



**Brussels, 18 March 2025
(OR. en)**

5997/25

LIMITE

**JAI 161
MIGR 52
ASIM 16
RELEX 153
COAFR 57
MAMA 58**

NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	Migratory situation on the Western Mediterranean/Atlantic routes with a focus on Senegal – opportunities for cooperation - Discussion paper

Trends in migration flows

The Western Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes concern the movements of migrants originating from North and West African countries with the aim of reaching Spain (primarily).

Since 2023, the Atlantic Route has been one of the most used migratory routes to the EU. The majority of migrants on this route are nationals of West African countries. Migrants depart from Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania and The Gambia, although departures from Guinea Bissau were also detected in late 2024. The Canary Islands are the entry point to the EU on this route. In 2023 the Atlantic Route saw the biggest growth among routes towards Europe: from 15 463 irregular entries in 2022 to 39 673 in 2023 (a rise of over 150%).

In 2024, according to Frontex data, the total for detected irregular border crossings into the EU dropped by 37% (representing the lowest level since 2021). On the Central Mediterranean Route there was a 58% decrease in arrivals, while the Western Mediterranean Route remained stable. However, in the same year, a further 18% increase in detected arrivals to the Atlantic Route was recorded, compared to 2023. Arrivals via the Western Mediterranean Route represented 7% of all arrivals to the EU in 2024 (4% in 2023), while arrivals via the Atlantic Route represented 20% of all arrivals to Europe in 2024 (10% in 2023).

According to Frontex, in January 2025, arrivals to Spain decreased by 32% (5 465) compared to January 2024. More specifically, arrivals via the Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands decreased by 35% (4 713). It is too early to determine the influence of weather conditions in this reduction and whether the reduction will be maintained. However, the trends seem to indicate good results of cooperation by the EU and the Member States with Morocco and West African countries (Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia), helping to prevent departures and increase detections. Despite the decrease in absolute numbers in the first month of 2025, the Atlantic Route remains the most active route in 2025 so far, with Mauritania as the main country of departure.

The Western Mediterranean Route leads from sub-Saharan Africa to and through the Maghreb area (in 2024 mainly Algeria but also Morocco) towards Spain by both sea (mainland Spain, Balearic Islands) and land (to the cities of Ceuta and Melilla on the North African coast). Morocco and Algeria are both transit countries for Sub-Saharan migrants willing to reach Europe, as well as countries of origin.

Africa in general, and West Africa in particular, have recently seen some significant changes:

- Recent developments in the ECOWAS.
- The creation of new regional formats such as the Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso), including the ongoing political and security situation in those countries, and the issuing, by that Alliance, of its own passport, replacing the ECOWAS one.
- Russian military initiatives in the region growing in importance and number, which could easily result in instrumentalisation and weaponisation of migration towards the EU as has been the case on the Eastern land border (there is no evidence of this as of yet, however).

Other factors include an increase in mixed migration flows along the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes (refugees/migrants from Horn of Africa or Asia, for instance, Syrians or Bangladeshis in the Western Mediterranean/Atlantic Route). The situation of Sudanese refugees must be closely monitored in that context.

Sea and ocean routes are highly dangerous due to extreme weather conditions, strong winds and currents, as well as increased controls, especially in the Strait of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean coastline / Ceuta and Melilla. To avoid being intercepted, migrants try to set off from dangerous rocky shores and choose inaccessible areas to dock, which increases the risk of accidents. Crossing the open ocean on the Atlantic route is especially challenging, often involving unsuitable boats and distances of up to 1 500 km.

Root causes and push factors

The reasons behind migration are complex and interlinked. They start from demographical issues, including the difficulties experienced by African countries in absorbing young workers entering their labour markets. West African youth is particularly exposed to emigration pressure due to limited educational and economic opportunities, including unemployment, low income, inflation, and lack of access to housing and healthcare. Limited opportunities for land, housing and livelihood generate social tensions in both urban and rural contexts.

Other push factors of migration are political or institutional (political instability, corruption, dictatorial regimes, democratic/governance deficit, human rights abuses, arbitrary arrests and torture) as well as armed conflicts and violence. According to IOM, 8.1 million persons were internally displaced in West and Central Africa as of June 2024. The terrorism affecting mainly Mali and Burkina Faso (jihadist groups) is another factor that is pushing West Africans to leave their countries of origin. It must also be mentioned that terrorist groups profit indirectly from migrant smuggling by extorting fees for passage. The abovementioned factors cause massive displacements in the region.

The growing numbers of forcibly displaced persons face a decreasing offer of social services in the receiving countries, in particular less access to education and health services, combined with a growing focus on movement restrictions. The increasing risk of the destabilisation of local communities is a factor of concern. Displaced persons are exposed to new protection risks (trafficking in human beings, including labour and sexual exploitation, discrimination, gender-based violence). Another factor facilitating exploitation and abuse is the lack of documents as well as fake documents (from civil registry to travel and identity documents).

Another set of reasons behind the decision to move are natural disasters, environmental degradation and climate change. According to IOM more than 717 000 persons were reported internally displaced due to disasters such as floods, storms, or wildfires, in West and Central Africa as of June 2024, while many countries of origin, countries of transit and host countries in the Sahel are considered as being highly vulnerable to climate change. Food insecurity (rising food prices) or a lack of water resources are other factors pushing people to move within or out of the region. Climate change is a vulnerability multiplier, fuelling protection needs and displacement in the region.

Main countries of origin and destination

Frontex reported that in 2024, the top nationalities travelling on the Western Mediterranean Route were Algerians and Moroccans. As far as the Atlantic Route is concerned, the top countries of origin in 2024 were Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Morocco and Mauritania. In terms of irregular border crossing into the EU, Malians represented the second nationality in 2024 (all routes).

The security situation in Mali is continuing to deteriorate, particularly in the North and Central part of the country, while dire economic conditions continue to impact the population. Due to the political and security situation, the EU has adapted its cooperation, avoiding actions that could legitimize or empower the military government and continuing to support the Malian population through humanitarian aid and development cooperation programmes directly benefiting vulnerable populations. The EU remains engaged in Mali through various regional and bilateral projects, including the EU-funded Migrant Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme for sub-Saharan Africa (MPRR-SSA), which facilitates the reintegration of Malian returnees from Africa (mostly North Africa). In addition, there are projects focussed on human and sustainable socio-economic development to improve living conditions and develop economic opportunities in southern regions of the country, e.g. Kayes.

Increased movements of Malians, Burkinabe, Senegalese, Guinean, Ivorian and Sudanese nationals were observed in 2024. This concerned also intra-African migration with Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria as host countries for the biggest West and Central African diasporas. In 2024, Spain saw big numbers of irregular arrivals (over 64 000) of migrants, mainly from Mali, Senegal, Algeria and Morocco¹. It is to be expected that the unstable situation in Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan will generate further displacement.

Efforts to address the situation

Sustained and inclusive collaboration between the EU and Africa is crucial to foster synergies, deepen partnerships, and advance mutual interests and objectives. With the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum, partnerships with third countries, including those in Africa, have become central to European policies aimed at promoting well-managed migration.

On the African side some initiatives have been presented; for instance, Morocco (together with others, within the Rabat Process format) has promoted its idea of humanised border management, while Mauritania and The Gambia made their respective supporting pledges at the 2023 UNHCR Global Refugee Forum to strengthen the West and Central African asylum systems within the regional dialogue (the last one was held on 23 and 25 September 2024).

¹ 2024 ISAA report.

In a long-term sustainable vision aimed at addressing irregular migration flows from West Africa, the Commission, in its EU Action Plan for the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes, published in June 2023, proposed a series of operational measures to respond to the current challenges.

MOCADEM is monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan. It was presented to Coreper in November 2024. The Presidency intends to update the report later this semester.

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 was 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 for the National Strategy on Immigration and Asylum (SNIA) and the operational strategic action plan defined by the Moroccan Ministry of Interior.

The EU has 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 EU under NDICI: one on Migrants Protection, Return and Reintegration Programme in North Africa (MPRR-NA), and another on Regional Police Cooperation.

In December 2023, **Mauritania** became the main country of departure on the Atlantic route. In this context, as a part of the comprehensive partnership between the EU and Mauritania, Commissioner Ylva Johansson visited Mauritania on 7 March 2024 and signed a joint declaration covering five areas:

- 1) creating jobs
- 2) protection and asylum
- 3) facilitating legal migration
- 4) cooperating to prevent illegal migration, combat smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings, and to promote readmission and return
- 5) strengthening border management

A total of EUR 210 million was announced and will be used to address the challenges of migration, humanitarian assistance to refugees and investment in employment, skills and entrepreneurship, as well as support for Global Gateway initiatives, including investments, infrastructures and job creation, primarily in the field of energy. The migration element of the package is backed by a EUR 60 million allocation (flexible mechanism, mostly contracted), including: EUR 28 million for asylum issues, EUR 25 million for maritime surveillance, search and rescue operations, and 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, as well as further EUR 100 million for budget support under the NDICI.

Implementation of the Joint Declaration is monitored by MOCADÉM. The last discussion on migration cooperation with Mauritania took place during the roundtable on 17 February. The update of the Mauritania action file will be presented to Coreper in early April 2025.

In order to further support Mauritania, it is important to work upstream, notably with Mali, in order to reduce the irregular flows to Spain from Mali via Mauritania.

Senegal is a key partner at regional and continental level (notably in the Rabat Process and the Valletta follow-up) as well as an important country of origin and departure for the Atlantic Route. In September 2024 high-level discussions on migration made it possible to define common interests in the areas of border management, prevention, smuggling and information communication. Following the enlarged discussions on migration, a total package of EUR 30 million was allocated. Senegal expects a comprehensive approach on migration for further enhancing its cooperation with the EU (roots causes; fight against human trafficking; legal pathways; returns and readmission). Senegal shares the EU interest on preventing irregular departures and young people dying at sea.

This is now a key political objective of the new authorities elected in 2024. Senegal has a clear interest in developing an effective system of border management, including maritime, land borders and international airports. In this context the EU aims at strengthening cooperation between the Senegalese authorities and Frontex, which has a legal framework and the means to provide operational support. The EU is urging cooperation in areas such as border management, smuggling of migrants and combating trafficking in human beings, return and readmission of irregular migrants (the Commission has proposed restrictive visa measures under Article 25a of the Visa Code in light of insufficient cooperation on readmission) and migration governance and management. In particular, the Commission proposed, under the Flexible Mechanism measure presented to the Member States in October 2024, to finance the fight against document fraud, for which the support of Member States (financial or with expertise) is necessary.

The cooperation with Senegal is of interest to MOCADÉM and the action file was presented to Coreper on 15 January.

Questions:

1. *How do Member States assess the cooperation with the main countries of origin, transit and departure on the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes in general, and with Senegal in particular?*
2. *What do Member States think about reengaging with Mali, with a view to reducing the movements toward Mauritania and hence towards the EU? In advance to the mission of the EU Special Representative for the Sahel in May 2025, existing channels could be used to cautiously exchange with Mali at technical level to better manage migration flows.*
3. *Which of the Member States' initiatives can be seen as good practices allowing a near-term improvement of cooperation in this region?*