

Europe's Migration and Refugee Crisis

September 4, 2015 (IF10259)



-|

-|

Kristin Archick (karchick@crs.loc.gov, 7-2668)

Rhoda Margesson (rmargesson@crs.loc.gov, 7-0425)

Mixed Migration to Europe

Europe is experiencing what many consider to be its worst migration and refugee crisis since World War II, as people flee conflict and poverty in neighboring regions. Many are from the Middle East and Africa; others come from Ukraine, as well as Kosovo and elsewhere in the Western Balkans. Experts have characterized the influxes as mixed migration, defined as flows of different groups of people—such as economic migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, trafficked persons, and unaccompanied children—who travel the same routes and use the same modes of transportation (see text box). Sometimes termed irregular migrants, these individuals do not have the required documentation, such as passports and visas, and may use smugglers and unauthorized border crossings.

Mixed migration flows may include groups such as:

Economic migrants, who are largely trying to escape poverty and seek a better life. They do this legally or illegally, for the long term or temporarily. In theory, they would receive the protection of their government should they return home.

Refugees, who have fled their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social or political group. Refugees are unwilling or unable to avail themselves of the protection of their home government due to fears of persecution. Once granted refugee status, a person has certain legal rights and protections under international law.

Asylum-seekers, who flee their home country and seek sanctuary in another state where they apply for asylum, i.e., the right to be recognized as a refugee. They may receive legal protection and assistance while their formal status is determined.

Stateless persons, who are not considered to be citizens of any state under national laws.

There are numerous mixed migration routes into Europe, both over land and by sea. As seen in [Figure 1](#), several routes cross the western, central, and eastern Mediterranean Sea. Greece and Italy (including Sicily and Lampedusa) are major points of arrival and transit. Land routes into Europe include those via Turkey and the Balkans, and along borders in the east with Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia. Many migrants and refugees are eager to reach European countries that belong to the Schengen area of free movement, which allows individuals to travel without passport checks among 26 participating states. Some hope to travel onward to northern European countries, such as Germany and Sweden, where they believe they are more likely to receive asylum and better welfare benefits. Others travel to northern France with the goal of crossing the English Channel to reach the United Kingdom, an attractive destination for those with English language skills.

Figure 1. Main Mediterranean Sea Migration Routes



Source: Graphic created by CRS, based on information from "Everything You Want to Know About Migration Across the Mediterranean," *The Economist*, May 4, 2015.

As humanitarian and protection concerns mount, European governments have been challenged to cope with the surge of migrants and refugees, and the 28-member European Union (EU) has come under criticism for lacking coherent and effective migration and asylum policies. The lines of distinction between groups in the mixed migration flows have raised questions about determination of status and protection required. A key policy consideration is whether the movement is voluntary or forced. While some migrants may choose to leave their place of origin in search of a better life, refugees and other vulnerable populations are often forced to do so because of war, ethnic strife, human rights violations, or natural disasters, among other reasons. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has asserted that two-thirds of those arriving in Europe are from refugee-producing countries. European governments argue that at least some individuals entering irregularly (especially from the Western Balkans and some African countries) are economic migrants.

Increasing Numbers and Fatalities

Until early 2015, the majority of migrants and refugees attempting to enter Europe were crossing the Mediterranean Sea using the central route in the Strait of Sicily. Increasingly in 2015, however, more have been using the eastern Mediterranean route to Greece and the Western Balkans land route. As of July 2015, Frontex—the EU's borders management agency—had detected over 325,000 irregular border crossings from these three major routes (compared to 265,000 in 2014). UNHCR estimates that over 300,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean so far this year, up from nearly 219,000 in all of 2014.

With the war in Syria in its fifth year, and with over 4 million refugees in neighboring countries, more Syrians have been leaving for Europe. Thus far in 2015, Syrians are the largest group by nationality crossing the Mediterranean, followed by Afghans, Eritreans, and Somalis. Other migrants and refugees originate from Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, and elsewhere in Africa. Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis have also reportedly tried to reach Greece and Bulgaria over land via Turkey.

Over the last few months, a growing number of migrants and refugees arriving in Greece (either by sea or land) have subsequently attempted to cross the Western Balkans into Hungary. Others from Kosovo, Bosnia, and Albania have also been seeking to reach the Schengen area via Hungary. In an effort to stop such influxes, Hungary is building a controversial 110-mile fence along its border with Serbia. Nevertheless, more than 2,000 migrants and refugees have been crossing into Hungary from Serbia every day.

As flows of migrants and refugees have increased, so have fatalities. Most deaths occur in the Mediterranean. According to UNHCR, while approximately 600 people perished at sea in 2013, an estimated 3,500 died in 2014. Of the roughly

2,500 dead or missing thus far in 2015, over 1,000 perished in two shipwrecks within the span of a week in April 2015. Concerns are also growing about possible fatalities on land, highlighted by the discovery in late August 2015 of 71 bodies in an abandoned truck in Austria. Authorities believe the truck was operated by human smugglers and had crossed into Austria from Hungary.

Growing Asylum Claims

The number of individuals seeking asylum in the EU has been increasing steadily. According to EU statistics, asylum applications have grown from 431,000 in 2013 to almost 626,000 in 2014. News reports indicate that during the first seven months of 2015, almost 438,000 people applied for asylum in the EU. Some 80% of asylum claims in the first quarter of 2015 were concentrated in five EU countries: Germany (40%), Hungary (18%), Italy (8%), France (8%), and Sweden (6%). Key countries of origin included Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Kosovo, and Iraq. While an average of 75% of Syrians and Eritreans qualify for asylum in the EU, the majority of asylum-seekers from Kosovo and other countries in the Western Balkans are rejected.

Under the "Dublin regulation," which governs the processing of asylum applications in the EU, the first EU member state an asylum-seeker enters is usually responsible for examining that individual's application. If an asylum-seeker travels to another member state, he or she may be transferred back to the member state of arrival. The recent surge in migrants and refugees to Europe has generated frictions between "frontline" states, which argue that they are overburdened, and other EU countries, which charge that some "frontline" authorities are not properly processing asylum applications and essentially allowing individuals to leave and seek asylum elsewhere in the EU.

EU Responses and Challenges

For many years, the EU has sought to develop a common immigration and asylum policy, but progress has been slow because of national sovereignty concerns and sensitivities about minorities, integration, and identity. As a result, policies continue to vary widely across the EU. While Germany and Sweden have accepted tens of thousands of refugees, other EU member states have been less welcoming. Financial difficulties in some EU countries, including Italy and Greece, and the growing popularity of anti-immigrant political parties throughout Europe have also constrained the responses of some European governments to the ongoing crisis.

The rising death toll in the Mediterranean in early 2015 prompted a raft of new EU initiatives. Priority was placed on saving lives. In April, the EU tripled funding and assets for two patrol operations in the Mediterranean, which have been credited with helping to decrease fatalities to some degree. The EU also announced measures to stop human smugglers and protect refugees and asylum-seekers. Some proposals, however, produced considerable divisions. Several EU governments objected to a mandatory distribution scheme to relocate 40,000 Syrian and Eritrean asylum-seekers from Italy and Greece, and to resettle 20,000 refugees, throughout the EU. A voluntary program was agreed upon, but not all EU members will participate.

As the crisis has deepened over the summer, the EU continues to struggle with burden-sharing, maintaining security, and protecting human rights. EU leaders will hold an emergency meeting in mid-September; observers expect they will reevaluate the Dublin regulation (Germany has already announced that it will not apply the rule to Syrians), identify countries of origin deemed "safe" for repatriation (particularly in Africa and the Balkans), and move forward with setting up EU-funded reception centers in "frontline" member states. Some in the EU appear to support establishing asylum-processing centers in Africa and the Middle East, but others worry about creating additional "pull" factors. Germany, France, and Italy have called again for a redistribution system—in which each EU country would accept a certain number of asylum-seekers—but this remains extremely controversial. Experts suggest that without more coordinated EU policies, the crisis could threaten the Schengen system should countries seek to re-impose systematic border controls; some have already stepped up security and instituted temporary border checks.

U.S. Concerns

U.S. officials view the crisis in Europe as a potential threat to the region's security and stability. U.S. and EU policymakers have agreed to expand dialogue on mixed migration and voluntary resettlement programs (especially in response to the Syrian crisis), and on possible joint initiatives to increase protections to persons most in need. Some

U.S. officials also worry that Islamist terrorists could enter Europe as part of the migrant and refugee flows.