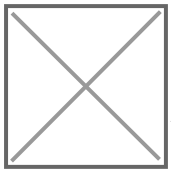
Please cite as: EUAA, '2.3.2 Situation at the EU external borders and migration routes' in *EASO Asylum Report 2021*, Gennaio 2022.

2.3.2 Situation at the EU external borders and migration routes



In 2020, the EU's external borders had the lowest number of crossings since 2013, according to preliminary data collected by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).[x], [178] Approximately 124,000 illegal border crossings in 2020 represented a 13% decrease compared to 2019. This decrease may be partly attributed to COVID-19-related restrictions. However, fluctuations in the number of crossings were noted across different migration routes:

- In early 2020, there was an increase in arrivals through the Eastern Mediterranean route. However, the number decreased drastically over the course of the year, to reach a total of less than 20,000 arrivals, representing a 76% decrease compared to 2019.
- The Western Mediterranean route experienced a 28% decrease, with approximately 17,000 arrivals.
- An eight-fold increase was noted through the Western Africa route, primarily due to the large number of arrivals on the Canary Islands (22,600).
- The number of arrivals tripled to 35,600 in the Central Mediterranean route, making it the most active migration route into Europe in 2020.
- The number of irregular arrivals along the Western Balkans route increased by 78% compared to 2019 and reached a total of approximately 27,000.[179]

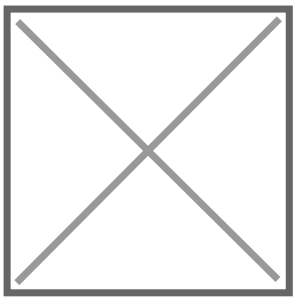
To assist Member States in responding effectively to increased inflows, while providing protection to people in need, the EU has provided financial and practical support since 2015 to Member States, especially those which are the most affected by migratory pressure. EU support to Member States at the external borders, such as Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain, has included funding to enhance asylum and migration systems, security and border management, and the provision of expertise from EU agencies and Member States through the deployment of experts under EASO and Frontex operations, when applicable.

To step up effectiveness at the external borders, two distinct but interlinked processes have been underway since 2019: the implementation of the European Border and Coast Guard Regulation,[180] which aims to strengthen day-to-day cooperation and improve response capacity at the borders; and the implementation of the regulation on the interoperability of IT systems[181] to keep track of arrivals and asylum applicants. The latter will connect all European databases on borders, migration, security and justice and will ensure that these systems communicate with each other so

that information is accessible in a consolidated manner.[182] EU status agreements provide the framework for neighbouring countries to enhance their migration and asylum systems, including border management *(see Section 2.4 for information on EU status agreements).*

Effective border management is also meant to allow for access to territory for those in need and to safeguard the right to apply for protection. Still, throughout 2020, a number of incidents were reported at the EU external borders regarding preventing or delaying the application of the recast Asylum Procedures Directive in the territory, including at the border, in territorial waters or in transit zones of Member States and, consequently, the provision of effective access to the asylum procedure. This included incidents at the Greek-Turkish border in Evros,[183] the Aegean Sea,[184] the Western Balkan region[185] and the Central Mediterranean route.[186] It was also reported that, in a number of those incidents in the Aegean Sea, Frontex personnel was allegedly present,[187] resulting in the agency launching an internal inquiry into the incidents and the European Ombudsman opening an inquiry to assess the agency's complaints mechanism[189] *(see Section 4.1).*

In July 2020, the UNHCR and the Mixed Migration Centre at the Danish Refugee Council published a report documenting the extreme human rights abuses suffered by migrants during their irregular journeys from East and West Africa to Africa's Mediterranean coast, which is considered one of the deadliest routes for refugees and migrants in the world. Smugglers are the main perpetrators of such abuses, while at times, security forces, military and police officials of the countries along the route are also involved.[190]



[x] Preliminary data offered by Frontex refer to the number of detections of irregular border crossing at the external borders of the EU. The same person may attempt to cross the border several times in different locations at the external border, and thus will be counted more than once.

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