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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	Migratory situation on the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes - Presidency paper

Migrants on the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic migration routes are primarily trying to reach Europe from African countries. On the Western Mediterranean route, they mainly arrive from and through Morocco and Algeria (notably via the Strait of Gibraltar, Ceuta and Melilla and the western shores of the Mediterranean), while on the Atlantic route migrants depart from West Africa and approach Spain (Canary Islands), the most affected EU Member State by the migration flows on the route. These routes are already highly dangerous by their very nature, due to extreme weather conditions, strong winds and currents, and in addition, given the increased controls on the Strait of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean coastline, migrants often try to set off from difficult-to-reach rocky shores and have to choose hidden, inaccessible areas to dock, which increase the risk of accidents at sea. On the Atlantic shores, especially in Senegal and Mauritania, sandy coasts and heavy tides make it extremely difficult to embark boats, the ocean is particularly difficult to cross on the open sea. The length of the journeys and the inaccessibility of the departure points often mean that migrants spend days at sea before reaching the Canary Islands after travelling approximately 1,000-1,500 km. Another risk is that migrants frequently use small speedboats (pateras), inflatable and wooden boats or fishing boats (cayucos), which are not meant for travel in high seas while usually used in extremely crowded conditions.

A key factor in the overcrowding of vessels is the role of smuggling networks, which exploit the vulnerability of migrants, charging high fees for crossing while failing to provide safe and secure means of transport. Smugglers often use obsolete, poorly maintained vessels that are not equipped with sufficient fuel, life jackets or food, which can create life-threatening situations at sea. When overcrowded boats capsize or sink, the authorities of the countries concerned and international organisations do their very best to carry out successful search and rescue operations, but rescue capacities are limited, visibility is often poor, especially at night and, due to the long distances in the Atlantic, it often takes days to find a vessel.

Why do migrants still choose these routes despite the risks?

The reasons behind migration are complex and interlinked, affecting migrants to varying degrees in their decision to leave their home countries and take an uncertain, often dangerous, route to Europe. In many of the African countries concerned, people face economic difficulties (unemployment, low incomes, inflation, lack of access to housing and healthcare), political repression (political instability, dictatorial regimes, human rights abuses, arbitrary arrests and torture), armed conflicts, terrorism and natural disasters, and are often forced to take risky migration routes in search of a better life and greater security.

The Western Mediterranean route may be considered safer than the route through Libya, as Morocco is considered a more stable country and the Spanish coast is easier to reach, as well as the fact that the Strait of Gibraltar is only 14 km away, making it an attractive alternative for a quick crossing. However, in recent years, controls have been strengthened in the Mediterranean, with many migrants choosing the Atlantic route instead. From countries along the Atlantic, such as Senegal and Mauritania, there is a relatively longer distance by sea to the Canary Islands. It is not without reason that smuggling networks operating along the Atlantic route actively seek to recruit migrants, with false promises that this route is safer and faster than the Mediterranean crossing.

Main countries of origin

- **Central and West Africa:** Economic hardship, unemployment and lack of prospects for the future have led many Senegalese and Gambians to try to reach Europe via the Canary Islands, due to their proximity. Migrants from Guinea are fleeing political instability, poverty and human rights abuses, and are choosing both the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic route as well as the Central Mediterranean route. From Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Burkina Faso, migrants are mainly driven by economic problems and political instability, often travelling thousands of kilometres to North Africa to take the Western Mediterranean route. Mali –one of the main countries of origin in the Atlantic route- faces serious security problems, particularly in the north of the country, where armed conflicts and jihadist groups are active. Senegal has become a major country of origin partly due to a series of economic and political crises.
- **North Africa:** Although Morocco is a transit country, many Moroccan nationals also depart for Europe, mainly for economic reasons in search of a better life. In addition, the risk of falling victims of traffickers is high. Morocco is the 3rd non-EU country of origin of trafficking victims registered in the EU. In the case of Algeria, considerations linked to the country's unstable internal political situation offer a comparatively more compelling reason to migrate, whereas the positive socio-economic outlook, owing to sustained oil and gas prices, may discourage potential irregular migrants from making the sea crossing.

Recent trends in migration flows

In 2018, the number of irregular migrants arriving in the EU via the Western Mediterranean route increased significantly. From 2019 onwards, while the Western Mediterranean route saw a decrease in arrivals (mainly as a result of the Spanish-Moroccan cooperation), the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands experienced a significant increase, especially in 2020 and 2021, followed by a 31% decrease in 2022 compared to the previous year. In 2023, a total of 280,356 migrants and refugees were registered arriving in Europe via the three Mediterranean routes and the Atlantic route, 20% of them in Spain alone (56,550), via the Western Mediterranean route (6%) and the Atlantic route (14%). Compared to 2022, arrivals increased in 2023 through all routes, with the most significant rise on the Atlantic route with 39 570 arrivals, 154% more than in 2022. In 2024 as of 18 August according to IOM DTM, there were 22,684 arrivals in the Canary Islands, which represents +126% compared to 2023. Along the Western Mediterranean Route over the same period, there were 8,960 arrivals, which is a 4 percent decrease compared to 2023 (9,321). In contrast, the number of migrants arriving via the Western Mediterranean route has remained stable (-1%), but migrants are still arriving on Spanish borders in significant volumes. Departures were mainly reported from Morocco but also from Mauritania, Senegal and Gambia, with increased risks associated with a longer journey. According to the 2023 DTM flow monitoring surveys, most men and women on these routes reported to be travelling alone. Regarding the top intended destinations, 70% of those arriving to Spain want to remain there, while 24% want to reach France. According to the latest figures, migration pressures will continue in 2024, in particular due to the instability in African countries, forcing many people to head towards Europe in the hope of finding better living conditions.

EU efforts to address the situation

As regards a long-term sustainable solution to address migration flows, the Commission proposed a series of operational measures to respond to the current challenges in its EU Action Plan for the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes, published in June 2023. The EU and the Member States are working together to achieve and effectively implement the objectives set.

Under the 2014-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework, the total amount of migration assistance to **Morocco** was EUR 360 million, of which around EUR 234 million was drawn from the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. A total of EUR 193 million has been earmarked for Morocco under the NDICI-GE for the period 2021-2023, covering all areas of migration. This includes a budget support measure of EUR 152 million to support the National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum (SNIA) and the operational strategic action plan defined by the Moroccan Ministry of Interior. Morocco will continue benefiting from regional and bilateral NDICI-funded measures in the coming years.

The EU has recently reinforced its engagement on migration with **Algeria, following** a request for enhanced support in the voluntary return of migrants residing in Algeria to their countries of origin. In the area of migration, Algeria benefits from two regional programmes funded by the European Union under NDICI: one on Migrants Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme in North Africa (MPRR-NA), and another one on Regional Police Cooperation.

In December 2023, **Mauritania became** the main country of departure on the Atlantic route, therefore the EU and Mauritania have been discussing the possibility of launching a migration partnership and dialogue. Commissioner Ylva Johansson visited Mauritania on 7 March 2024 and signed a Joint Declaration covering 5 areas: 1) creating jobs; 2) protection and asylum; 3) facilitating legal migration; 4) cooperation to prevent illegal migration, combat smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, and promote readmission and return; 5) strengthening border management. The total amount of EUR 210 million announced will be used for addressing the challenges of migration, humanitarian assistance to refugees and investment in employment, skills and entrepreneurship, as well as support to Global Gateway initiatives, including investments, infrastructures and job creations primarily in the field of energy. The migration element of the package is backed by a EUR 60 million envelope (flexible mechanism, mostly contracted), including: EUR 28 million for asylum issues, EUR 25 million for maritime surveillance, search and rescue operations, EUR 2 million for combating trafficking in human beings and smuggling of migrants. A further EUR 22,5 million will be allocated to Mauritania from the African Peace Facility (which now only covers Mauritania and Chad). An emergency allocation of EUR 8,67 million (ECHO) for the border with Mali is an additional element. The further EUR 100 million under the NDICI is under preparation and the Commission foresees its adoption in the second half of 2024. DG HOME and DG INTPA will shortly be travelling to Mauritania to make progress on the operationalisation of this package, to support effective coordination and operational cooperation under the Declaration. The measures taken so far by the Mauritanian authorities have been moderately effective, and the situation on the Atlantic route remains critical. Spain has reported a 300% increase in illegal arrivals on the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes since January 2024, mainly from Mauritania. The main nationalities on the route in 2024 are Malian (41%), Senegalese (19%), Moroccan (9%) and Mauritanian (8%).

Questions:

1. How do Member States view cooperation with the main countries of origin, transit and departure on the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes over the past year? What is the state-of-play of your bilateral cooperation and what do you consider to be the main challenges of the routes?
 2. Do you have any bilateral best practices in relation with the third countries concerned by this route which could be of common interest to other Member States?
 3. Have you identified any potential room for improvement in the EU Action Plan published by the Commission in June 2023 in order to increase the effectiveness and achieve more results already in the short-term? How do you see future opportunities for cooperation with the countries concerned by the routes? What actions are in your views the most effective, including EU Agencies' actions?
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