



The EU's Approach to Irregular Migration in the Contemporary Fragile Context: An Effective Model?

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Abstract: This article analyzes the EU's approach to addressing irregular migration against the background of a deteriorating security environment and other challenges such as climate change. It argues that loopholes and flaws, both within and between member states, create incentives for the instrumentalization of migration by third countries and political actors. At the same time, although migrant movements caused by climate change are generally internal and temporary, the lack of a commonly accepted term for climate migration and climate migrants hinders the integration of climate-induced migration in EU migration policies, especially when it occurs alongside armed conflicts.

Keywords: irregular migration, security challenges, climate change, refugees, EU.

Introduction

The European Union's policy in the fields of migration and asylum acquired particular importance with the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring, when uprisings and armed rebellions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region led to armed conflicts, triggering unprecedented migration flows to Europe. This, combined with the permissive migration policies of some EU member states and the attempts by certain (primarily transit) countries and countries of origin to instrumentalize these movements, further contributed to tensions and rising populism within the European Union.¹

¹ Carlo Ruzza, "Populism and Euroscepticism: Towards Uncivil Society?" *Policy and Society* 28, no. 1 (2009): 87-98, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2009.02.007>; Ayhan

Over the last three years, Russia's military invasion of Ukraine has forced millions to flee,² while in less than two years, the war between Israel and Hamas, Hezbollah, and other armed groups has displaced some 1.9 million people internally,³ in addition to the impact of other ongoing armed conflicts across the world. Given the proximity of the first of these theaters to the European Union, it is not surprising that most of the Ukrainian refugees have been hosted in the member states. At the same time, persisting or worsening security and socio-economic challenges across both the MENA region and Sub-Saharan Africa continue to serve as push factors for (irregular) migration, including to the European Union.⁴

The fast-changing security context within and outside the European Union inevitably affects decision-making. Germany's decision to impose temporary border controls from September 16, 2024, citing "the need to limit irregular migration further and to protect Germany's internal security,"⁵ is a case in point. This decision came shortly after the terrorist attack in the city of Solingen, claimed by the so-called Islamic State, and in view of the approaching regional elections. Furthermore, armed conflicts and migration routes through certain third countries led to the European Union signing agreements with transit countries such as Libya, Tunisia, and Turkey. In addition, the conclusion of several bilateral migration management agreements between countries of destination and transit has once again demonstrated that some EU member states continue to seek solutions on their own.

Kaya, "Right-wing Populism and Islamophobia in Europe and Their Impact on Turkey-EU Relations," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020): 1-28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1499431>; Francesco Campo, Sara Giunti, and Mariapia Mendola, "Refugee Crisis and Right-Wing Populism: Evidence from the Italian Dispersal Policy," *European Economic Review* 168 (2024): 104826, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2024.104826>.

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Europe Situations: Data and Trends – Arrivals and Displaced Populations – September 2024," *Operational Data Portal*, November 8, 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/112366>.

³ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), "UNRWA Situation Report #118 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem," July 5, 2024, www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-118-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem.

⁴ James Dennison, "Re-Thinking the Drivers of Regular and Irregular Migration: Evidence from the MENA Region," *Comparative Migration Studies* 10 (2022), article 21, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00296-y>; Wendy Williams, "African Migration Trends to Watch in 2024," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 9, 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/african-migration-trends-to-watch-in-2024/>.

⁵ "Limiting Irregular Migration and Protecting Internal Security: Border Checks at All German Land Borders to Start 16 September 2024," *Press Release*, German Federal Ministry of the Interior, September 9, 2024, www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/pressmitteilungen/EN/2024/09/binnengrenzkontrollen_en.html.

Against this background, armed conflicts are not the only factor that may trigger mixed migration⁶ toward the European Union in the long run. Other drivers, such as economic and political turmoil, as well as climate change, also have the potential to become major push factors for migration in the coming decades. The latter deserves particular attention, as climate-induced hazards have already forced millions to flee their homes or even countries – in many cases, while living in conflict-affected areas.⁷ While climate change and environmental degradation currently affect mainly populations in countries with high exposure and low adaptive capacity—and the mobility associated with these conditions occurs predominantly within their borders—in the long term, persistent adverse effects may push people to seek a better life in other countries, thereby becoming irregular migrants.⁸

Under such circumstances, EU policies addressing irregular and mixed migration flows as a whole have been a real source of contention in political, economic, and social terms throughout the last decade.⁹ With an aging population (those aged 65 years or more accounted for some 21.3 % of the total population in 2023),¹⁰ low fertility rates, and significant population decline in some member states, the influx of refugees and migrants to the European Union is destined to remain at the top of its political agenda in the years ahead. Nonetheless, long-term solutions are either avoided or underestimate other drivers of migration, namely, climate change. In this regard, the lack of a universally accepted and legally binding definition of *climate refugees* remains a major challenge, compounded by existing uncertainties about the long-term effects of climate change on cross-border population movements.

The EU's Measures to Reduce Irregular Migration

Since the so-called refugee and migrant crisis of the mid-2010s, the European Union has adopted or promoted several policies addressing the management of migration. Among these is the *European Security Program*, adopted by the Euro-

⁶ The term “mixed migration” refers to cross-border movements of people who travel together, but not for the same reasons. Thus, mixed migration includes various types of migrants, such as refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants. In the case of the European Union, mixed migration also includes irregular migration.

⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “No Escape: On the Frontlines of Climate Change, Conflict and Forced Displacement,” November 2024, 7, <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/no-escape-frontlines-climate-change-conflict-and-forced-displacement>.

⁸ “Statements – Act Now: Migrant Inclusion in Climate Action Is an Obligation, Not an Option,” United Nations Network on Migration, accessed September 6, 2024, <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/statements/act-now-migrant-inclusion-climate-action-obligation-not-option>.

⁹ This has slightly changed with the Russian military invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁰ Eurostat, “Demography of Europe – 2024 Edition,” *Interactive Publications*, May 15, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.2785/911441>.

pean Commission in April 2015, which emphasized the importance of cooperation with third countries as a priority in the fight against smuggling.¹¹ Shortly after, in May 2015, the *European Agenda on Migration* was also adopted in an attempt to reduce incentives for irregular migration while securing the EU's external borders and creating pathways for legal migration. In addition, during the Valletta Summit on Migration, the EU Heads of State and Government agreed with their African counterparts on an action plan focused on five priority areas: addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement; preventing and combating illegal migration, migrant smuggling, and trafficking in persons; promoting legal migration and the right to protection and asylum; and ensuring the return and reintegration of migrants.¹²

At the same time, growing migration pressure through the Mediterranean Sea led to the launch of EUNAVFOR MED Sophia in 2015, aimed at deterring migrant smuggling across the Mediterranean region. It was subsequently replaced by the ongoing military crisis management operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI.¹³

In fact, a significant drop in the number of illegal entries into the European Union was registered in 2016 compared to the previous year (Figure 1). This decline continued for several years. However, illegal arrivals decreased primarily along the so-called *Eastern Mediterranean route*, while they actually increased several times along the *Western route* (Figure 1). Moreover, the decrease in illegal entries through the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes can also be attributed, to some extent, to the politics of Donald Trump's first presidential mandate and to changes in some EU governments.

Moreover, the initial decrease along the Central Mediterranean route, which reached its lowest point during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, subsequently began to increase steadily. The highest number of irregular migrants since 2017 was registered in 2023. This was also the case for the Eastern and Western Mediterranean routes, where the number of irregular arrivals more than doubled between 2019 and 2023.

These trends indicate that countering irregular migration necessitates a comprehensive range of measures implemented in countries of origin, transit, and destination. Although the European Union has already undertaken several important steps in this regard, they have not been particularly successful, as evidenced by the continued high numbers of irregular arrivals over the last few

¹¹ European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: EU Action Plan Against Migrant Smuggling (2015–2020)," May 27, 2015, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52015DC0285>.

¹² European Council & Council of the European Union, "Valletta Summit on Migration, 11-12 November 2015," 2015, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2015/11/11-12/>.

¹³ "Council Decision (CFSP) 2020/472 of 31 March 2020 on a European Union Military Operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI)," *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 101/4, April 1, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec/2020/472/oj>.

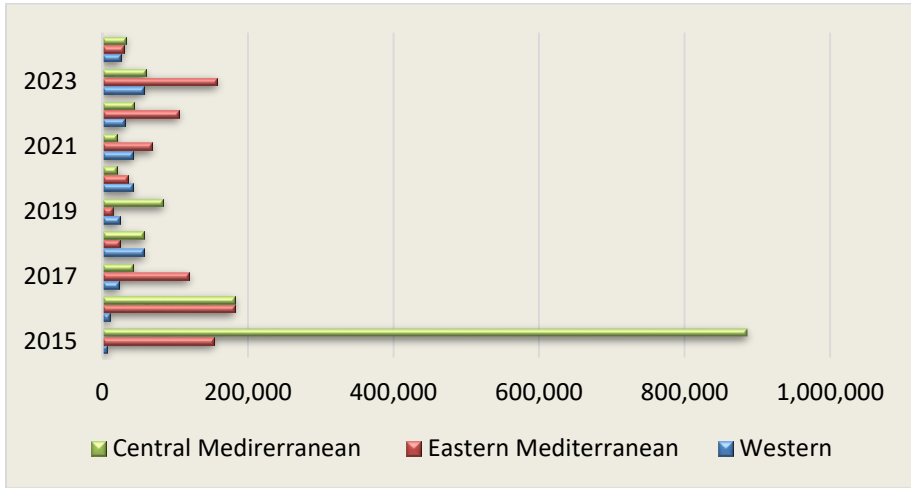


Figure 1: Registered Irregular Arrivals in the EU in the Period 2015-2024.¹⁴

years. Therefore, building cooperation with third countries has been a central part of the EU's efforts to address irregular migration. As a result, several agreements with transit countries have been concluded in recent years, both at the EU level and bilaterally between individual member states and countries of origin. A key feature of most of these agreements is that they encompass not only security-related matters but also socio-economic aspects. For example, the *Malta Declaration* underlines the importance of stabilizing Libya, which involves both enhancing the capacity of Libyan authorities to counter smuggling activities and improving the socio-economic situation of the local population.¹⁵

It is worth noting that, in terms of cooperation with third countries, the issue of the possible instrumentalization of mixed migration has still not received sufficient attention. This was particularly notable in the case of Belarus, which pushed thousands of irregular migrants in 2021 to cross the borders with Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland in a new form of hybrid attack.¹⁶ Similar patterns have been observed with transit countries such as Turkey on various occasions, and

¹⁴ The data for 2024 is up to July 2024. Source: European Council & Council of the European Union, "Irregular Arrivals to the EU – 2008–2024," 2024, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/irregular-arrivals-since-2008/.

¹⁵ European Council & Council of the European Union, "Malta Declaration by the Members of the European Council on the External Aspects of Migration: Addressing the Central Mediterranean Route," *Press Release*, February 3, 2017, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/02/03/malta-declaration/.

¹⁶ European Parliament, "Instrumentalisation in the Field of Migration and Asylum," Briefing: EU Legislation in Progress, November 22, 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)739204](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2022)739204).

later with Morocco and Tunisia.¹⁷ This led the European Union to stipulate agreements with the latter in 2023, with a particular focus on addressing irregular migration.¹⁸ In 2024, a similar deal was also concluded with Lebanon.¹⁹

Although the European Union often condemns the use of migrants as a tool to achieve political goals by third countries, it can be argued that the EU itself contributes to this practice through agreements with transit countries such as those mentioned above. While these third countries bear a heavy burden in managing migration flows—including hosting significant numbers of refugees and other migrants—the European Union is expected to demonstrate empathy by providing financial assistance, training, and responsibility-sharing initiatives.²⁰ Nevertheless, most of the agreements remain controversial. Issues of poor human rights protection²¹ and the broader political context in many of these countries raise a number of concerns, especially given the EU’s self-proclaimed image as a global leader in the field of human rights.

In addition to the above, these agreements clearly fail to achieve their primary objective, which is to significantly reduce illegal border crossings. On the few occasions when they do so, it is only temporary and contingent upon the agreed EU financial support to third countries. Although it can be assumed that without these agreements the number of illegal migrants in the European Union would probably have been much higher, it is not surprising that such deals are seen as tools that increase the EU’s dependence on external actors. In this case, the latter are represented by third countries, creating precisely the opportunity

¹⁷ See European Parliamentary Research Service, “Substitute Impact Assessment: Proposal for a Regulation Addressing Situations of Instrumentalisation in the Field of Migration and Asylum,” October 3, 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/think-tank/en/document/EPRS_STU\(2023\)753156](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/think-tank/en/document/EPRS_STU(2023)753156).

¹⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, “EU Launches New Cooperation Programmes with Morocco Worth €624 Million Green Transition, Migration and Reforms,” March 2, 2023, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-launches-new-cooperation-programmes-morocco-worth-eu624-million-green-transition-migration-and-2023-03-02_en; and European Parliamentary Research Service, “EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding,” September 11, 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)751467](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2023)751467).

¹⁹ Alexandra Brozowsky, “EU pledges €1 billion for Lebanon to curb migration, support economy,” *Euroactiv*, May 2, 2024, www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-pledges-e1-billion-for-lebanon-to-curb-migration-support-economy/.

²⁰ Eiko Thielemann, “Improving Refugee Protection Policies in Europe: Towards a Mandatory, Capacity-Based Allocation System for Asylum Seekers,” Research Impact Case Study, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2021, www.lse.ac.uk/Research/research-impact-case-studies/2021/improving-refugee-protection-policies-in-Europe.

²¹ See, for example, Jenny Poon, “EU-Turkey Deal: Violation of, or Consistency with, International Law?” *European Papers: A Journal on Law and Integration* 1, no. 3 (2016): 1195-1203, <https://doi.org/10.15166/2499-8249/96>.

for the instrumentalization of migrants as a means of achieving political goals.²² In other words, by accepting large numbers of refugees and other migrants, third countries develop considerable leverage, which they can use to blackmail target countries if they choose to do so.²³

It can also be argued that some EU policy documents in the field of migration currently remain implemented mainly on paper. For instance, in June 2019, the European Council adopted a new strategic agenda for the period 2019–2024, providing a common framework and guidelines for addressing the challenges of irregular migration with four main priorities: protection of citizens and freedoms; economic development; green, fair, and social policies; and promoting EU interests and values globally.²⁴ However, this framework remained largely declarative, as became evident in the years that followed. Since 2020, various changes to the security environment, including the imposition of movement restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic and individual country decisions, such as the establishment of bilateral relations between single member states and transit countries, have indeed had a deterrent effect on irregular migration to the European Union. Hence, the European Union seems to adhere to the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, without sufficient predictability in terms of member states' contributions.²⁵

Given the above, in May 2024, the Council of the European Union adopted a new *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, initially presented by the European Commission in September 2020. The pact is based on four pillars: robust screening, the Eurodac asylum and migration database, border procedures and returns, and crisis protocols and action against instrumentalization.²⁶ It is important to note that this instrument introduces new measures or extends already existing ones, some of which can be regarded as belated and surprisingly neglected until now. For example, through the Eurodac biometric database, applications and applicants will be tracked, while simultaneously, the storage of certain data will be signifi-

²² Atanas Dimitrov and Vasil Pavlov, "EU-Third Countries Cooperation in Managing Irregular Migration," *International Scientific Journal Security & Future* 7, no. 2 (2023): 46–48, <https://stumejournals.com/journals/confsec/2023/2/46>.

²³ Monika Sie Dhian Ho and Myrthe Wijnkoop, "The Instrumentalization of Migration: A Geopolitical Perspective and Toolbox," Clingendael Report (The Hague, The Netherlands: Clingendael Institute, December 2022), 11, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Report_The_instrumentalization_of_migration.pdf.

²⁴ European Council, "A New Strategic Agenda 2019–2024," *Press Release*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/20/a-new-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>.

²⁵ Eleni Karageorgiou and Gregor Noll, "What Is Wrong with Solidarity in EU Asylum and Migration Law?" *Jus Cogens* 4 (2022): 131–154, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42439-022-00059-4>.

²⁶ European Commission, "Pact on Migration and Asylum: A Common EU System to Manage Migration," Migration and Home Affairs, May 21, 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.

cantly expanded.²⁷ Yet the new pact also includes measures that at first glance seem rather difficult to implement in practice or, at the very least, ambiguous in their essence. For instance, while asylum applicants who are unlikely to receive international protection will be subject to efficient returns,²⁸ in the case of those presenting a security risk, it remains unclear how precisely they will receive support for reintegration in their countries of origin. Such vagueness, in political terms, only adds fuel to the fire.

Despite its launch as an instrument intended to support a comprehensive solution to the issue of mixed migrant flows to the European Union, this topic remains a central concern in the political agendas of many member states, particularly during pre-election campaigns and efforts to garner public attention. Moreover, the legislative texts aimed at reforming European migration and asylum policy were adopted with varying levels of support from member states, in some cases reflecting a very fragile consensus. Put simply, taking concrete measures that will deliver results in the shortest possible time is more than urgent if the European Union is to avoid losing further credibility and the trust of both individual governments and millions of citizens. Otherwise, the consequences may unfold at geostrategic and political levels in the medium and long term.

The Nexus between Climate Change and Migration in the Context of EU Policies

Climate Change and Migration in the Literature

The nexus between climate change and migration²⁹ has been of particular interest to scholars in recent years.³⁰ Although human mobility driven by environmental issues is not new in the contemporary globalized world, climate change today contributes to increasing internal and international migration and displacement worldwide, both through direct and indirect impacts.³¹ Climate

²⁷ European Commission, "Pact on Migration and Asylum."

²⁸ European Commission, "Pact on Migration and Asylum."

²⁹ The European Migration Network defines forced migration as "a migratory movement where an element of coercion exists, no matter if it is due to natural or man-made causes." We adopt this definition as a working one in this article, as we consider it important for decision-making at the national and regional levels, since it emphasizes the urgent nature of the action. For more, see "EMN Asylum and Migration Glossary," European Migration Network, European Commission, April 29, 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary_en.

³⁰ See, for example, Issa Ibrahim Berchin et al., "Climate Change and Forced Migrations: An Effort Towards Recognizing Climate Refugees," *Geoforum* 84 (2017): 147-150, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.022>.

³¹ Lawrence Huang, "Climate Migration 101: An Explainer," Migration Policy Institute, November 16, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/climate-migration-101-explainer>.

change is regarded as negatively affecting living conditions due to more frequent and severe natural hazards or changes in local climates, which may act as push factors for migration.³² Ghosh and Orchiston state that the effects of climatic and geophysical hazards are often exacerbated by their interactions with human-related factors, including social and political dynamics, which can lead to migration as a result.³³

In this regard, armed conflict is not only a major cause of forced migration but also a factor that can exacerbate the consequences of climate change and environmental degradation. The reverse is also true, particularly in regions where agriculture is the primary livelihood of the local population, and climate-induced events tend to increase the risk of violent conflict.³⁴ It should also be noted that agriculture-dependent countries are often associated with higher levels of irregular migration to the European Union, although the exact drivers vary by country and region, ranging from droughts and global warming to rainfall variability.³⁵ As some scholars argue, climate change and conflict have a multidimensional, context-dependent relationship.³⁶

Other scholars emphasize that, despite the clear adverse effects associated with climate change, mobility decisions are often subjective and based on personal perceptions.³⁷ In this regard, Minehan and Wesselbaum argue that the way people perceive climate change, including expectations about its future impact, plays a central role in migration decisions.³⁸ This may explain why climate-induced migration remains partly underestimated in the implementation of migration policy within the European Union, both at the European and national levels. While the European Union strongly prioritizes human rights protection and frames climate change as a just cause at the international level, environmental

³² Bishawjit Mallick and Jochen Schanze, "Trapped or Voluntary? Non-Migration Despite Climate Risks," *Sustainability* 12, no. 11 (2020): 4718, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12114718>.

³³ Rajan Chandra Ghosh and Caroline Orchiston, "A Systematic Review of Climate Migration Research: Gaps in Existing Literature," *SN Social Sciences* 2 (2022), article 47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-022-00341-8>.

³⁴ Elisabeth Lio Rosvold, "Security Implications of Climate Change: The Climate-Conflict Nexus," in *The Impacts of Climate Change: A Comprehensive Study of Physical, Bio-physical, Social, and Political Issues*, ed. Trevor M. Letcher (Elsevier, 2021): 465-478, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-822373-4.00015-X>.

³⁵ Fabien Cottier and Idean Salehyan, "Climate Variability and Irregular Migration to the European Union," *Global Environmental Change* 69 (July 2021): 102275, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102275>.

³⁶ Amar Causevic and Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "NATO and Anthropogenic Strategic Security," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 22, no. 1 (2023): 67-78, <https://doi.org/10.11610/Connections.22.1.16>.

³⁷ Mallick and Jochen, "Trapped or Voluntary? Non-Migration Despite Climate Risks."

³⁸ Shannon Minehan and Dennis Wesselbaum, "Do Climate Change Expectations Drive Migration? Evidence from Migration Flows Towards OECD Countries," *Global and Planetary Change* 227 (2023): 104188, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloplacha.2023.104188>.

migration does not appear to be among the leading concerns for Brussels or individual member states.³⁹ With some probability, this may be attributed to the lack of reliable data on cross-border climate-related migration, which is critically important. Trinh and Munro further argue that limited exposure to actual climate change makes it a difficult task to predict its impact on driving migration.⁴⁰

Given the above, it should be highlighted that most of the data regarding climate-induced migration, including environmental migration, is qualitative rather than quantitative. This is mainly due to the existence of various drivers of migration and the lack of standardized methods for data collection. As a result, research usually focuses on case studies, predominantly within a given country.⁴¹

The various definitions used in research and policy documents affect data collection and, more broadly, how political actors and other stakeholders perceive the nexus between climate change and migration. Undoubtedly, virtually every study on migration is based on specific definitions, and climate-induced migration is no exception. Moreover, at the time of writing, there is no internationally recognized definition of a climate migrant, climate refugee, or environmental migration. Therefore, the existing working definitions serve more as points of departure, case-specific scenarios, or advocacy tools. For example, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines *environmental migration* as:

Movement of persons or groups of persons (environmental migrants) who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence.⁴²

Similarly, the term *climate migration* is regarded as a subcategory of environmental migration and is defined as:

The movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do

³⁹ Lucia Wirthová, "Environmentally Driven Migration in EU Discourse: Norms, Policies and Realities," *UCL Open Environment* 6, no. 1 (2024): 03, <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444/ucloe.1975>.

⁴⁰ Tra Thi Trinh and Alistair Munro, "Climate Change and Migration Decisions: A Choice Experiment from the Mekong Delta, Vietnam," *Ecological Economics* 224 (October 2024): 108307, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2024.108307>.

⁴¹ "Climate and Environmental Migration," Migration Data Portal, accessed September 9, 2024, https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/environmental_migration_and_statistics.

⁴² International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Discussion Note: Migration and the Environment," MC/INF/288, November 1, 2007, https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1411/files/MC_INF_288.pdf.

so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border.⁴³

These working definitions are largely used by intergovernmental agencies in the migration field, such as IOM and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Yet, they tend to avoid the usage of definitions of *climate refugees* or *environmental refugees*, considering them misleading, which could undermine the international legal regime for the protection of refugees.⁴⁴

As for the term *climate change*, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines it as:

A change in the state of the climate that can be identified (e.g. by using statistical tests) by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer.⁴⁵

According to this definition, climate change may be due to both natural internal processes and external factors, including human activity.⁴⁶ At the same time, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change defines climate change as deriving directly or indirectly from human activity, while using the term *climate variability* to indicate changes in climate due to natural causes.⁴⁷

All definitions listed above are useful for research purposes; however, in terms of existing or new policies, they contribute little. Not surprisingly, the European Union faces significant challenges in addressing climate-induced migration, particularly in the context of uncertainty and tensions among member states regarding irregular migration.

The Place of Climate-Induced Migration in the EU Context

When it comes to irregular migration and possible scenarios concerning migration influxes toward the European Union, some important data should be considered. For example, at the end of 2023, 68.3 million people were living as in-

⁴³ Alice Sironi, Céline Bauloz, and Milen Emmanuel, eds., *Glossary on Migration*, International Migration Law No. 34 (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019), <https://publications.iom.int/books/international-migration-law-ndeg34-glossary-migration>.

⁴⁴ "Environmental Migration," International Organization for Migration, Environmental Migration Portal, accessed August 11, 2024, <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/environmental-migration>.

⁴⁵ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Susan Solomon et al., eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 667, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar4/wg1/>.

⁴⁶ IPCC, *Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis*.

⁴⁷ UN General Assembly, "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly," A/RES/48/189, January 20, 1994, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/resolution/unga/1994/en/26583>.

ternally displaced persons (IDPs) globally due to conflict and violence, while another 7.7 million were displaced due to disasters.⁴⁸ While it appears that conflict generally has a longer-lasting impact on displacement than disaster-driven crises, over the last few years, the number of people internally displaced by disasters has increased significantly, with approximately 26.4 million recorded displacements in 2024 alone (Figure 2).

Although such data can be interpreted in various ways, especially when looking at specific regions, some visible trends emerge. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the number of IDPs between 2014 and 2023 has gradually increased (Figure 3). In 2023, however, most of them (32.5 million) were displaced due to conflict and violence, while the remainder were displaced due to disasters. Although it can be assumed that most are likely to remain in their country of origin, and precise data on how many IDPs become irregular migrants does not exist, failures in protecting and assisting them often lead to cross-border movements, as surveys suggest.⁴⁹

It should also be noted that many of these people willing to reach the European Union would need to pass through the MENA region, which serves both as the main transit point for irregular migration to the European Union and as a place of origin for many migrants. In short, climate change can exacerbate mixed migration flows and, consequently, irregular migration toward the European Union.

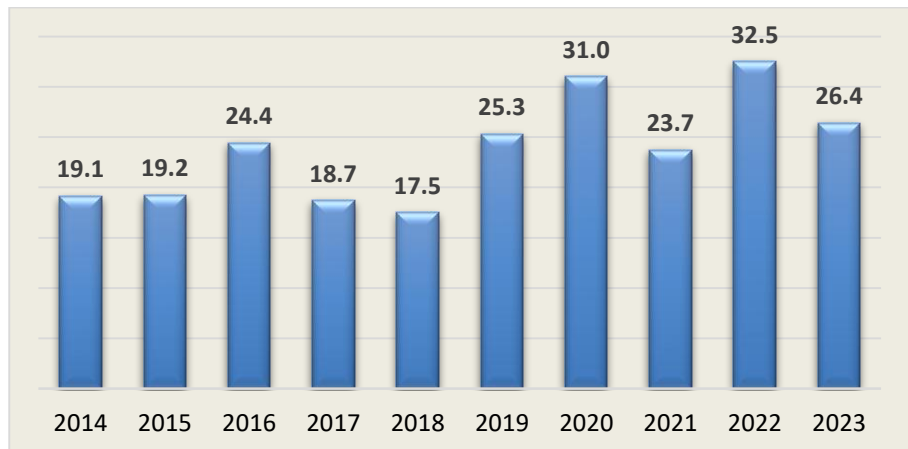


Figure 2: Internal Displacements Due to Disaster in 2014–2023 (in Millions).

Source: IDMC, “2024 Global Report on Internal Displacement.”

⁴⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), “2024 Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID),” May 14, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.55363/IDMC.DAKY2849>.

⁴⁹ Chloe Sydney, “The Displacement Continuum: The Relationship between Internal Displacement and Cross-Border Movement in Seven Countries,” Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, June 2020, <https://doi.org/10.55363/idmc.riey7765>.

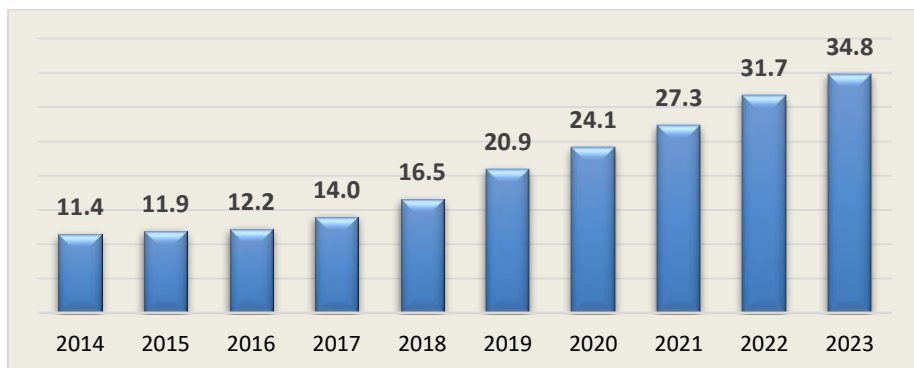


Figure 3: Number of Internally Displaced Persons in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 2014–2023 period. (Source: IDMC, 2024)

In this context, attempts to establish a fair system of solidarity and shared responsibility among EU member states in distributing the burden of irregular migration have so far been largely unsuccessful. In fact, irregular migration, as previously noted, has been at the center of political disputes and even entire parliamentary and presidential election campaigns, challenging some of the EU's core values and raising questions about the relevance of its economic, social, and political course in the contemporary security context. This has been particularly evident in countries facing political crises, most of which lie on the EU's external borders and/or absorb a large share of the influx of irregular migrants.

The overwhelming number of irregular migrants can lead to social discontent and provide fertile ground for political exploitation within the European Union, as noted above. Unsurprisingly, this has been reflected in EU-level measures to manage migration processes, such as establishing a clear distinction between illegal migrants and those in need of international protection.⁵⁰

Against this backdrop, climate change and environmental events can further exacerbate migration pressures and are very likely to contribute to increased migration flows, including by aggravating other drivers of migration.⁵¹ Yet, this issue receives very limited attention in EU policies, and even less in national-level policies. Despite uncertainties about the long-term consequences of climate change, the issue of climate-induced migration deserves greater prominence on the EU's political agenda, as well as that of its member states, particularly in

⁵⁰ European Council, "European Council Conclusions, 28 June 2018," *Press Release*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/06/29/20180628-euco-conclusions-final/>.

⁵¹ Albert Kraler, Tatiana Cernei, and Marion Noack, "'Climate Refugees' – Legal and Policy Responses to Environmentally Induced Migration," Briefing paper prepared for Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament, December 7, 2011, 28, [www.euro-parl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL-LIBE_ET\(2011\)462422](http://www.euro-parl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL-LIBE_ET(2011)462422).

terms of building trust and credibility in how local populations perceive migration. While the European Union is expected to create legal pathways for people affected by climate-triggered events,⁵² the measures required to adequately manage climate-induced migration should not differ substantially from those needed to address irregular migration caused by armed conflict. This is due to the assumption that in both cases, affected populations are vulnerable to marginalization and, consequently, to potential recruitment by terrorist or other armed groups, in addition to other associated security risks.

The Need for Skilled Labor vs. the Management of Irregular Migration

One important aspect concerning irregular migration is the need for skilled labor in the European Union. It is widely argued that immigration supports economic growth⁵³ and is therefore necessary. In recent years, such claims have been reinforced by the shortage of qualified workers and negative demographic trends. For example, it is perceived that the green and digital transformation of EU economies will only succeed if they can rely on a workforce with the necessary skills, highlighting the need for the European Union to be prepared to compete globally in attracting talent.⁵⁴

In demographic terms, negative demographic trends are often cited as an additional reason to advocate for legal pathways for regular migration to the European Union. According to Eurostat data, the total fertility rate in the European Union in 2022 was 1.46 live births per woman, a further decline compared to the already low figures of 1.53 in 2021 and 1.51 in 2020.⁵⁵ Compared to the significantly higher fertility rates in many countries in Africa and Asia, it becomes clear why EU member states should adopt a long-term approach to mixed migration, including from a security perspective. Failing to do so will, at best, only postpone the necessary decisions at national and EU levels.

In an attempt to address the EU's need for highly skilled labor from third countries, the so-called *Blue Card Directive* was adopted in October 2021. It establishes the conditions of entry and residence for highly skilled non-EU nation-

⁵² Dina Moawad, "Does Environmental Change Affect Migration Especially into the EU?" *Social Sciences* 13, no. 3 (2024): 160, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13030160>.

⁵³ See, for example, Manuela Ortega-Gil, Chaima ElHichou-Ahmed, and Antonio Mata-García, "Effects of Immigrants, Health, and Ageing on Economic Growth in the European Union," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 1 (2022): 224, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20010224>.

⁵⁴ Council of the European Union, "Legal Migration: Council Presidency and European Parliament Reach Provisional Agreement on Scheme to Attract Highly Qualified Workers," *Press Release*, May 17, 2021 www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/17/legal-migration-council-presidency-and-european-parliament-reach-provisional-agreement-on-scheme-to-attract-highly-qualified-workers/.

⁵⁵ Eurostat, "How Many Children Were Born in the EU in 2022?" March 7, 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240307-1>.

als coming to live and work in the member states, with a particular focus on sectors experiencing severe shortages of personnel with the required skills,⁵⁶ such as the information and communication technology (ICT) sector.⁵⁷ These new criteria take a more inclusive approach regarding the admission of migrants from third countries by “facilitating intra-EU mobility and family reunification, simplifying procedures for recognized employers, providing a very high level of access to the labor market and widening the scope to include non-EU family members of EU citizens and beneficiaries of international protection.”⁵⁸

The above-mentioned measures seem completely reasonable against the background of the high demand for qualified personnel, particularly in the ICT sector, at both the EU and global levels. However, when placed in the context of significant irregular migration to EU member states, ongoing armed conflicts, and poor socio-economic conditions in many third countries, such measures could be viewed as at least controversial and possibly cynical. In this regard, it should be noted that (1) member states follow, or aim to introduce, restrictive measures against migrants who do not meet the conditions for receiving international protection and who lack qualifications that correspond to labor market demands in the country concerned, and (2) for decades, developing countries—many of which are countries of origin for irregular migration—have suffered from the negative consequences of the so-called “brain drain.” It should also be pointed out that high-skilled immigrants are generally considered easier to integrate economically, socially, and politically, due to their perceived possession of the required language skills and educational qualifications.⁵⁹

If socio-economic, political, and security problems in third countries are largely neglected, and the “brain drain” is encouraged by those who ignore or do not prioritize solving these problems, efforts to manage mixed migrant flows toward the European Union will achieve only partial success. Instead, the instrumentalization of migrants for political and economic gain—by countries of origin

⁵⁶ Council of the European Union, “Legal Migration: Council Adopts Blue Card Directive to Attract Highly-Qualified Workers,” *Press Release*, October 7, 2021, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/07/legal-migration-council-adopts-blue-card-directive-to-attract-highly-qualified-workers/.

⁵⁷ European Parliament & Council of the EU, “Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Conditions of Entry and Residence of Third-Country Nationals for the Purpose of Highly Qualified Employment, and Repealing Council Directive 2009/50/EC,” September 22, 2021, 5, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CONSIL:PE_40_2021_INIT.

⁵⁸ European Parliament & Council of the EU, “Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Conditions of Entry and Residence of Third-Country Nationals for the Purpose of Highly Qualified Employment.”

⁵⁹ Jeroen Doomernik et al., *No Shortcuts: Selective Migration and Integration* (Washington: Transatlantic Academy, 2009), cited in Marc Helbling, Stephan Simon, and Samuel D. Schmid, “Restricting Immigration to Foster Migrant Integration? A Comparative Study Across 22 European Countries,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 13 (2020): 2603-2624, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1727316>.

and transit, as well as by political actors in countries of (final) destination—will persist. A similar conclusion is drawn in Frontex’s 2023–2024 risk analysis report, which notes that future developments in many of the countries of origin and transit, driven by global macroeconomic factors (mainly sustained inflation and global recession), will negatively impact the socio-economic conditions of large segments of the population, ultimately increasing migration flows to Europe.⁶⁰

Although immigration from third countries appears to be one of the possible solutions to the manpower shortage within the European Union,⁶¹ one main challenge comes to the fore – namely, the integration of newcomers, especially low-skilled migrants⁶² and refugees.⁶³ Much attention is usually paid to their economic impact, particularly whether they will boost the local economy and how they will affect the earnings and productivity of both low- and high-skilled workers.⁶⁴ This issue is, in fact, regarded by virtually all stakeholders as a two-way process, with local authorities, civil society, and social partners expected to play an important role in the integration process.⁶⁵ However, this often proves to be a challenging task for several reasons. Apart from cultural and religious factors, which many scholars identify as hindering integration,⁶⁶ there are other aspects where the host government should play a leading role.

One of the most commonly accepted approaches is the implementation of integration programs, which generally encompass language training, cultural ori-

⁶⁰ “Frontex Risk Analysis 2023/2024 Discusses Challenges at EU External Borders,” *News Release*, Frontex, September 4, 2023, <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/frontex-risk-analysis-2023-2024-discusses-challenges-at-eu-external-borders-J6yq05>; Frontex, “Risk Analysis 2023/2024,” Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2819/920282>.

⁶¹ European Commission, “Commission Proposes New Measures on Skills and Talent to Help Address Critical Labour Shortages,” *Press Release*, November 15, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5740.

⁶² See, for example, Riccardo Faini, “Remittances and the Brain Drain: Do More Skilled Migrants Remit More?” *The World Bank Economic Review* 21, no. 2 (2007): 177-191, <https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhm006>.

⁶³ Agnieszka Weinar and Amanda Klekowski von Koppenfels, “The State and the Highly Skilled Immigrant,” in *Highly-Skilled Migration: Between Settlement and Mobility*, IMISCOE Research Series (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 37-77, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-42204-2_3.

⁶⁴ Abdurrahman B. Aydemir, “Skill-Based Immigration, Economic Integration, and Economic Performance,” *IZA World of Labor* 41 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.15185/iza wol.41.v2>.

⁶⁵ Rinus Penninx, “Decentralising Integration Policies: Managing Migration in Cities, Regions and Localities,” *Policy Network Paper* (London: Policy Network, 2009), [http://integratingcities2012.eu/documents/\(2009%20-%20Penninx\)%20Decentralising%20in tegration%20policies.pdf](http://integratingcities2012.eu/documents/(2009%20-%20Penninx)%20Decentralising%20in tegration%20policies.pdf).

⁶⁶ Nancy Foner and Richard Alba, “Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion?” *International Migration Review* 42, no. 2 (2008): 360-392, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2008.00128.x>.

entation, and support in accessing the labor market.⁶⁷ Nowadays, although many immigration policies do affect integration outcomes, they tend to succeed mainly in economic terms.⁶⁸ Moreover, in some countries, such as Bulgaria, there is currently no refugee integration policy, which further complicates the integration of beneficiaries of international protection and negatively affects the local population's perception of newcomers.

In most cases, the financial provision for integration activities depends mainly on state budget allocations. In times of rising political fragmentation and populism, and more recently with increasing defence budgets, this makes it difficult for some countries to implement adequate measures, including the development of qualified personnel. In fact, the provision of sufficient financial resources for addressing mixed migration also includes the accommodation of asylum seekers, not only beneficiaries of international protection.

In addition, spending on migration and border management for the period 2021–2027 is expected to amount to €24.73 billion (in 2018 prices),⁶⁹ compared to €14.47 billion in committed appropriations for security and defense. This imbalance is seen by many as striking. Hence, among political actors and local citizens, there are concerns that such funds are being, or will be, provided at the expense of essential social services for the host population in the European Union, which has been one of the central arguments of those opposing the influx of migrants to Europe over the last decade.

Conclusion

This article shows that although specific measures and tools have been established to counter irregular migration and strengthen the EU's external borders and internal security, notable challenges remain. One of these is the lack of large-scale, reliable data collection on the cross-border manifestations of climate-induced migration, especially in the long term. While this is not surprising given that a single, legally binding term for climate refugees does not exist, the adoption of such a definition is unlikely in the near future – and may even threaten to further divide the European Union and encourage the political instrumentalization of migration.

Moreover, considering that the countries most affected by climate change are often among the least developed or developing countries, it becomes clear that EU member states can do far more to help them alleviate the adverse effects

⁶⁷ Jenny Phillimore, "Refugee-Integration-Opportunity Structures: Shifting the Focus from Refugees to Context," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (June 2021): 1946–1966, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa012>.

⁶⁸ Helbling, Simon, and Schmid, "Restricting Immigration to Foster Migrant Integration?" 2619.

⁶⁹ "Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2024/765 of 29 February 2024 Amending Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 Laying Down the Multiannual Financial Framework for the Years 2021 to 2027," *Official Journal of the European Union* L, February 29, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32024R0765>.

of climate change. This is especially necessary, given that maintaining the status quo will likely lead to greater long-term political, economic, social, and security implications at both the national and EU levels.

Therefore, the primary approach to countering irregular and mixed migration remains addressing the security, economic, and political issues in many countries of origin, as well as in certain transit countries, such as Libya and Tunisia. This also means that the European Union should not only recognize the impact of climate change and its adverse effects on local populations but also work effectively with affected countries to mitigate these risks, including those that trigger irregular migration. Considering the nexus between irregular migration, armed conflict, and climate change, the European Union is expected to play a more active role through both funding and field operations.

It is also worth noting that global approaches to migration remain fragmented, varying depending on context and a range of factors. As a result, the actors involved often address climate-induced migration in isolation, without perceiving it as a political priority.⁷⁰ Hence, much more is needed at both the EU and national levels to advance a common approach to managing irregular migration. Failure to do so will only increase the risk for instrumentalization of migration, with possible negative—if rare—security implications for member states.

Disclaimer

The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Partnership for Peace Consortium, its participating institutions, or any governmental or international organizations affiliated with its governance structure.

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⁷⁰ Helena Hahn and Melanie Fessler, "The EU's Approach to Climate Mobility: Which Way Forward?" *Discussion Paper*, European Policy Centre, October 26, 2023, 11, <https://archive.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-EUs-approach-to-climate-mobility-Which-way-forward~553098>.

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