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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject: Migratory situation in the Channel/La Manche

Current situation

The migratory situation in the Channel (also referred to as the English Channel or La Manche) remains a complex and evolving issue. From the EU's perspective, this situation presents significant challenges.

In 2023, approximately 62.000¹ attempted and successful illegal border crossings (IBCs) were detected on the English Channel with most irregular migrants being smuggled across the Channel in small boats; this represents a 12% decrease from the 71.000² IBCs recorded in 2022. However, 2024 saw a 9% increase compared to 2023, with around 67500³ attempted and successful illegal crossings. This fluctuation highlights the dynamic nature of migration patterns in the region.

¹ [Significant rise in irregular border crossings in 2023, highest since 2016](#)

² [EU's external borders in 2022: Number of irregular border crossings highest since 2016](#)

³ [Irregular border crossings into EU drop sharply in 2024](#)

Frontex reports that 96% of departures from Europe via the English Channel involve unknown nationals. The majority of those leaving in small boats are male, and 75% of them are men aged 18 or over, while 16% are minors under the age of 18.⁴ This gender imbalance is consistent with global migration trends, as IOM data shows that men make up about 70% of international migrants worldwide. The range of nationalities crossing the Channel has shifted over time, reflecting changing global migration patterns and geopolitical situations. Since 2018, two-thirds of those crossing in small boats have been nationals of five countries: Iran (18%), Afghanistan (15%), Iraq (13%), Albania (12%), and Syria (8%). However, recent data shows evolving trends. In 2024, the main nationalities detected in the English Channel were Afghans, Syrians and Vietnamese nationals.⁵ This shift highlights the dynamic nature of migration flows and the need for adaptive policy responses.

Factors influencing illegal border crossings via the Channel

The rise in Channel crossings can be attributed to a complex interplay of factors. Enhanced security measures at French, Belgian and Dutch ports and strengthened security of the Eurotunnel have made traditional methods of irregular entry more challenging, potentially pushing migrants towards the Channel / La Manche route and small boats. This shift has been facilitated by the growth and professionalisation of smuggling networks operating in France. Personal connections and existing diaspora play a significant role in migrants' decision-making. Many asylum seekers have limited or inaccurate knowledge of the policies they will face. This suggests that deterrent policies may have less impact than anticipated, as migrants often make decisions based on incomplete information.

The effectiveness in the fight against other irregular crossings of the Channel (Eurotunnel and regular maritime lines) has left small boats as the last resort. As controls by the Belgian, French and German law enforcement forces increase, smuggling networks do not hesitate to push migrants into high-risk situations and to launch unseaworthy vessels crowded with irregular migrants from various third countries.

⁴ BRIEFING www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk AUTHORS: Peter William Walsh Mihnea V. Cuius PUBLISHED: 01/07/2024 People crossing the English Channel in small boats

⁵ Irregular border crossings into the EU dropped sharply in 2024

Humanitarian issues

The situation in the Channel, like other maritime migration routes, raises significant humanitarian concerns. The perilous nature of these crossings has resulted in tragic loss of life. According to the IOM's Missing Migrants Project, over 250 people died attempting to cross the Channel between 2014 and June 2024⁶. While this figure is significantly smaller than the 30 000 deaths recorded in the Mediterranean during the same period, it is still very alarming.

According to IOM data, 82 migrants were recorded missing in the Channel in 2024, compared with 24 in 2023. The humanitarian concerns extend beyond the risk of death at sea. Vulnerable groups, including women, children and families, are among those undertaking these dangerous journeys. This raises questions about the protection of minors, potential long-term trauma associated with such experiences and possible cases of trafficking in human beings. It is important to recognise that many individuals crossing the Channel are fleeing conflict, persecution, or severe economic hardship in their country of origin. This highlights the complex nature of the issue, balancing the need for border management with humanitarian responsibilities and international protection obligations.

An increasing number of migrants are boarding boats in a hurried and unauthorised manner just before departure. This is a regular occurrence and remains particularly dangerous with panic and overloading leading to engine failure or sinking. Also, law enforcement officers are regularly victims of an increased level of violence as they try to prevent irregular crossings.

⁶ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

Policy Responses and Challenges

The EU and its Member States have taken decisive steps to tackle the issue of Channel crossings. Their approach has been multifaceted, focusing on three key areas. Firstly, they have strengthened their bilateral partnerships with destination countries and countries of origin, enhancing cooperation in border control and maritime patrols. This collaborative effort aims to create a more robust system for monitoring and managing cross-Channel movement. Secondly, there has been a concerted push to dismantle smuggling networks. By targeting these criminal organisations, authorities hope to disrupt the infrastructure that facilitates dangerous crossings. Lastly, significant improvements have been made to detection and interception capabilities along the coast. This includes the deployment of advanced surveillance technology and an increase in personnel, allowing for more effective monitoring and a rapid response to potential crossing attempts. These measures, working in tandem, form a comprehensive strategy to address the complex challenges posed by irregular Channel crossings.

Since 2021, Frontex has deployed a sea operation to support Member States in the Channel and North Sea region with aerial reconnaissance services. In parallel, an EMPACT operational action implemented under the Operational Action Plan Migrant Smuggling – OA 2.6 - “Small boats” coupled with joint investigations, including several operational task forces coordinated by Europol, have contributed to the dismantling, across Member States, of a number of smuggling networks responsible for facilitating Channel crossings.

Future Perspectives

Addressing the issue of small boat crossings requires a holistic and balanced approach that integrates border security, humanitarian responsibilities, and international cooperation.

To effectively tackle this challenge, future strategies should focus on several key areas.

Firstly, it is essential to strengthen collaboration with countries of origin and transit to address the root causes of irregular migration. This involves tackling factors such as political instability, economic hardship, and conflict that drive individuals to undertake perilous journeys. Moreover, addressing the root causes in countries of origin through development aid and conflict resolution initiatives is vital. Supporting education, infrastructure development, and economic opportunities in these regions can help mitigate the push factors driving irregular migration. The basis for multilateral engagement has already been laid out with the launch of the Global Alliance to Counter Migrant Smuggling by the Commission in November 2023, the adoption of the Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Migrant Smuggling by the G7 countries⁷ and with the more recent plan agreed under the Calais Group⁸. The implementation of the three strands of the Global Alliance continues and the next International Conference will be organised in the course of 2025.

The global context of forced displacement highlights the need for long-term, collaborative solutions. According to UNHCR, there were 108.4 million forcibly displaced people worldwide at the end of 2022, with numbers continuing to rise. This global trend emphasises the importance of a Team Europe approach and international cooperation in addressing migration challenges.

As climate change continues to impact vulnerable regions, environmental factors may play an increasing role in driving migration. Future policy frameworks will need to account for climate-induced displacement and explore innovative solutions to address this emerging challenge.

⁷ Action-Plan-Anti-Smuggling-G7-FINAL.pdf

⁸ Calais Group Priority Plan on Countering Migrant Smuggling for 2025 - GOV.UK

Secondly, there is a pressing need to develop safe and legal pathways for migrants in need of protection, which would reduce their reliance on dangerous and irregular crossings, as well as reducing their risk of exploitation in the context of trafficking in human beings. These measures could include expanding resettlement programmes, issuing humanitarian visas, and creating legal migration channels. Increased efforts are called for to prevent irregular migration by developing information and awareness-raising campaigns on the risks of irregular migration and migrant smuggling. The European Commission is currently exploring innovative approaches to the implementation of these campaigns, to enable a more dynamic response to emerging migratory trends.

Lastly, improving the efficiency of the processing of asylum claims is another critical element. Streamlining procedures to reduce backlogs and uncertainty would not only enhance fairness but also alleviate pressure on asylum systems.

Discussion questions

- 1) Given the ongoing migratory challenges in the Channel and North Sea region should consideration be given to increasing the monitoring of the situation in this region?*
- 2) What measures or instruments at our disposal could be better used to reduce the migratory pressure in the Channel and the North Sea region?*
- 3) How could the European Union engage more effectively with countries of origin/transit on this specific topic?*