CHAPTER 1

The Context of Current Migration

INTRODUCTION

Before delving into what a positive peace approach to migration can look like in practice, it is important to outline some of the main features of current migration. This chapter will first look at the complexities of modern migration, before moving on to outline some of the main global and European trends. It will summarise the current legal pathways for migration and, finally, set out the securitisation and racialisation of, as well as the religious discrimination in the current approaches to migration.

Exploring the Complexities of Current Migration

There are many different reasons why people choose to migrate, and research has indicated that the process leading to this decision is complex.

One of the most significant studies that shed light on these complexities is the recent EU supported project MIGNEX and its final report *New Insights on the Causes of Migration*[1]. This five-year research project was based on a mixed-methods study with potential migrants from 26 communities across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

> *The decision to migrate is not just a simple choice—it is shaped by aspirations, risks, family responsibilities, community conditions, and national policies.*

The study concluded that the decision to migrate is a complex process divided into interlinked stages, including the formation of aspirations to migrate as well as planning and preparing for migration. The study highlighted that although many people might wish to migrate, most do not go ahead with it.

It also argued that multiple interlinked factors at the individual (such as perception of and willingness to take risks), family (such as financial responsibility for family), community (such as high levels of unemployment or crime), and national level (such as legal access to other countries) influence the decision to migrate.

It stressed that the same factor can, sometimes, increase migration in some cases and decrease migration in others since its influence is dependent on context and interplay with other factors. For example, the study showed that, for some, receiving social protection support means not needing to migrate, whereas for others, it is a way of financing migration. The study also showed some opposing effects. For example, people who perceived opportunities to earn a living and finance a family as limited were more inclined to migrate unless they lived in very poor communities, preventing them from financing a way out. It also suggests that the decision to migrate is linked with access to infrastructure, such as brokers, legal procedures, transportation opportunities, and migrant networks.

Furthermore, the research highlighted important gender differences in migration numbers, destinations, and ways, partly influenced by gender norms (such as considering it unsafe and/or unacceptable for women to travel on their own) and opportunities (such as employment). Hence, though the desire to migrate may be the same for women and men, external factors might make it easier for men to migrate.

Though **war and unemployment** are often cited in the media as main reasons for migration, research highlights other important factors, such as corruption, lack of trust in institutions, and inadequate public services. For example, it showed that people who live in places affected by widespread corruption are more likely to migrate. **Corruption** can have both direct personal consequences, such as a reduction in personal finances because of money spent on bribes, as well as indirect effects, such as **inadequate infrastructure and services** due to funds being diverted to individuals or powerful groups.

The report also argues that people who are dissatisfied with the quality of education and health services, and/or do **not trust institutions**, such as the police, the judicial system and the military, are more likely to migrate.

An earlier study[2] focusing on the drivers of migration also concluded that migration is a complex phenomenon. It argued that factors on three different levels interact to inform individuals' decisions to migrate.

- At the macro-level, demographic, socio-economic, political and environmental factors contribute to people being forced to migrate, either internally or internationally. These are often factors, such as violent conflict, widespread famine or natural disasters, that individuals have little control over.

- At the middle level, land grabbing, communication technology, and links with the diaspora are all contributing factors to people deciding to migrate. Diasporas and social media depict, and at times overstate, how much better the living conditions are in other countries, encouraging people to migrate.

- Finally, on the micro level, factors such as religion, marital status, education and employment opportunities, and personal attitudes to migration also play a role in the decision to migrate. Like the later study, this study also highlighted that a lack of personal financial resources to finance migration means that many people cannot migrate.

NEZIA'S STORY[3]

I am a Burundi-American humanitarian. I am here because my parents fled two genocides and a war.

There was a genocide in Burundi and my parents left in 1972. They went to Rwanda. It wasn't a decision; it was a choice made for them. In 1994 we left Rwanda because of the Rwandan genocide. Again, it was a choice that was made for us.

Then we went to Zaire, or Democratic Republic of Congo. There was a war in 1996. So we kept fleeing. Our history before the United States was a series of choices made for us. If we wanted to survive, we had to go somewhere else. That's why we ended up here (in the US). We were in a refugee camp for almost six years in Tanzania before we moved here, when I was a teenager, through the resettlement program. Only about 1% of refugees worldwide get to resettle in countries that accept refugees through the resettlement program. Many children still live the same life that I lived as a child. In 2002 my family was resettled as refugees in Baltimore.

These studies show that it is important to remember that each migrant has their own complex interlinked reasons for deciding to migrate. Focusing mainly on one factor, such as war or unemployment, fails to capture this complexity and is often unhelpful. In addition, when discussing migration, it is important to emphasise that, while some push factors might encourage people to migrate, many pull factors also persuade them to stay put. The studies also emphasised that temporary (with an expectation to return home) and short-distance internal or international migration are much more common than long-distance international migration. However the latter often dominates the media and political debates. Therefore, when discussing migration, it is important to emphasise that most people who migrate stay in their own country or move to neighbour countries rather than travelling to countries far away.

This is in stark contrast to the picture that much of the European media, and many politicians, are currently portraying. Current public and policy debates seem to be informed by an assumption that most migrants are trying to get to Europe and the US, leading to unprecedented and uncontrollable levels of migration. This claim is often accompanied by images of overcrowded reception centres, or groups of young men attempting to pierce through heavily-policed fences at the external borders of the EU, the US or via the English Channel. This narrative is underpinned by a sense of fear, crisis and being overwhelmed. However, there is evidence that challenges these assumptions and adds nuances to them.

Global Trends in Current Migration

According to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), there were approximately 281 million international migrants, defined as people living outside their country of origin, equating to 3.6% of the world's population in 2020[4]. That is an increase of only 0.8% since 2000[5]. Additionally, in 2020, Europe hosted 87 million international migrants (12% of the total population), Asia 86 million (1.8% of the total population), and North America 59 million (16% of the total population).[6] Compared to 2000, Asia has had the largest growth in international migrants with an increase of 37 million people, Europe has received 30 million more, and North America 18 million more (Ibid). Thus the number of migrants in Europe and North America is not spinning out of control and Asia is the preferred destination for many migrants. It is also important to keep in mind that several European countries including Ukraine, Poland, the UK, Romania and Germany have sizeable populations of citizens living abroad, thus demonstrating that the movement of people in contemporary European states is not one-directional (Ibid).

Secondly, although more males than females migrate, the difference is not as dramatic as the media often tries to portray. The share of male migrants has only increased by 1.3% between 2000, when the percentage was 50.6%, and 2020, when the percentage was 51.9%. The split between male and female remains fairly equal.

Furthermore, and noteworthily, in 2019, 169 million (69% of international migrants) were international workers. They transferred at least $ 647 billion[7] in remittances to their families and communities in their countries of origin in 2022[8], underlining their importance for local economies. In 2022 the main countries international migrants worked in were the United States ($79 billion in remittances), Saudi Arabia ($39 billion), Switzerland ($31.9 billion) and Germany ($25.6 billion), and they came mainly from India, Mexico, China, the Philippines and Egypt[9]. Therefore, the majority of international migrants are not refugees fleeing their countries, but people who take up jobs abroad helping to grow local economies in their countries of destination and origin.

Current statistics support the notion that the number of forcibly displaced people is increasing, since their total has increased annually over the last 12 years to 117.3 million at the end of 2023. Ten years ago, one in 125 people was displaced, whereas today, that number is one in 69[10]. The increase in 2023 was mainly driven by violence in Myanmar, Sudan and Palestine. In 2023 the number of refugees also rose by 7% to 43.4 million, which means it has more than tripled in the last decade[11]. This included 5.8 million people under UNHCR's international protection, and six million refugees from Palestine under UNRWA's mandate. The rest were people in so-called refugee-like situations.

Despite the widespread perception that most refugees are heading to Europe and the US, 69% remain in neighboring countries, with 75% residing in low- and middle-income nations.

More than half of the refugees came from Afghanistan, Syria, Venezuela and Ukraine. However, 69% of refugees were staying in countries neighbouring their country of origin at the end of 2023.

Countries where refugees stayed by the end of 2023

Other countries
31%

Countries neighbouring their country of origin
69%
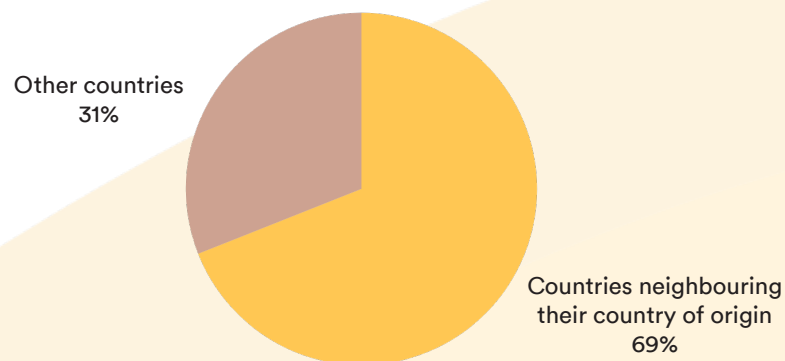
Source: International Organisation of Migration (IOM)

This means that 75% of refugees were living in low or middle-income countries, such as Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, which together hosted about 92% of refugees from African countries.

Countries where refugees stayed by the end of 2023

High income countries
25%

Low or middle income countries
75%
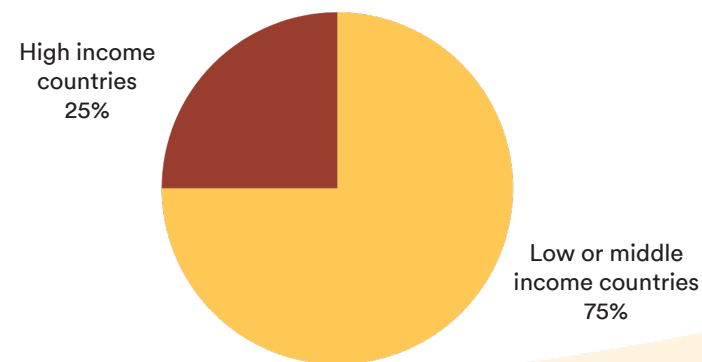
Source: International Organisation of Migration (IOM)

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre's (IDMC) Global Report on Internal Displacement (2024), there were 75.9 million people internally displaced. Internal displacement is defined as having been forced to leave home because of conflict and violence (68.3 million mainly in Sudan, Syria, DRC, Colombia, and Yemen) or disasters (7.7 million mainly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Türkiye and China), but still living within the same nation-state at the end of 2023[12].This was an increase of 51% since 2018[13]. Therefore, though there has been a significant increase in the number of people migrating, most still live either in their country of origin or a neighbouring country. This supports the conclusion of the MIGNEX research project and contradicts the perception that most refugees are heading to Europe and the US.

Moreover, only 8% (158,700) of the people the UNHCR deemed to need resettlement were resettled in third countries in 2023. Even if people, for whatever reason, cannot resettle within their own or neighbouring countries, they are still not allowed to settle in safer places such as Europe or the US.

While it is common for numbers to fluctuate, mirroring levels of conflict in countries of origin, the number of people seeking refuge from armed conflict or violence across international borders does not, at least yet, show any long-term permanent increase[14]. Between 1985 and 2021, the total share of the refugee population was between 7 and 12% of all international migrants, fluctuating between 9 and 21 million people. In other words, international refugee migration increases and decreases as violent conflicts evolve, but global figures of cross-border refugee migration are not accelerating in an unprecedent manner- as is often claimed in the media and in political debates.

Increased connectivity and the use of social media has helped create the impression that levels of warfare and physical violence in the world are at an all-time high. Recent data from the Global Peace Index supports these concerns since they have identified 56 conflicts, the highest number since World War II. 92 countries are implicated in conflicts outside their own borders. There is also a rising number of minor conflicts that might develop into major conflicts without interventions, and 108 countries have become more militarised. However, it is important to keep in mind that the number of conflicts has increased and then decreased again over time. This was evident in wide-ranging studies such as the UCDP-PRIO Armed Conflict Database (1946-2008) which suggested that the number of conflicts had not increased, and conflicts had become less severe in terms of loss of human life during the 62 years covered by the study[15]. Therefore, it is too early to determine whether the current increase in violent conflicts is permanent or whether it will decrease again, as it has done in the past.

Before turning to how migration has been securitised and racialised in recent years, it is important to also focus specifically on the current European context and current regular, safe pathways.

European Trends in Current Migration

According to statistics from the European Commission, there were 448.8 million people living in the European Union (EU) in 2023. 42.4 million of them were born outside the EU, corresponding to 9% of the total population. Out of these, 27.3 million were not yet EU citizens, corresponding to 6%, and about a third (9.93 million) had jobs, equating to 5.1% of the total working population in the EU[16]. In 2022, the EU's net immigration was 4.25 million people since 2.73 million left the EU and 6.98 million arrived. In the same year, 35% of residence permits were granted for family reasons, 20% for work, 4% for education, 15 % for asylum and 26% for other reasons, such as being an unaccompanied minor or a victim of trafficking. The population in the EU is increasing, partly because more people are arriving than leaving.
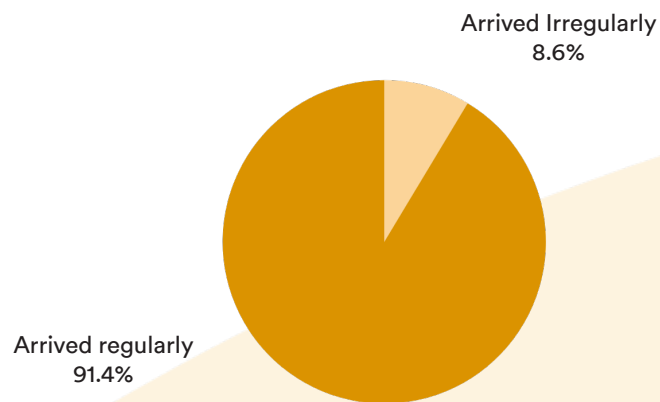
**People living in the EU:
448.8 million inhabitants in 2023**

Born outside the EU (non-citizens)
5.6%

Born outside the EU (citizens)
3.4%
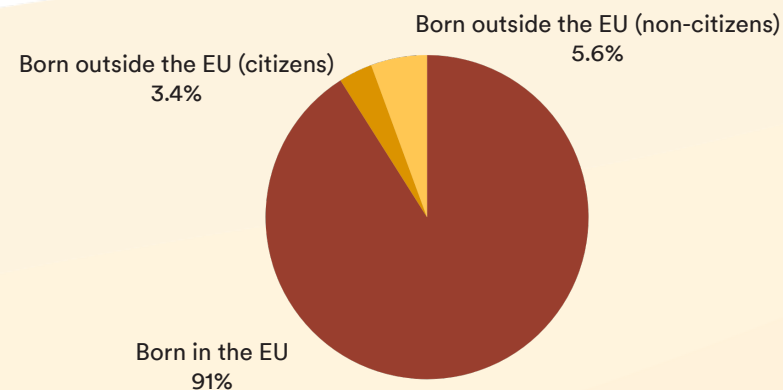
Born in the EU
91%

Source: European Commission

However, the vast majority of people living in the EU were born in the EU. The majority of the relatively small group of people born outside the EU came to the EU to work or to be united with family, and not because they needed asylum. This contradicts the common perception that the EU is full of refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, in 2022, 326,217 migrants arrived irregularly, whereas 3,454,684 migrated legally. Despite the former group receiving a lot of attention in the media, they constitute less than 10% of the people arriving in the EU. It is also worth remembering that many undocumented people in the EU did not arrive through irregular crossings at the EU's external border. Instead, they arrived through regular channels and became undocumented through overstaying their visa or losing their status.

In 2023, 23% of the 1,049,000 first-time asylum applicants in the EU came from Asia, 23% came from Africa, 22% from the Middle East, 17% from Latin America, and 14% from Europe. The number of applications increased by 18% compared to 2022, and 62% compared to 2019. Germany received most of these applications (329,000) followed by Spain (160,500), France (145,100), Italy (130,600) and Greece (57,900). However, it is important to point out that in that same year only 53% of the 673,000 first-instance asylum decisions taken in the EU were positive. 152,000 people received refugee status, 129,700 received subsidiary protection status, and 75,400 obtained humanitarian status.

The number of pending decisions rose by 39%, meaning that 883,000 people were waiting to have their asylum application processed. Additionally, 430,600 non-EU citizens were instructed to leave the EU. This included 5.5 % from Afghanistan and 5% from Syria- countries that were still ravaged by violent conflict. Therefore, when assessing the number of asylum seekers, it is important to take into account the many whose applications are turned down, or who remain in limbo for their application to be processed.

People arriving to the EU:
≈3.8 millions in 2022

Arrived Irregularly
8.6%

Arrived regularly
91.4%

Source: European Commission

First-instance asylum decisions taken in the EU
673,000 decisions in 2022

Positive (Humanitarian status)
11.2%

Negative
47%

Positive (subsidiary protection status)
19.3%

Positive (refugee status)
22.6%
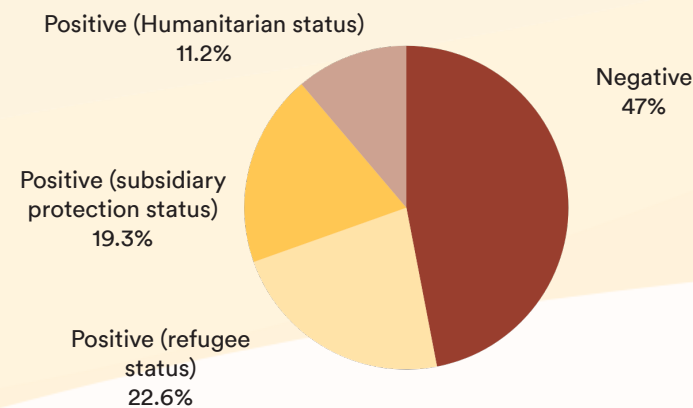
Source: European Commission

Regular Pathways in Current Migration

Regular migration pathways provide migrants with vital alternatives to irregular migration, which is often marked by exploitation, violence, abuse and, in the worst-case scenario, death. Governance frameworks that enable migrants to enter and remain in countries allow them to engage in training, education and employment, while also facilitating integration by providing access to services such as healthcare and language learning. A recent report from the IOM *Migration Governance Insights on Regular Pathways: Delivering on the Promise of Migration*[17] focused on the current state of four regular migration pathways in 100 countries.

The report concluded that, although the number of international students has steadily grown over the last decade to 6 million in 2021, less than 25% of countries included in the report have regulated study opportunities for international students. The report also highlighted that international students face many barriers to admission, including higher tuition fees, quotas on entries and unclear eligibility criteria and application processes. Only 30% of the countries included in the study allowed international students to work during their studies to help them afford their tuition fees and cost of living expenses. Moreover, only 13% of countries allowed international students to work post-graduation.

Secondly, the report showed that, although the number of migrant workers has also increased in recent years, less than 40% of participating countries have established policies and procedures to enable effective labour migration. Again, the report identified many barriers to labour migration, including access restrictions, such as only being allowed to apply for certain jobs, having to be skilled in particular areas and having to earn a high minimum income. The report also showed that many migrant workers face abuse of basic rights, such as the withholding of wages and personal travel documents, as well as poor working conditions.

Thirdly, migration for family reasons has slowly increased during the last decade. Though the right to family life is included in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, family members often face many challenges to being reunited with their migrating relative(s). These challenges include restrictions depending on the migration status of the primary migrant, such as having to be a citizen or permanent resident to qualify for reunification. They also include narrow definitions of what constitutes a qualifying family member, and hard to meet requirements, such as the primary migrant having a significant income or reuniting family members having a relatively high level of language proficiency.

The final group of migrants was people who migrate because of violent conflict or natural disasters. According to the study, only 39% of the countries included have established policies and procedures to allow entry and grant temporary protection to people fleeing violence and disasters. Many of these temporary protection schemes only include migrants from particular countries. Furthermore, even when schemes have been developed, qualifying migrants have faced other obstacles, such as no safe routes out of their country of origin or a lack of legally approved evidence to prove their identity.

I had to go by myself. For safety reasons, I had to travel to the airport alone. When I got there, I saw crowds of people who were trying to leave and get to America, but they likely didn't have the right documents. There was a troop of former Afghan commanders, and I wanted to show them that I had the proper documents to be able to leave. One of the commanders started beating me with his gun. It was so scary. I started running. I kept running and running, even though it was a hot day, and I had a long overcoat on. I was running through a battlefield. There were shots ringing in the air and no one cared who got shot. I was left with no entrance to the airport. This was extremely disappointing. I was also disappointed because I knew I had to be alone. At first, I had received a message saying I could take my family to safety with me, but then the embassy told me that they had been misinformed and I had to be alone. I was nervous for my family because it had also come to my attention that the Taliban might chase people who were related to me, because I was an employee of the embassy.

The toughest decision I ever made came two weeks after the government fell. The embassy communicated to me that there was fast transportation for me to take to get out of Afghanistan, they had made an arrangement with the Taliban. This was a difficult decision. I left my mom and siblings, I left my dreams, my entire life. I left with a group of people, and we were granted access to the airport and transportation which would take us out of Afghanistan. That night when I left, I saw a colleague who had his pregnant wife and two children. We all shared a blanket and slept on the ground. Throughout the night, people were waking up and discussing their families and all the things they had sacrificed and left behind.

The next morning, I flew to Qatar. In Qatar I met a family who knew my brother. They recognized me and asked me to stay with them because they were going to travel to a different military base a few days later. For the next few nights, I felt like I had absolutely no energy. I didn't eat any food, and I was so tired. I then travelled with that same family to a base in Italy. There, I started helping the evacuation committee and the hospital committee. I had never lived in a military camp before, so I tried to keep busy. I was always out, helping in whatever way I could. One night, I stayed up to remind people about their flights and help them figure out where they needed to go. It was a pleasure for me to do that; I just wanted to help people.

This was a really hard time for me, and I felt very depressed.

All in all, regular pathways to safer high-income countries are still unavailable for most migrants, especially those from low-income countries, forcing them instead to travel along dangerous routes to their desired country of destination.

The Securitisation of Migration

The many restrictions on regular migratory pathways result from a growing trend across Europe and the US to perceive migrants, especially from Asia, Africa and South and Central America, as a threat to security. This is known as the securitisation of migration. Migration has become a significant political issue, with the focus more on national security than on humanitarian and human rights issues.

Since the early 2000s, combatting irregular migration has been a core component of the European political agenda, with an emphasis on stopping irregular arrivals at sea and at the external borders. Examples include the EU's agreement with Türkiye in 2016, whereby so-called irregular migrants attempting to get to Greece would be returned to Türkiye, and Türkiye would attempt to stem new migratory routes into the EU.

LINAR'S STORY

We are from the Hazara Province of Daykundi in central Afghanistan. We are Shi'ite. When the Taliban came to our town, they took many of the men and beheaded them. They enslaved women and kidnapped children. We didn't dare leave our house. Under no condition! We didn't dare step out. We lived secretly. We finally fled. We should have left a lot earlier, but we didn't have anything. No money. We withdrew all our savings and sold everything, even my husband's mother's things. Then we borrowed money. We only had enough to get this far, here in Greece. Now we're stuck.

There were twenty of us travelling together. While at the Iran-Turkey border, we crossed a river at night. The water was deep, and it was raining. Then the Turkish patrol caught us. They kept us out in the cold until morning. All our clothes were wet but still they kept us unsheltered in the freezing rain. In the morning, they sent us back to the border again. We were at a lake. The Turkish border guard was hitting us, even our children, to make us cross the water. We were crying and screaming, telling him we would drown there—the children would drown. He pushed an old woman into the water. A couple of the young men rescued her. We screamed and cried so much the Turkish guard finally quit pushing us and left us there alone. A trafficker was watching, but he didn't come to help.

Then Iranian patrols came. They pointed guns at us and told us to return the way we came, which meant back to Turkey. We were stuck between two patrols. Both sides were firing guns. To hide, we went into the tall reeds in the lake and sat in water up to our waists all day long until late at night, until midnight. And it was still raining. We had no food, no good water, nothing.

Securing external borders is one of the four policy pillars of the Pact on Migration and Asylum adopted by the EU in 2024. Stricter border control, pathways to citizenship and the role of migrant workers are also highly polarising issues in current political debates in the US.

The securitisation of migration has reinforced a connection between migration and crime, which has led to the widespread use of enforcement and coercive means to manage migration.

The securitisation of migration has reinforced a connection between migration and crime, which has led to the widespread use of enforcement and coercive means to manage migration. Exacerbated by the War on Terror, with its focus on fear of outsiders and enemies within states, increased migration has been linked with higher levels of serious crimes, such as terrorist attacks. These narratives have led to the progressive scaling up of border enforcement and surveillance capacities at national and European levels, including expanding agencies such as Frontex and Europol. Coercive measures, such as conditionality instruments, are increasingly shaping relationships with third countries, with trade and development agreements becoming laden with requirements to cooperate with migration control and return policies.

The construction of migrants as threats is rooted in a particular state-centred perception of security which understands states as security providers, whose duties are to protect themselves and their citizens from perceived external and internal threats. This perception legitimises measures of control, containment and surveillance of populations, as well as strategies of deterrence based on punishment.

This understanding of security disproportionately impacts sections of the population that are perceived as not belonging to the community in-group: underprivileged groups or ethnic, religious, sexual or racial minorities. People who migrate are among the groups that are made most vulnerable and insecure by policies and measures rooted in hard security approaches. At origin, transit and destination, the criminalisation of mobility fuels violent behaviour and structural violence against people on the move.

The securitisation of migration is based on self-reinforcing claims, mechanisms, practices and narratives. Firstly, securitisation fuels a perception that current levels of migration are unprecedented, unsustainable and accelerating, despite evidence that points to a more stable long-term pattern, with reasonable fluctuations. Then, hostile narratives proliferate, based on notions that society needs to be protected from outer threats. These include migrants being othered and dehumanised.

Finally, narratives inform policies and practices that selectively target and disproportionately impact racialised populations, often irrespective of their migration status[19].

The Racialisation of and Religious Discrimination in Migration

A worrying trend of racialising migrants has also gained traction, branding migrants from poorer and diverse religious and cultural backgrounds in Africa, Asia, and South America as undesirable and white Christian migrants as deserving of protection. This has led to unequal treatment of migrants, in contradiction to international law, including the Refugee Convention. Recent examples include the Temporary Protection Directive that was adopted after Russia invaded Ukraine, granting Ukrainians easy access to protection in other European states. This protection included immediate access to education, the labour market and housing. In many countries, this meant that while the asylum process for people from Asia, Africa and South America often took a very long time, Ukrainian refugees were offered immediate accommodation, access to education, and the right to work.

These rights were offered only to Ukrainian citizens, not to other people, such as international students or people who were in the process of seeking asylum in Ukraine, who were equally affected by the violence. The dominant media narrative suggested that Ukrainian citizens were more important because they were like us in terms of religious and cultural affiliation and, hence, should be welcomed with open arms.

Meanwhile, migrants of colour fleeing violent conflict and personal persecution in many African, Asian and South American countries were not offered any legal and safe escape routes. Some countries, such as Poland and Hungary, have openly declared that they do not want to welcome asylum-seekers who are not Christians because they do not want their countries to become multicultural. Again, this is in direct contradiction to international law, which calls for equal treatment of asylum seekers and refugees regardless of their religious and cultural backgrounds.

The securitisation and racialisation of, and religious discrimination in, current migration policies and discourse have led to some highly questionable practices that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Endnotes

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2   Castelli, F. (2018), 'Drivers of migration: why do people move?' In: *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 25:1.

3   Interview by Jennifer McNeil, *Don't Be Afraid and Don't Let Go. Their Story is Our Story*.

4   IOM (2024). *World Migration Report*. IOM and UN Migration.

5   Migration Data Portal. Total number of international migrants at mid-year 2020.

6   IOM (2024). *World Migration Report*. IOM and UN Migration.

7   The number is likely significantly higher due to lack of accurate data.

8   IOM. Data and Research: Facts and Figures

9   IOM (2024). *World Migration Report*. IOM and UN Migration.

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16   European Commission (2024). Statistics on Migration to Europe.

17   International Organisation for Migration (IOM), (2024). *Migration Governance Insights on Regular Pathways: Delivering on the Promise of Migration*. IOM, Geneva.

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19   Bello, V. (2020). 'The spiralling of the securitisation of migration in the EU: from the management of a 'crisis' to a governance of human mobility?' In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48:6, pp. 1327–1344