



## Chapter 2:

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Challenging the Current Approaches  
to Migration:

Seven Problematic and Harmful Practices





## INTRODUCTION

There are indicators that many of the current practices in the dominant approaches to migration are problematic, unsuitable and some even seriously harmful. This chapter will identify some of the most troublesome practices, but the list is not exhaustive.

### Unsafe Routes

Perhaps the most persuasive argument against the current dominant approaches to migration is that they fail to provide safe pathways for migrants. Instead, migrants are exposed to direct, structural and cultural violence on their transitional journey, in their country of origin, and in their country of destination.

Despite international ambitions to improve migration governance and make it safer, as reflected in the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) framework*, the number of people dying on migration routes is increasing. 2023 was the deadliest year that has been recorded by the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrants Project<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, 8,565 people died worldwide, a 20% increase compared to the previous year. Nevertheless, this number is likely to be significantly higher due to challenges in collecting relevant data. More than half of the people reported dead died by drowning, 9% died in vehicle accidents and 7% died because of physical violence. Crossing the Mediterranean in small boats continued to be the most dangerous route with 3,129 deaths and disappearances. In Africa, 1,866 people died, mainly while crossing the Sahara Desert or attempting to reach the Canary Islands by sea. In Asia, 2,138 mainly Afghan and Rohingya refugees died fleeing violence and persecution in their countries.

### NADINE'S STORY<sup>2</sup>

We left Calais at 2am. The air was cold. There were 18 of us in a tiny dinghy. We were sitting on top of each other, and I was terrified. We asked the smuggler to reduce the number of people on the dinghy, but he didn't listen. The boy driving the boat couldn't have been over 14.

At around 3.30am we saw a red light and the smuggler told us we were in British waters. We called the British coastguard, but were told we were still in international waters and they couldn't help. They sent a helicopter, which flew over us. I took off my hijab and waved it but the helicopter didn't stop.

Then the boat started to deflate. Water began coming in, filling the dinghy. We rapidly went below the waterline. I was swallowing seawater and throwing up. I had water in my nose and ears. In quick succession, four large waves crashed onto us.

It was panic. Everyone was screaming and fighting. The temperature was below zero. The water was freezing. The men started arguing with each other. We were cold and so scared. We called the smuggler to alert the French authorities. One of the two other women on the dinghy called her parents to tell them we were drowning. At first they didn't believe her because the smuggler had told them she had arrived in the UK. Finally, she convinced her parents to call for help. My own dad called the British authorities.

The smugglers don't see us as human beings, only as a source of money. Before my first attempted crossing, they lied to me. They told me it would be easy, that I would be at sea for only four hours. It was all lies, to convince desperate people to pay them.

At 2pm we still had received no help. It had been almost 12 hours since we started sinking, and we were losing hope. For hours I was crying, trying to bail out the dinghy. I can't swim, and I remember thinking, "This is it." I saw my whole life flash before me. I really thought I was going to die.

As we were sinking, three different boats approached us. They all told us they could not help, but took photos. Finally, at around 3pm, a larger tourist ship arrived and threw us ropes so we could clamber aboard. Climbing was difficult, and many of us fell back into the water or the dinghy. I climbed halfway, fell, hit my face and lost consciousness. I was rescued and taken onto the ship, where I was given tea. The people were very nice. We were all taken back to Calais. I don't even know if we all survived that night.

Many migrants also become victims of direct violence. Examples include migrants crossing the Darién Gap on the border between Panama and Colombia. There, armed groups involved in drug trafficking and the violent conflicts in Colombia routinely expose migrants to direct violence such as robbery, extortion and sexual violence<sup>3</sup>. The situation is even worse in places such as Libya, where migrants waiting to cross the Mediterranean Sea are exposed to horrific incidents of direct violence including arbitrary detention, torture and unlawful killings<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, women and people with intersectional identities, such as belonging to ethnic, religious and LGBTQ+ communities, are often disproportionately affected. Current approaches to migration, consisting of inadequate legal migration routes, are doing very little to stop this human suffering. This starkly contrasts with international intentions set out in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is also a form of structural violence since access to safe legal routes is dependent on characteristics such as nationality, and there is unequal access to protection.

## PAT'S STORY<sup>5</sup>

I went to Kano and paid money to smugglers to take me across the Sahara Desert in Libya, to the seashore, where I could take a boat to Italy. In Kano, so many people were loaded into each Hilux [open-bed truck] that we almost could not breathe. Some people died. While crossing the desert, one boy died—he bled blood, bled blood and died.

At one place during our journey, we found water in a rock. We drank the water and ate some leaves. I saw people before me dying. I didn't want to die out there. Dead bodies because we had no water, no food to eat. We came to a wet place in the desert, and we drank the water even though there was a dead body beside it and it was smelling. We drank the water, anyway, because if we didn't we would die.

After the long journey across the desert in Libya, we finally got close to the seashore. But they didn't want us to get on boats to go to Italy. Instead a man brought a car to take a few of us to another place. But they wouldn't let us sit on the seats. He put me in the boot [trunk] but then he went away. I was in the boot for more than an hour. I was crying and shouting. I yelled, "Someone is in the boot! Someone is in the boot!" But the man was gone.

I was crying and sweating all over my body. I said, "God, make it so someone can open this boot." Immediately, God calmed me and a man came and broke the back glass. He said, "Come out." I gave thanks to God that I didn't die.

Then they took three of us to a very big place with big gates. When we went inside, a man and a woman gave the man who brought us there some money. We saw crying children and women who were pregnant. We saw more than five hundred, more than one thousand in a big hall. We slept four people in each small bed on the floor. We had to lie on our sides, back-to-stomach, to fit everyone on the bed. We could not turn. In the morning they would flog us, then give us the food and a little water.

I stayed in that prison for eight months. They say it is not a prison—no police there, no uniforms—bad men run the place. Women gave birth there; they were suffering. And small, small children! I didn't cry for myself, but I cried for those children and newborn babies.

## Attempts to Discourage Irregular Migration

An essential part of current approaches to migration is trying to dissuade potential migrants from leaving their country of origin through so-called deterrence campaigns. Since 2015, the EU has spent more than € 23 million on nearly 130 deterrence campaigns. The campaigns, at times paid for by individual states, have focused on three key messages:

1. Migrating is too dangerous;
2. Life as a migrant in Europe is not easy; and
3. There are opportunities in the countries of origin<sup>6</sup>.

Examples include Migrants as Messengers, a Dutch government-funded campaign, targeting potential migrants from West Africa. In this campaign, returned migrants shared personal accounts of their experiences through social media and messaging platforms, enabling potential migrants with firsthand insights to make informed migration decisions<sup>7</sup>. An evaluation of Migrants as Messengers found that though young people became more informed, they were not discouraged from migrating<sup>8</sup>. A recent study in The Gambia also showed that local people were aware of the dangers of migrating and life's challenges in Europe. However, they still decided to go because it was better than their current life circumstances<sup>9</sup>. In addition, a recent article that reviewed the assessments of these campaigns concluded: 'it is possible that information campaigns only serve to give European leaders the feeling that they are acting to prevent the tragedies that result from their own policies'<sup>10</sup>. A lot of money has been wasted on campaigns that have not had the desired effect at all. As they only target potential migrants from certain poorer countries based on prejudices and generalisations about their lack of knowledge and skills connected to their nationality, they are based on cultural violence. Meanwhile, migrants from other European countries can freely move to another European country solely based on their nationality, irrespective of the knowledge and skills they bring.

## Border Walls and Fences

The number of border walls around the world has grown drastically in recent decades, from six in 1989 to 74 in 2022<sup>11</sup>. Internal EU/Schengen border walls have increased from zero to 19, built by 12 different countries. The process was initiated by Spain, who built walls around their enclaves Ceuta and Melilla in Morocco, in the early 1990s. Within the last decade walls and fences have been built on the EU/Schengen's external borders, especially with Russia and Belarus. Examples include Lithuania's 502 km long wall on the border with Belarus, and Estonia's steel fence on the border with Russia. Currently, more than 10% of the EU's external borders now have a wall or a fence, with more being constructed and planned. Countries such as Austria, Hungary and Slovenia have also constructed walls and fences on their borders with other EU/Schengen countries.

Official reasons for building border walls or fences and using military personnel include addressing territorial disputes, tackling terrorism, and preventing migration, smuggling and trafficking. However, research indicates that the costs often outstrip the benefits because fences and walls are costly to construct and they hinder local cooperation, trade and mobility<sup>12</sup>. The latter usually leads to more people migrating because people who work on the other side of a border are forced to move with their families when they can no longer freely cross the border for work.

A study from 2022 carried out by the Migration Policy Institute also contended that rather than limiting goods and people crossing the border, walls and fences merely reroute them to other access points<sup>13</sup>. This can also lead to increased organised crime and the profits of people smugglers. The study concluded that improved opportunities for legal migration are more effective than building walls and fences in addressing irregular border crossings.

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Examples of how border walls and fences expose migrants to violence include the use of razor wire and electrified fencing, which cause serious injury and, in some cases, bleeding to death<sup>14</sup>. The border walls and fences are also linked to structural and cultural violence, using characteristics such as nationality, prejudices and generalisations connected to these nationalities to determine who deserves and who does not deserve safe and free access to countries in the Western world.

## Pushbacks and Pullbacks

Studies have shown that **pushbacks**, the practice where border guards push migrants back across the border, are not only illegal but also inhumane<sup>15</sup>. Their illegality derives from international law guaranteeing the right to an individual assessment of human rights protection needs through an asylum process, regardless of how people have arrived. In some cases, people are pushed back to countries where their lives and freedoms are threatened, such as Belarus for example. This practice violates the principle of non-refoulement, a critical protection standard under international human rights law.

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**Pullbacks** have the same aim as pushbacks, namely, to prevent migrants from staying in a country. However, rather than pushing migrants back across borders, pullbacks hinder migrants from crossing the border in the first place. Pullbacks and pushbacks at sea are currently happening in areas such as the Eastern Mediterranean, where actors such as Frontex and the Cypriot, as well as Greek and Italian coast guards, are preventing migrant boats from reaching their shores. Their practices include closing harbours to migrant ships, refusing to rescue migrants from overcrowded and unsuitable boats in danger of sinking, and intercepting and disabling boats or towing overcrowded migrant boats at high-speed<sup>16</sup>. These practices have led to numerous tragedies, including the sinking of the *Adriana* in June 2023 in the presence of the Greek coast guard, killing more than 600 migrants.

Police officers and guards on the borders of countries such as Poland, Croatia, Lithuania, Hungary and Bulgaria are trying to hinder migrants from entering their territory by, often violently, pushing them back to the countries they are trying to escape from or preventing them from entering. Migrants exposed to pushbacks and pullbacks have reported experiencing violence such as shootings and beatings, and being held in overcrowded vans and camps without food nor water before being forced back across borders<sup>17</sup>. Again, some migrants, including women, are disproportionately affected because of intersectional identities. More alarmingly, many politicians across Europe either openly support these violent practices or do nothing to stop them, thereby further endangering migrants' lives.

There are currently no conclusive datasets or media reports that show that being pushed back across a border or prevented from crossing a border makes migrants return to their country of origin. Instead, individual accounts suggest that migrants continue to attempt to cross borders until they succeed. Keeping in mind that the danger of migration does not deter migrants from setting off in the first place, it is difficult to see what such pullbacks and pushbacks achieve other than further human suffering. Like border walls and fences, pushbacks and pullbacks are connected to structural and cultural violence since they disproportionately target migrants with particular personal characteristics, such as religion, nationality and skin colour.

## Lengthy and Inhumane Application Processes

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Other noteworthy harmful practices are the very lengthy asylum application processes encountered in many countries and the ways people are detained while waiting for their fate to be decided.

As an example, a report developed by the British Refugee Council revealed a considerable increase in the number of asylum-seekers waiting more than a year for even an initial decision, with some waiting more than five years<sup>18</sup>. The report noted the **detrimental effect this lengthy process** has on the employment and integration prospects of asylum-seekers, as well as the impact on their wellbeing and mental health, leading some to self-harm or even suicide. The situation is often worse for those whose asylum application has been rejected but who cannot be deported because they have nowhere safe to go, leaving them in prolonged uncertainty.

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People are often kept in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation while their application is being processed. For example, in Denmark, centres serve different purposes, meaning that people have to move between them, often with very short notice depending on whether they have just arrived, are waiting for their case to be looked at, or are waiting to be deported<sup>19</sup>. Asylum seekers have to stay in these designated centres, which are located in remote rural areas.

This, combined with the very low daily allowance asylum seekers receive, makes it very difficult for them to connect with Danish citizens or gain access to essential resources, such as counselling services.

Conditions are often overcrowded. Many asylum seekers have significant traumas and mental health issues which are not addressed. The inability to work, the lack of meaningful and engaging activities, and the uncertainty about their future contribute to making life unnecessarily challenging for asylum-seekers.

These application processes demonstrate a stark contrast to the ways refugees from Ukraine have been welcomed since Russia's invasion. Indeed, Ukrainians have been offered temporary protection based on their nationality and granted the immediate right to work, housing and education. These differences indicate that the current application process is based on cultural and structural violence, granting people with certain personal characteristics immediate access while leaving others to go through lengthy and traumatic application processes.

## Sending Irregular Migrants to Third Countries for Processing

Several European countries, including Denmark, Italy and the United Kingdom, have threatened to send asylum-seekers to third countries, such as Rwanda, to process their application and potentially resettle them.

**Outsourcing responsibilities** to countries, mostly low-income countries, is becoming a very worrying aspect of migration governance. Not only does this practice shift responsibility to less wealthy countries, but it also fails to adequately consider the rights of migrants and the root causes of migration.

For example, Denmark has recently passed a law allowing such practice. Although no one has been deported yet under this law, it remains high on the political agenda. Similarly, despite opposition from the House of Lords and the Supreme Court, the British government passed a bill enabling the expulsion of people arriving irregularly across the English Channel from transit countries considered safe to a third country where their asylum claims will be processed. In 2024, the United Kingdom (UK) government made an agreement with Rwanda to accept such people even though they had no connection with the country. Moreover, this law also banned exiles from ever applying for asylum in the UK again. It was seen as a key part of the previous Conservative government's plan to stop people from entering the UK irregularly via the English Channel. However, only one failed asylum-seeker was sent to Rwanda under a voluntary scheme, and the new Labour government has decided to scrap the scheme. In their opinion, it is too expensive and unlikely to work as a deterrent because of the small percentage of people likely to be deported.

Italy has also attempted to deport non-vulnerable male asylum seekers arriving from transit countries considered safe to Albanian centres. Under the scheme, their applications will be reviewed under Italian law via video consultations to courtrooms in Rome. Men considered vulnerable because of illness or having been tortured, women, children and older people will continue to have their cases processed in Italy, and families will not be separated. The scheme is currently facing opposition from the Italian legal system but it is still on the political agenda.



Worryingly, the idea of outsourcing different responsibilities related to migration is spreading across Europe. The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has shown an interest in developing similar schemes for the EU. She is also exploring the establishment of return centres outside Europe where rejected asylum-seekers can be sent if they cannot be returned to their country of origin.

The United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other human rights organisations have raised serious concerns about these schemes, arguing that they set a dangerous precedent and that their legality is highly questionable. The impact of these, and other future similar schemes, is not yet known. However, it is important to highlight that these schemes are dependent on the cooperation of countries outside Europe which are willing to receive the many people who will not be allowed to remain in Europe. It is also essential to emphasise that these schemes are based on cultural and structural violence, providing **unequal access** to Europe based on generalising assumptions about large groups of people.

## Enforcing the Return of Irregular Migrants

Another important part of current approaches to migration is the attempt to force unwanted migrants to travel back to their countries of origin. This is not always an easy process. Once it has been determined that a migrant should be returned to their country of origin, this decision has to be implemented. In many cases, migrants do not have the right travel documents which means that their country of origin first has to identify them as one of their citizens, and then issue new travel documentation. The country of origin also has to allow flights carrying returning migrants to land on their territory. Hence, the successful return of migrants is dependent on the cooperation of the countries of origin.

Recent research has indicated that cooperating to receive expelled migrants is likely to be unpopular in countries of origin because local populations also rely on the money migrants can earn abroad<sup>20</sup>. Families and communities might have paid for the migrant's travel expenses in exchange for a cut of their salary. Therefore, they may not want their government to accept their untimely return. In many cases, the remittance that migrants send back are what sustain the families' and communities' livelihoods. Considering the circular link between poverty and violent conflict where poverty can act as a catalyst for violent conflict which then leads to further poverty and further direct violence, returning migrants into poor communities might lead to increased migration if peace is endangered.

The challenges of forcefully returning migrants are reflected in the relatively low number of migrants that nation-states manage to return. In 2022, countries in the EU issued 422,400 decisions to return migrants but only managed to return 96,795 migrants to their countries of origin outside the EU- 53% of which were involuntary<sup>21</sup>. This **highlights the failure of the current approach**.

With so many indications that the current approaches to migration are flawed, a new vision and framework for migration worldwide is called for, as laid out in this handbook.



# Endnotes

- 1 IOM (2024). 'Deadliest Year on Record for Migrants with Nearly 8,600 Deaths in 2023.' 6 March 2024.
- 2 *Migrant Voice Speaking for Ourselves*. A year ago, I crossed the Channel in a dinghy. Three days later, 32 people died trying to do the same.
- 3 Human Rights Watch (2023). 'This Hell Was My Only Option; Abuses Against Migrants and Asylum Seekers Pushed to Cross the Darién Gap.' 9 November 2023.
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- 6 Chini, M. (2024). 'A highly inefficient policy: Migration and deportation myths debunked'. In *The Brussels Times*, 20 September 2024.
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- 18 <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/latest/news/thousands-seeking-asylum-face-cruel-wait-of-years-for-asylum-decision-fresh-research-show>
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