, as noted earlier in the case study, Spain issued special humanitarian protection visas in 2020 to around 40,000 Venezuelans. Another example includes how in May of 2021, Spain signed an agreement with Honduras allowing temporary work permits for Hondurans, amplifying regular channels of migration for this population (Presidencia del Gobierno 2021).

Still, forced migration within and out of the region is likely to persist if not increase, which from a human rights perspective could be understood as caused by state neglect or even structural violence, or climate disaster causing loss of livelihoods. Climate disasters continue, with 2020 not only witnessing the Hurricanes Eta and Iota referenced in the Honduran case (and impacting the entire surrounding region); it was also a year of intense drought (the worst in 50 years) and atypical fire seasons in Brazil, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Argentina. The impacts on livelihoods and displacement were compounded with the COVID-19

pandemic (WMO, 2021). The effects of these extreme weather events will undoubtedly drive future migration, and such climate developments appear likely to continue. In this sense, and in the LAC context, these forced mobilities and should inform future interpretations of international protection. It could include the concepts of climatic events as well as structural violence due to state failure or neglect, with the normalization of violence drivers particularly affecting vulnerable populations like women and youth, indigenous people, persons of African descent, LGBTQI+ persons and rural population (Coraza 2020; Gzesh 2008).

In light of these current and future considerations, it is noteworthy that restrictive, inadequate, inconsistent or inexistant migration policies to date in both the LAC region as well as at the destination point of EU Member States have not seemed to aid or abet irregular and clandestine migratory movements both within and out of the region; instead, migration journeys and vulnerable circumstances seem to experience amplified precarity and to continue in this manner. While this does not necessarily entail increased volumes of migratory movements to EU Member States, it does promise further irregular migration and lack of migration protections, as well as possible breaches of human rights guarantees to which the Member States have ascribed. To move forward, policy discussions and narratives both in LAC and the EU would potentially benefit from a broader view as to international protection norms and migrant protections, beyond those defined in the 1951 Convention, which in addition to serving as limited instrument in the present-day context, may often be used in a discretionary manner. Such policy forays could work in combination with a reconceptualization of what constitutes “mixed migration,” and could benefit from regional level approaches in addition to the national, given the inherently transnational nature of migration governance.

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