



From Africa to the EU, with masks on

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration flows



Migration is normal — migration has always been here, migration will always be here... it works quite well I should say, and we need migration.

EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson,

23 September 2020

Introduction

Around the world in 2020, migration continued to be an exception rather than a rule for most people. Only an estimated 3.6% of the global population had moved to live in another country. Yet migration and mobility have been, and will remain, a defining feature of Europe's society, economy and politics for decades.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reiterated the important role of thousands of migrants who work in key sectors vital for the functioning of our societies. Migrants represent 13% of all key workers in the EU-27 .

However, the pandemic also affected migration flows to the European Union (EU), which declined in 2020 compared to the previous year. Whereas in 2019, 2.9 million people were granted permits to move to the EU from non-EU countries and territories, this figure was only 2.2 million in 2020.

Migration from Africa to the EU was affected too. Based on analysis from the 2021 edition of the Atlas of Migration , this StoryMap aims at highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on migration flows from African countries to the EU. It compares data from the pandemic era (2020 and 2021) to trends from the preceding years as it pertains to first residence permits, asylum applications and irregular border crossings provided by Eurostat and Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency).

Atlas of Migration

Each year, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) publishes the Atlas of Migration , which collates data from 27 EU Members States and 171 non-EU countries and territories around the world. It brings together harmonised, validated global data from 15 international sources. For non-EU Countries and Territories, the Atlas of Migration covers 34 indicators on demography, migration, asylum, international legal frameworks, drivers of migration (e.g., social conditions, political context, education and labour market) and some implications of migration (e.g., remittances, compared with other financial inflows). Country and territory factsheets are available [here](#) .

Even though more than half of African migrants move within the African continent, Europe is an important destination. In 2020, 22 % of people who emigrated from African countries were residing in the EU (UNDESA).

Over the last decade, the number of migrants of African origin in the EU increased from 7.3 million in 2010 to 9.2 million in 2020 (UNDESA).

Explore the Atlas of Migration

This Atlas is an interactive resource, which gathers data and indicators on migration and migration related topics.

<https://migration-demography-tools.jrc.ec.europa.eu>

Did COVID-19 change the trends?

Over the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged and transformed societies around the world. There have been more than 290 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide, and over five million deaths (WHO , Feb 2022). Face masks, social distancing, travel restrictions, lockdowns and vaccine certificates have become a familiar part of many people's daily lives.

We can't fight the virus without migrants. And our economies will not recover without migrants... migrants are not "them". They are part of "us".

EU Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson at the meeting of the European Integration Network, 31 March 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has had major implications for international migration flows. It reduced opportunities for migrant workers by impacting on sectors that often employ migrants, such as agriculture, services and tourism. In many countries of origin, people may have been deterred from migrating due to the risk of contracting the virus, or chose to stay at home to work or study remotely.

Focussing on African migration, the next sections compare data from 2020 and 2021 with the trends of the previous years for what concerns first residence permits granted by EU Member States, asylum applications in the EU and irregular crossings of the EU external borders.

Migration flows from Africa to the EU

First residence permits refer to any authorisation issued to a person for the first time by the authorities of a Member State allowing a third country national to stay legally on its territory. The number of first residence permits is often used to measure migrant flows to the EU.



Eurostat provides annual figures on first residence permits disaggregated by the following groups of reasons: Remunerated activities (referred to as ‘Work’), Family, Education and Other. The group ‘Other’ includes Refugee status and subsidiary protection; Humanitarian reasons; Residence only; Unaccompanied minors; Victims of trafficking in human beings; and ‘Other’ reasons not specified.

Migration to the EU from non-EU countries (measured as the number of first residence permits) declined by 24% in 2020 compared with 2019. Migration from Africa to the EU was affected to a lesser extent.

These charts show the number of first residence permits (all lengths) annually issued to African migrants in all EU Member States across the six years 2015-

2021 by reason of the permit. The sizes of the pies reflect the total number of permits. Source: eurostat

The number of first residence permits issued to African migrants was 13% lower in 2020 compared with 2019. During the pre-COVID period (2017-2019), the number of permits granted annually exceeded 450 thousand. In 2020, only 391 thousand permits were granted. This was the lowest annual figure for the five preceding years.

Despite the decline in the number of migrants arriving from Africa to the EU over 2020, the reasons for migration remained stable (shown as the distribution of resident permits by reason) .

Family unification was and remains the primary channel of entry (45% in 2020), followed by education (18%) and work (16%).

Morocco remains the top African nationality migrating to the EU, with 123 445 permits granted in 2020 (+11% increase compared to the 2015-2019 average). But most countries showed a decline in 2020 compared to the 2015-2019 average.

Asylum applications

An asylum seeker is a person who seeks protection from persecution or serious harm in a country other than their own and awaits a decision on the application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments (in the EU context: Geneva Refugee Convention and Protocol).



First time asylum applicants are people who lodged an application for asylum for the first time in a given Member State during a reference period. The term ‘first-time’ implies no time limitation, so a person can be recorded as a first-time applicant only if they have never applied for international protection in the reporting country/territory in the past, irrespective of whether they have applied in another Member State of the EU.

During the pandemic, there has been a reduction in the number of first-time asylum applications made by nationals of African countries in the EU-27.

The total number of first-time applications in 2019 was 153 thousand. This figure dropped to 97 thousand in 2020. This is the lowest number registered since 2013

and less than half the number of applications reported during the refugee crisis of 2016.

Although the pandemic may have impacted on the capacity of some people to travel to the EU or to lodge asylum applications once arrived, the factors causing people to leave their homes in search of safety and shelter continue to drive forced migration to Europe. Yet, the effect varied for the flows from different African regions and countries.

The percentage of Western Africans among asylum applicants had already been declining since 2016. During 2020 this percentage declined by a further 5 percentage points (from 43% in 2019 to 38% in 2020). By contrast, the percentage of Northern and Eastern Africans among asylum applicants increased by 2 and 4 percentage points, respectively.



The drivers of forced migration are multi-faceted and shift over time according to the context in countries of origin, along transit routes and at the borders of EU

Member States. This means the data might reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the factors driving people to seek asylum, or it could show the implications for the institutional capacity of Member States to process asylum applications, or both.

Irregular migration

Whereas the scale of regular migration and asylum applications from African countries in the EU has declined during the pandemic, this has not been the case with irregular migration.



Illegal Border Crossings (IBCs) refer to detections of illegal border-crossing, rather than the number of persons because the same person may cross an external border several times. However, there is currently no EU system in place capable of tracing each person's movements following an illegal border crossing. Therefore, it is not possible to establish the precise number of persons who have illegally crossed the external border.

During 2020, the number of irregular border crossings detected by Frontex increased by 45% compared to 2019. And it kept rising as 36% more irregular border crossings were detected in 2021 compared to 2020.

Between 2019 and 2021 both sea and land routes experienced an increase in detected irregular border crossings. However, this aggregate trend doesn't describe the dynamics observed on individual routes.

The number of detected irregular border crossings declined across two routes:

On the Eastern Mediterranean route (from Turkey to Greece), the number fell from 12,788 in 2019 to 4,649 in 2020 and 7,665 in 2021.

On the Western Mediterranean route (from eastern Morocco to Spain), the number fell from 23,783 in 2019 to 17,143 in 2020 and 18,317 in 2021.

The Central Mediterranean route (the stretch of the Mediterranean Sea between North Africa and Italy) saw the biggest increase of detected irregular border crossings during the pandemic.

The most recent data is available from the Frontex website (updated monthly).

Policy context

Since 2014, European and African countries have been developing a joint approach to managing migration and mobility. This includes the joint Valletta action plan, the Khartoum and Rabat processes, the EU partnership framework on migration for bilateral relations with partner countries, and the commitment of both sides to develop a joint framework on continent-to-continent migration and mobility dialogue.

A partnership on migration and mobility was one of the five key global trends around which the Joint Communication 'Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa' proposed that the two continents work together. It covers the cooperation on addressing the challenges of forced displacement, irregular migration, return, readmission, and reintegration as well as cooperation on legal migration.

During the Sixth European Union - African Union Summit (17-18 February 2022, Brussels), the leaders agreed on a Joint Vision for a renewed partnership including an enhanced and reciprocal partnership for migration and mobility. This EU-AU Sixth Summit Joint Declaration outlines the following:

Through joint action and capacity-building, including with dedicated African migration institutions, we will aim at:

- Preventing irregular migration
- Enhancing cooperation against smuggling and trafficking in human beings
- Supporting strengthened border management and achieving effective improvements on return, readmission and reintegration
- Including promoting voluntary return and facilitating sustainable reintegration of returned persons
- As well as enhancing migration dialogues between the two Continents and delivering on their key priorities.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission continued working on the implementation of the EU Pilot Projects on Legal Migration which paves the way towards Talent Partnerships proposed in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2020).

The PALIM (Pilot Project Addressing Labour shortages through Innovative labour migration Models) aims to respond to labour market needs in the ICT sector of Belgium and Morocco while developing professional skills of young graduates in Morocco and developing the cooperation between the two countries.

The MATCH (Migration of African Talents through Capacity building and Hiring) is aimed at providing highly skilled talents from Nigeria and Senegal to private sector companies whose needs for qualified staff cannot be satisfied by the offer available on the EU labour market.

The YGCA (Young Generation as Change Agents) is a one-year mobility scheme dedicated to Moroccan students willing to enrol in a Master's degree in Spain.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts on international migration flows. Migration from Africa to the EU during 2020 and 2021 followed the general trend with: a reduction in the number of first residence permits granted by the EU Member States and in the number of asylum applications, and an increase in the number of detected irregular border crossings.

Even if there has been a general reduction in the scale of international migration flows during the pandemic, migration did not stop completely. Regardless of the global crisis, the complex interplay of push and pull factors driving international migration between Africa and Europe continued to influence people's decisions to leave their countries of origin.

The pandemic has underlined the importance of migration and mobility for countries around the world. This includes the vital contribution migrants make to sectors such as agriculture , healthcare and science and their role as key workers doing many of the day-to-day essential tasks that keep societies functioning. It also includes the major contribution they make to the pandemic response and recovery in their countries of origin by sending remittances .

Migration and mobility have long been at the forefront of the dialogue between Africa and Europe. With 9.2 million migrants of African origin in the EU in 2020, a joint approach to migration is important and this is reflected in the recent Joint Vision for a renewed partnership between the two continents. To this end, the Knowledge Centre on Migration and Demography is an invaluable source of further insights and regular updates to support this shared African and European vision.



<https://africa-knowledge-platform.ec.europa.eu/>

This document has been originated from a StoryMap compiled in the context the European Commission's Africa Knowledge Platform.<https://africa-knowledge-platform.ec.europa.eu/>

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Images

World Bank - Ousmane Traore ; Kyle Glenn ; Daniel Schludi ; Markus Spiske ; and Frontex .