

ANNUAL REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Europe

January - December 2021

OVERVIEW

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) documented more than 3,400 deaths on migration routes to and within Europe in 2021, the highest number of recorded fatalities in any year since 2016. This is due in large part to the increase in the number of lives lost on sea routes to Europe compared to prior years, particularly on the Central Mediterranean route, with more than 1,500 deaths and disappearances documented in 2021, and on the Western Africa-Atlantic route to the Spanish Canary Islands, with more than 1,100 deaths documented. 2021 was also marked by increases in deaths on many other European routes compared to prior years, notably on the Turkey-Greece land border, the English Channel crossing, at Belarus-European Union (EU) borders and on the Western Balkans route.

This trend is concerning because it marks a continuation of the mass loss of life on migration routes that are taken when no safe, legal alternative routes are available. Beyond this, available data are likely an undercount of the true death toll, as disappearances at sea are highly likely to go undocumented, particularly with many cases of 'invisible shipwrecks' in which entire boats go missing without a trace. For example, the NGO Caminando Fronteras estimated that more than 95 per cent of fatalities on the sea route to the Canary Islands were people whose remains were never recovered, including at least 83 vessels who disappeared with no survivors in 2021.¹

This briefing provides an overview of deaths recorded by MMP during transit to and within Europe in 2021, as well as a discussion of the many caveats that come with documenting an underexposed issue such as missing migrants. It should be noted, however, that MMP data only partially reflect the magnitude of the tens of thousands of lives lost needlessly on migrant routes in Europe and worldwide. As discussed in the conclusion of this briefing, it is imperative for all relevant actors to come together in a meaningful action to address this ongoing crisis by improving documentation of these tragic deaths and disappearances and taking effective measures to prevent their occurrence and save lives.

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT TO EUROPE

"[The people in distress] ask us, 'OK, so when is the rescue coming?' And we have to say, 'Sorry, we don't know, we can't tell you, because there is nobody reacting... So we have to find ways to tell them on one side the truth, and on the other hand we have to somehow support them to survive these hours until any rescue shows up. It makes us angry and desperate.'" – Deanna Dadusc, Alarm Phone volunteer via [Middle East Eye](#).

Sea routes to Europe

MMP documented more than 3,200 deaths on sea routes to Europe in 2021, more than any year in IOM's records since 2016, when attempted crossings were far higher than in recent years² (see figure 1).

This report is authored by Julia Black, Project Officer at IOM's Missing Migrants Project.

¹ See Caminando Fronteras, 2021. [Monitoring the right to life on the Euro-African Western Border, year 2021](#).

² Attempted crossings figures may include individuals who attempt to cross multiple times, a factor which is most frequently

Though the reasons for this cannot be attributed to any single factor, it is notable that an increasing proportion of people who attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea are intercepted by non-European actors,³ particularly Libyan authorities. Interceptions⁴ by these actors are of particular concern as there are widespread reports that not only are these interceptions sometimes conducted in an unsafe manner,⁵ but also as migrants are detained in inhumane conditions after being returned to shore.⁶

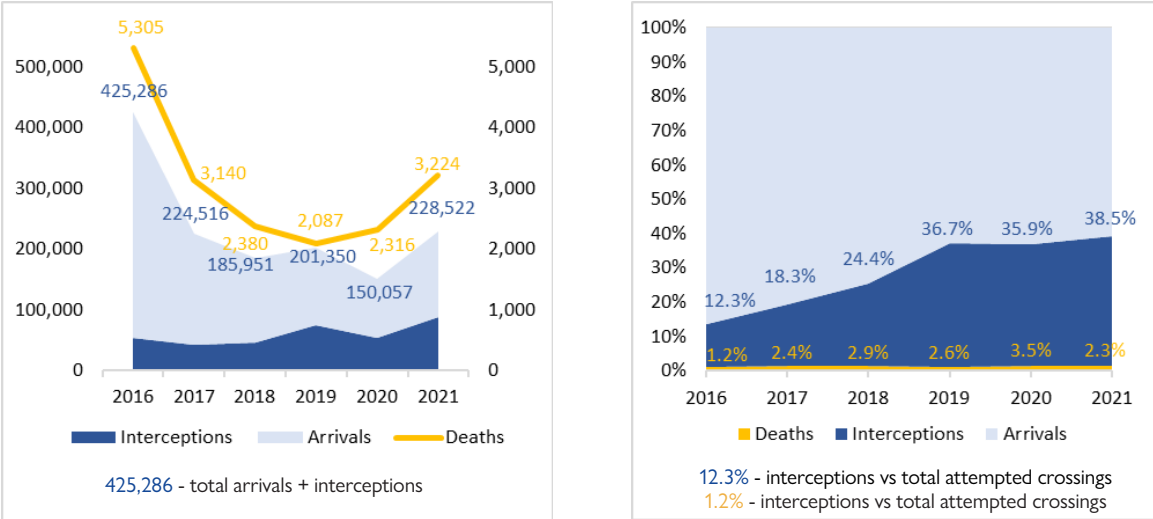


Figure 1: Attempted crossings of sea routes to Europe, by number and proportion of interceptions by non-European actors

Note: Attempted crossings include the minimum estimated number of people who died or disappeared; the number of people rescued and intercepted at sea by Turkish, Libyan, Tunisian and Algerian authorities during out-migration attempts by boat; and the number of people who arrived irregularly by sea in Spain, Italy, Malta, Greece and Cyprus. Notably, data on interceptions by Moroccan and Western African authorities are not available.

Source: IOM’s Missing Migrants Project (deaths); Turkish Coast Guard, IOM Libya, Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES) and Algerian Ministry of Defense (interceptions); Spanish Ministry of the Interior, Italian Ministry of the Interior, Hellenic Coast Guard, IOM Cyprus, IOM Malta via IOM’s Europe Displacement Tracking Matrix (arrivals). All data as of 4 April 2022.

The proportion of deaths compared to total attempted crossings in 2021 was lower than in most prior years, with some exceptions. In the Central Mediterranean, more than 1,550 deaths were documented by MMP, more than in any year since 2017. More than 96 per cent of all lives lost on the Central Mediterranean in 2021 were documented off the coast of North Africa.⁷ Of the less than four per cent people whose deaths were documented off the coast of European countries, these included 56 people who died off the coast of Italy – 45 of whose remains were never recovered – and three disappearances at sea in the Maltese Search and Rescue (SAR) zone. The nationality of 55 of 59 people (93%) who died off the coast of Europe in the Central Mediterranean crossing in 2021 could not be established, meaning that their identities likely

documented with people attempting to leave Libya and Tunisia.

³ It should be noted that several North African and Turkish actors operating in the Mediterranean receive funding from the EU and EU Member States. See e.g. European Parliament, [EU funding for the Libyan Coast Guard](#), 16 December 2021; [Use of European funded ship by Turkey to ram a Greek vessel](#), 4 April 2021.

⁴ An interception is any measure applied by a State, either at its land or sea borders, or on the high seas, territorial waters or borders of another State, to: (i) prevent embarkation of persons on an international journey; (ii) prevent further onward international travel by persons who have commenced their journey; or (iii) assert control of vessels where there are reasonable grounds to believe the vessel is transporting persons contrary to international or national maritime law ([IOM Glossary on Migration](#), 2019). The figures on interceptions presented in this briefing include rescues at sea performed by non-European actors as the available data do not distinguish between interception and rescue.

⁵ One case in 2021 involved a death due to violence at the hands of North African authorities verified by IOM; see case no. 2021.MMP00872 in Missing Migrants Project dataset.

⁶ See e.g. press release 9 October 2021, [IOM Condemns Killing of Six Migrants at Detention Centre in Tripoli](#).

⁷ A detailed analysis of deaths off the North African coast can be found in Missing Migrants Project’s [2021 Middle East and North Africa briefing](#).

remain unknown. This is a lower rate of identification than those individuals recorded off the coast of North Africa, where 1,074 of 1,494 individuals (72%) who died on the Central Mediterranean route in 2021 listed with an unknown country of origin. In total, more than 11,000 people who lost their lives on the Central Mediterranean route between 2014 and 2021 are listed without any information on country of origin, a key identifying detail which indicates the unresolved loss of countless families searching for missing relatives lost en route to Europe.

On other Mediterranean routes far fewer deaths were recorded, though these losses are no less impactful for the many families left behind. On the Western Mediterranean route, more than 380 deaths were documented in 2021, a death toll slightly higher than the 343 documented in 2020, but lower than the prior two years during which more than 500 lives were lost each year. On the Eastern Mediterranean route, more than 110 deaths were recorded, similar to the death toll of 106 recorded in 2020.

On the Western Africa-Atlantic route (WAAR) to the Spanish Canary Islands, more than 1,110 lives are known to be lost in 2021, with some NGOs estimating far more disappearances at sea that could not be verified by MMP. This is a continuation of a trend of increasing deaths seen on this route since 2020, when more than 875 deaths were recorded, compared to just over 200 in 2019 and 43 in 2018. In 2021, at least 319 lives were lost close to the Spanish territory, which included at least 229 people whose remains were never recovered.⁸ Compared to the 23,425 people whose irregular arrival by sea to the Canary Islands was reported by Spanish authorities, it is estimated that at least one person dies for every 20 who arrive. However, many more disappearances likely remain undocumented due to widespread reports of ‘invisible shipwrecks’ on this route, which often takes days or even weeks to traverse. For example, the NGO Caminando Fronteras, which receives requests from people in distress at sea as well as families searching for lost loved ones, reported more than 4,000 deaths and disappearances on the WAAR in 2021, including more than 80 ‘invisible shipwrecks’.⁹

Turkey-Europe Land Route

While deaths on sea routes comprise the largest death toll in MMP records on European routes, more than 55 deaths were documented at the Turkey-Greece land border in 2021, including 49 on the Turkish side of the border. At least 17 of these deaths were related to alleged forced expulsions by the authorities (“pushbacks”) in 2021, according to reports from survivors. These included at least three Afghan and three Syrian nationals, and another eight cases in which the identity of the person was never determined.

DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT WITHIN EUROPE

MMP documented 132 deaths on migration routes within European territory in 2021, though here—as in most of the rest of the world—there are few official sources regularly reporting complete data on cases of deaths during migration.

English Channel crossing

45 deaths were recorded on English Channel crossing, including one shipwreck on 11 November from which the remains of 27 people were eventually recovered. Of those who lost their lives attempting to reach the United Kingdom on this route, 16 people were from Iraq and another five were from Afghanistan, though smaller numbers of people from across multiple regions in Africa and Asia were also documented.

However, like all overseas crossings, more people have likely gone missing in the Channel than currently recorded due to the challenges of estimating missing persons in a shipwreck involving boats with no logs of people onboard. Multiple reports from 2021 had conflicting information on the number of missing persons

⁸ A detailed analysis of WAAR deaths off the North African coast in 2021 can be found in Missing Migrants Project’s [2021 Middle East and North Africa briefing](#) and off the coast of Western Africa in the [2021 West and Central Africa briefing](#).

⁹ See Caminando Fronteras, 2021. [Monitoring the right to life on the Euro-African Western Border, year 2021](#).

in the same shipwreck,¹⁰ and, as on all overseas irregular routes, it may be that small shipwrecks which occur without any distress call being placed went entirely undocumented.

Belarus-EU border

MMP recorded deaths at Belarusian borders for the first time in 2021, with 21 deaths documented during attempted crossings from Belarus to Poland, 12 of which occurred in Poland and nine in Belarus. These deaths were often preventable, with seven deaths linked to sickness and lack of access to healthcare and another four due to lack of shelter during harsh environmental conditions. The cause of death for at least seven people could not be verified, as their bodies were found after their death occurred and no further information on an investigation of the cause was ever published.

At least eight of those who died were from Iraq, another seven were from Syrian Arab Republic, and the identities of three people remain unknown. Unusually, all but three cases involved people who were eventually identified, likely due to the high levels of attention given to each case by the relevant authorities and social and traditional media.

Rajaa Hasan had only known the world of overcrowded refugee camps. She was born in a refugee camp in Syria and was living in the cramped refugee neighborhood in Hama, a city in the northwest of the country, with her husband and four sons. After her husband fell ill, she decided to make the trip to Poland via Belarus alone.

She crossed in November 2021, walking through the cold and rainy Białowieża forest with a group of Syrians. They were eventually intercepted by the authorities, but Rajaa died of unknown causes – likely linked to chest pains – during her forced return to Belarus.

Her family back in Hama learned of Rajaa Hasan's death through her Syrian companion. He also delivered two audio messages that Hasan had recorded for her mother while she was still in the forest, but hadn't been able to send them. "How are you, mama?" she asked. "We're doing well. Pray for us." ¹

¹ Adapted from Der Spiegel, [A Chronicle of Refugee Deaths along the Border Between Poland and Belarus](#), 22 December 2021.

Western Balkans route

Though other routes discussed in this section received larger media and policy attention, the Western Balkans route has claimed the most lives of any intra-European route monitored by MMP, with nearly 250 deaths documented since 2014 and many more likely unrecorded. In 2021 MMP documented 39 deaths on this route, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina (8), Croatia (8), Hungary (7) and Serbia (7). Nearly half (19) of these lives lost were linked to hazardous transport such as car accidents, and another eight lives were lost due to drowning in various border rivers. Even though deaths have occurred on routes across the Western Balkans since 2014, no country systematically reports information on these cases. While media reports on such cases are reasonably frequent, differentiating migrants on the move from those who die after settling in Western Balkan countries is difficult with the available information, especially as some migrants live in irregular situations and lose their lives to causes similar to those seen on migration routes.

¹⁰ Missing Migrants Project data reflects the lowest estimated number of missing persons, for consistency and to ensure that MMP data represent a 'minimum estimate' of the true number of deaths during migration.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA QUALITY

MMP counts migrant fatalities only at the external borders of a state or during the process of migrating towards an international destination. Collecting data on migrant deaths and disappearances remains challenging due to the lack of systematic reporting on the deaths of people on the move. Even when available, official data are often incomplete. MMP collects data through official sources such as coast guards and local authorities; nongovernmental civil society organizations and focal points in IOM country offices; and media monitoring. However, media sources can have incomplete or incorrect coverage, which poses an additional challenge on routes with limited official reporting. This data collection methodology presents some limitations in terms of consistency and comparability of data given the availability of sources of data and information, but this does not diminish the value of the reported analysis.

On routes to and within Europe, there are several unique data challenges that exacerbate the challenges inherent to collected data on deaths and disappearances during migration. Like all other regions of the world, no country systematically reports data on this issue – despite its inclusion as an indicator of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹¹ Unlike other regions where data limitations are due to lack of capacity, even the limited official reports on migrant deaths in Europe are complicated by the extreme politicization of migration issues, meaning that a border death reported by one country may be contested by another. In addition, on routes at sea where disappearances continue to occur en masse, estimates of people onboard must be collected from survivors who may be traumatized by their experience, as most governmental SAR actors do not report estimates of persons lost at sea who are missing and presumed dead. Beyond this, the aforementioned ‘invisible shipwrecks’ occur increasingly, which makes verification of disappearances nearly impossible in the many cases for which no SAR operation is ever conducted. These challenges affect the data coverage and completeness differently depending on the nuances of each route, as illustrated in the table below, which shows the proportions of data types for recorded incidents in 2021 by route.

Region/Route	Single media report	Eyewitness report	Multiple media sources	Inter- / Non-governmental organizations	Official sources
Eastern Mediterranean	6%	0%	6%	6%	83%
Central Mediterranean	4%	0%	19%	69%	8%
Western Mediterranean	17%	0%	58%	14%	11%
Western Africa - Atlantic route to the Canary Islands	8%	0%	35%	42%	15%
English Channel crossing	6%	0%	44%	31%	19%
Turkey-Greece land border	15%	13%	3%	33%	36%
Western Balkans route	8%	0%	19%	35%	38%
Belarus-EU borders	0%	0%	24%	14%	62%

Figure 2: Sources of 2021 data on deaths and disappearances during migration in Europe

Note: Due to rounding errors the total percentage of data sources listed for the Eastern Mediterranean route adds up to 101%.

¹¹ MMP data is used as [SDG indicator 10.7.3](#), the “number of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination.”

CONCLUSION

Despite the many mobility restrictions on European borders, both imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and for other reasons, thousands of lives were lost en route to and within Europe in 2021. With more than 3,400 deaths documented by MMP in 2021, routes to and in Europe have claimed more than 27,000 lives since data collection began in 2014, of whom more than 18,000 are missing and presumed dead. This has profound effects not only on those who lost their lives in the absence of safe legal migration routes, but on the countless families who may never know the fate of their lost loved ones, and on the many communities that are tasked with the consequences of managing these thousands of human remains.

IOM's Missing Migrants Project calls on States to end the normalization of these deaths as a natural consequence of migration, in line with their commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, and many other obligations codified in international law. Specifically, States must prevent further deaths and disappearances by prioritizing search and rescue on land and at sea, including supporting non-governmental actors in this area. Beyond this, States must ultimately assess the impact of their laws, policies and practices and revise them to ensure that they do not create or exacerbate the risk of migrants dying or going missing.¹²

¹² Further recommendations can be found in the United Nations Network on Migration's 2022 joint statement with ICRC, IFRC, and ICMP: [Act Now to Save Lives and Prevent Migrants From Going Missing](#).



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