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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum
Subject: Annual overview of the migratory situation 2023

Against the backdrop of the migratory situation at the EU's external borders in 2023 as outlined in the below background paper and guiding question for the exchange of views, the Presidency proposes to discuss the main migratory challenges in the short term. The Presidency has therefore invited the relevant agencies to report on the most recent flows and trends, as well as challenges, by way of short presentations. The Commission will provide additional information on the ongoing work and contacts with the most pertinent third countries.

In a second part of the presentation of the situational picture, the EUAA, Europol and Frontex will present their "Joint Analysis on Secondary Movements with a regional focus" (WK 595/2024).

Summary:

In 2023, Frontex recorded a 17% increase in migratory pressure on the EU's external borders compared to 2022. The number of arrivals on all sea routes increased. On land routes, the number of irregular border crossings via the Western Balkans decreased, but the pressure on the Eastern border mainly on Poland and Latvia increased. Although the numbers are low, migratory pressure on the Finnish-Russian border became a concern in the second half of the year. The main nationalities detected in 2023 at the EU external borders were Syrians (+7%), Guineans (+231%), and Afghans (-44%). Nearly 130 000 Sub-Saharan nationals arrived via the various routes, an increase of 168 %.

The number of persons displaced from Ukraine benefitting from temporary protection in the EU exceeded 4,3 million at the end of 2023.

On exit, the number of irregular migrants intercepted when attempting to cross the Channel towards the UK decreased but remained quite high. The UK reported slightly less than 30 000 arrivals, a decrease of 35 % compared to 2022.

Almost 275 000 migrants arrived via the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, an increase of 57 % compared to 2022. In Italy, almost 160 000 arrivals were registered, an increase of 50%. On the Eastern Mediterranean Route, Cyprus recorded a decrease of 40 % but with 40 000 arrivals Greece experienced triple the number of arrivals via the Aegean Sea compared to 2022. A similar number arrived on the Canary Islands. Arrivals on the Spanish mainland only slightly increased.

After years of increasing pressure in the Western Balkan region, pressure decreased in 2023. Slightly less than 100 000 detections were registered, a decrease of 30 %. The total number in 2023 remains well above the pre-pandemic figures but still well below the levels recorded in 2015 and 2016.

In 2023 the number of asylum applications lodged in the EU+ exceeded 1 million. According to consolidated figures some 1 144 000 applications were lodged, an increase of 16 % compared to 2022 and only slightly below the levels of 2015 and 2016.

Details per route:

Arrivals via **the Eastern Mediterranean route** have increased with 55 % in 2023. This is exclusively due to an increase of the sea arrivals both to Greece (+ 214 %) and Cyprus (+396 %).

Along the route as a whole, Syrians and Afghans were the top nationalities arriving in the EU in 2023, while Palestinians were the third most reported nationality on the route. The latter nationality is granted refugee status with a 100% recognition rate in one Member State, contributing to the high number of irregular sea arrivals, which has more than tripled compared to last year.

In Cyprus, the Green Line remains the primary entry point for irregular migrants, albeit with a substantial reduction in arrivals compared to 2022. By contrast, irregular arrivals by boat from Lebanon and Syria to the government-controlled areas of Cyprus registered an almost five-fold increase (+396%). This resulted in a shift of nationalities. The number of African migrants decreased significantly while the number of Syrians increased.

For Cyprus, it is also interesting to note the progress made in 2023 in terms of readmission and return; a total of 9 699 third-country nationals were repatriated. This number corresponds to more than 85 % of the total number of immigrant arrivals in 2023. Assistance by the EUAA and Frontex has contributed to the significant increase in the number of returns of rejected asylum seekers.

Migration flows from Turkey via land routes to Greece were stable (6 951, +8%). With 1 555 arrivals, the number of arrivals in Bulgaria is slightly lower (- 13%) compared to the same period last year. In contrast, the sea route to Greece started to increase significantly since the summer and has more than tripled compared to last year. The Turkish-Italian maritime corridor is also still active, but the number of crossings is much lower than in 2022. Overall, in 2023, 7 100 individuals were recorded crossing, 56% less compared to the same period last year.

In 2023, the number of irregular arrivals via **the Central Mediterranean route** went up with 50%, arriving at the highest number since 2017 (but remaining lower than the levels of 2016). In total, 158 000 arrivals were recorded in 2023, almost exclusively in Italy. The highest numbers were recorded during the summer. In the fall, numbers decreased and were even lower compared to the numbers recorded in 2022.

The total number of arrivals on the route has been steadily climbing since 2019 reflecting the lack of effective EU (and Italian) cooperation with Libyan and Tunisian authorities.

The toll on human lives is also very heavy. As many as 2 498 fatalities and missing migrants were recorded on the route in 2023.

In 2023, Tunisia became the main country of departure followed by Libya. The increase in departures from Tunisia can be linked to the Tunisian authorities' outspoken anti-migrant sentiments since February, highly organised smuggling networks and visa free regime for certain West African nationalities as well as poor socio-economic conditions for both Tunisian nationals and migrants. As a result, the main nationalities arriving in Italy also shifted being now Guineans and Tunisian followed by Ivorians and Bangladeshi.

The high and constant number of departures from Tunisia in small boats, many organised by the migrants themselves, led the EU to negotiate a comprehensive framework for cooperation with Tunisia and an MoU was signed in July. Political and technical obstacles meant that the implementation only took off very slowly, but this has since improved. There are nonetheless still concerns how the Tunisian authorities follow through on protection of refugees' and migrants' rights. In particular, the expulsions to Libya and Algeria cause concern both because of the dire circumstances in which they happen as well as the fact that the migrants expelled to Libya are transferred to the sub-standard detention centres from where some opt for voluntary repatriation by IOM (funded by the EU), but others pay to be smuggled to Italy.

A sudden spike in arrivals in September to Lampedusa resulting in severe overcrowding of reception facilities sparked another, more immediate, reaction from the EU in the form of a 10-point plan, addressing concerns on both the Tunisian and Italian side. Following the intensification by Tunisian authorities of the campaign to counter irregular migration (started in mid-September) and the worsening of the weather conditions, the arrivals from Tunisia decreased significantly in October only to increase again hereafter but remaining at much lower levels than during the summer months. Tunisian authorities bolstered the patrolling of coastal areas, including interceptions, enhanced the controls on entry at their land borders, as well as removed migrants to less congested areas and carried out expulsions, cf. above. The resilience of smuggling networks, the sustainability of enforcement measures and the persistent demand for departures will impact the flows in upcoming months.

In an effort to deter further irregular arrivals, Italy entered a protocol with Albania by which Italy will conduct migration and asylum management, including detention and asylum processing, in a few designated areas in Albania. Implementation is scheduled to start in early 2024.

The migratory pressure on **the Atlantic and the Western Mediterranean routes** with arrivals to Spain increased with more than 80 %. This increase is almost exclusively due to the increase of arrivals on the Canary Islands starting in late summer. With almost 40 000 arrivals, the Canary Islands were breaking the record of the Cayucos crisis in 2006.

On the Western Mediterranean route, after high numbers in spring and early summer, arrivals stabilised resulting in an increase of 18% compared to the same period last year. Migratory pressure on the enclaves Ceuta and Melilla decreased (-35%). The main nationalities arriving on the Spanish mainland are Moroccans and Algerians followed by smaller numbers of Syrians, Guineans and Malians.

On the **Atlantic Route**, apart from the 15 % Moroccans, almost exclusively sub-Saharan nationals are registered. The main nationalities are Senegalese (44%), Gambians (11%), and Malians (7%), while 10% of arrivals are of unspecified sub-Saharan nationality. The main countries of departure to the Canary Islands were Senegal (40%) and Morocco (22%) while for 13% is unknown. Since mid-December, a growing number of vessels is departing from Mauritania. Improved weather conditions coupled with increasing political uncertainties, economic hardship, and security concerns in the Sahel are the main factors contributing to this upsurge.

On the **eastern border with Belarus**, the overall number of attempts to cross the border in 2023 was 23% higher compared to 2022. The increase is mainly due to a higher pressure on the Latvian-Belarusian border, but most attempts in 2023 continued to take place at the Polish-Belarusian border. With 4 715 arrivals, of which 4 160 registered in Poland, the number of arrivals along the Eastern border route more than tripled compared to 2022.

Another scenario of instrumentalization developed at the **Russian-Finnish border** in mid-November when migrants without valid entry documents were suddenly allowed to pass through the Russian border points and then cross into Finland on bicycles and ask for asylum. Finnish authorities responded swiftly by closing official border crossing points first in the south and then to the north so that all points were closed and will remain so until 14 April 2024. Between August 2023 and 1 February 2024, the Russian Border Guard Service allowed 1 323 third country citizens without Schengen visa or residence permit, to cross the border. Main nationalities are Syria, Somalia and Yemen.

Throughout 2023, pressure on the **Western Balkan route** remained at lower levels compared to last year (-31%), with the border between Serbia and Hungary registering the biggest drop (-38%). On the other hand, the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia registered a substantial increase (+68%), compared to 2022. Overall, main detected nationalities in 2023 were primarily Syrians, followed by Turks and Afghans, in line with 2022. There is little doubt that the decrease is linked to the ongoing alignment process of visa requirements by Western Balkan countries, and it also results in a lower number of asylum applications in Austria. Turks, the second nationality observed on the route, remain visa-free in the whole Western Balkan region.

The number of irregular migrants on exit via **the English Channel route**, reported by Belgium and France, is 62 000, including both intercepted and successful migrants, which is 12 % less compared to last year. The UK reported slightly less than 30 000 arrivals, a decrease of 35% compared to 2022.

As of 9 January 2024, 4 329 768 active registrations for **temporary protection** were recorded in the EU+ (4 195 783 in the EU). The highest numbers of active registrations are recorded in Germany (24%), Poland (22%) and Czechia (9%) with the latter hosting the highest proportion of active temporary protection registrations per capita.

Based on consolidated figures, some 1 144 000 **applications for international protection** were lodged in the EU+ in 2023, up by 16% from the previous year and just slightly below (-9%) the levels reached in 2016. Germany (334 100), France (167 000), Spain (162 400), Italy (136 100) and Greece (64 100) jointly received three quarters of all EU+ applications (compared to two thirds in 2022). Main nationalities are Syrians (181 400, most applications since 2016) followed by Afghans and Turks, the latter having the highest number on record, 100 800. Venezuelans and Colombians followed, both by the highest number on record. The main nationalities of applicants remained unchanged from the previous year.

The high number of asylum applications also meant an increase by 32% in **secondary movements** across the EU in 2023: 584 936 foreign Eurodac hits were registered. The top countries of destination were Germany, France, Italy and Belgium (as in 2022), while the top countries of departure were Croatia, Greece and Italy (compared to Greece, Germany, Austria in 2022) – with the route from Croatia to Germany being the one with the highest number of hits and with the route from Croatia to Slovenia registering an almost six-fold increase, compared to 2022.

- 1) Considering the overview of migratory trends observed in 2023 and of the current situational picture, what short term operational challenges and solutions do Member States see at the EU level for the months to come?**

 - 2) Against the backdrop of the recent Agencies' Joint Analysis on secondary movements, how do Member States assess the irregular migratory flows of North African citizens both towards and within the European Union?**
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