

## ANNUAL REGIONAL OVERVIEW

Europe

January - December 2022

### OVERVIEW

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) recorded 3,167 fatalities during transit to and within Europe in 2022. Of these, almost 3,000 migrants died on sea routes to Europe, 74 people lost their lives on the land borders of Europe with Western Asia and another 128 people died during migration within Europe. 2022 has the highest number of recorded fatalities since 2017 in the Mediterranean, marking another year of the protracted crisis of migrant deaths on this route. The Central Mediterranean remained the deadliest known migration route in the world, accounting for almost half of all deaths on sea routes to Europe. There is also evidence of an increase in the death toll on the Western Mediterranean route in recent years. With 64 recorded lives lost, the land route between Türkiye and Europe also saw a record number of migrant deaths in 2022, the majority (43) allegedly related to violent forced expulsions. Within Europe, most deaths happened on the Western Balkans route (40) and at the onset of the war in Ukraine, some fatalities (17) of persons fleeing the country were recorded. However, given the limitations of the data, all figures are likely to be undercounts of the true number of lives lost.

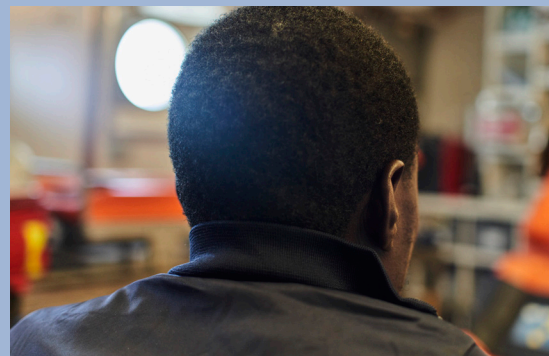
### DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT TO EUROPE

#### Maritime routes to Europe

In 2022, at least 2,970 people lost their lives on sea routes to Europe. 559 of these fatalities happened on the West Africa Atlantic Route to Spain's Canary Islands and 2,406 in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>1</sup> Migrant fatalities in the Mediterranean continued to increase, and 2022 saw the most recorded fatalities since 2017. The Central Mediterranean remains the deadliest known migration route in the world, it accounts for almost half of all deaths on sea routes to Europe with 1,417 deaths recorded in 2022. It is followed by the Western Mediterranean Route with 611 recorded fatalities and by the Eastern Mediterranean with 383 lives lost.

Romeo\* lost his parents during a war in Côte d'Ivoire, his home country, forcing him to fend for himself. His harrowing journey took him from Côte d'Ivoire to Mali, Libya, and Tunisia, where he was exploited and endured brutal beatings and deplorable conditions. Miraculously escaping, he embarked on a dangerous trip towards Europe with his girlfriend. After five days of waiting in the bush, they set sail on an unseaworthy boat, carrying 39 people, including children and a pregnant woman. After one day at sea, the boat's engine stopped working. Amid despair, a rescue ship appeared on the horizon: the Humanity 1, operated by the search and rescue NGO SOS Humanity. Without this intervention, he believed death was imminent.

Now seeking asylum in Europe, Romeo hopes for safety and a chance at a new life.



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\*Pseudonym chosen by the survivor

This briefing was authored by Andrea Garcia Borja, Data Analyst at IOM's Missing Migrants Project. Andrea is dedicated to producing evidence of the risks that people face during dangerous migration journeys and making their stories visible.

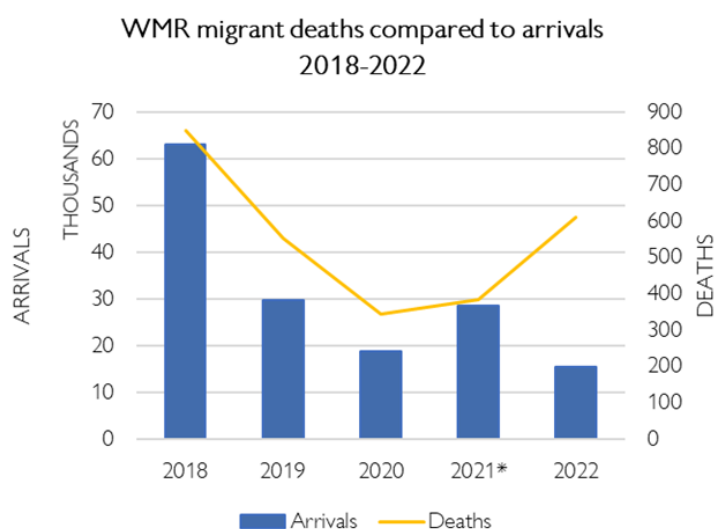
<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth analysis of deaths on the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes and on the WAAR see 2022 MMP Annual Regional Overviews for the Middle East and North Africa and, separately, the West and Central Africa, available at [missingmigrants.iom.int/publications](https://missingmigrants.iom.int/publications).

## Western Mediterranean Route

Notably, 2022 was the second-deadliest year on record on the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) after 2018, with 849 migrant deaths documented. At least 611 migrants lost their lives in 2022 and 76 per cent of them were recorded as missing and presumed dead, meaning that their remains were never recovered from the sea. Also, half of the victims (301) died in the 21 invisible shipwrecks (boats which disappear at sea without a trace). Behind all the unrecovered remains and victims of invisible shipwrecks, there are hundreds of families searching for their missing loved ones, who every day have to face the impacts of not knowing what happened to them.

There is little information on the profiles of the migrants who perished in the Western Mediterranean in 2022, for most of them (81%) there is no demographic information at all. For the rest, there is information on sex and age, and they include 67 males, 29 females and 16 children. Similarly, for more than half (61%) there is no information on the country of origin. For the ones with information on nationality available, 183 of the victims originate from Algeria, 27 from Morocco, 25 from the Syrian Arab Republic, and one from Yemen.

The increase in documented deaths in 2022 can be attributed mostly to an improvement in data sources for the WMR. In 2022, MMP was able to access data from the Centro Internacional para la Identificación de Migrantes Desaparecidos (CIPIMD), a civil society organization that conducts searches for migrants who go missing on maritime routes to Spain and documents their disappearances. For almost half (48%) of the incidents recorded last year by MMP, the only information source is the CIPIMD. While the changes in data sources throughout the years make longitudinal analysis of MMP data for the WMR almost impossible, there is other evidence from civil society organizations<sup>2</sup> that points to a continuous increase in fatalities recorded on the WMR since 2021, specifically on the route from Algeria to mainland Spain and the Balearic Islands. At the same time, the number of maritime arrivals to Spain through the Western Mediterranean has been decreasing since 2018 with only 13,248 recorded arrivals in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Data gaps notwithstanding, this points to an increasing death toll both proportionally and in terms of absolute numbers on the WMR.



\*The number of arrivals in 2021 is higher due to an incident in which around 9,000 people crossed from Morocco to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Excluding this incident, the number of arrivals would be 19,629, following the downward trend of previous years.

Data sources: IOM Missing Migrants Project, 2023; Spanish Ministry of the Interior via IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See “La Ruta Argelina del Mediterráneo Central: Muro de Indiferencia” (2022) from the Human Rights Observatory of Caminando Fronteras available in Spanish only at <https://caminandofronteras.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Informe-Muro-de-indiferencia-La-ruta-argelina-del-Mediterraneo-Occidental-ES.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Data on arrivals to Europe available at <https://dtm.iom.int/content/europe-migration-arrivals-dashboard>.

## Türkiye-Europe Land Route

The land route between Türkiye and Europe also saw a record number of migrant deaths in 2022, the highest since IOM started documenting them. Most fatalities (64) took place at the Türkiye-Greece land border and 10 took place at the Türkiye border with Bulgaria. While data on this route is still incomplete, especially on the Greek side of the border, the data quality is better than for most routes around the world. Available data show that among the 74 victims, there were 56 men, 3 women, and 2 children, for 13 people there was no information on sex and age. In terms of nationality, the largest group was Syrians (26), followed by Afghans (14) and Somalians (5), and for 26 people there was no information on nationality. At least 43 of these deaths were related to alleged forced expulsions by the authorities in 2022, according to reports from survivors, which IOM is not able to independently verify.

## DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES DURING TRANSIT WITHIN EUROPE

### Western Balkans

Most recorded deaths on migration routes within the European continent in 2022 happened along the Western Balkans route. The continued securitization of borders<sup>4</sup> across the region compels migrants to take dangerous routes. In 2022, at least 40 people lost their lives on this route, including 19 males, 2 females, and 2 minors. For 17 recorded deaths there was no information on sex and age available, meaning these people likely remain unidentified. Similarly, there is no information on the nationality of almost half of the victims (18). As for the rest, the most common countries of origin were the Democratic Republic of Congo (6), Türkiye (5) and Afghanistan (4). There was no significant change in the figure for 2022 compared to previous years. However, given the little attention that deaths on this migration route receive, these figures are likely an undercount of the true number of lives lost.

### Ukraine to Europe

With the onset of the war in Ukraine, millions of Ukrainians fled their country. Between February and May 2022, 17 people on the move lost their lives going from Ukraine to various European countries, including 6 males, 6 females, 2 children and 4 unidentified people. Almost all of them were Ukrainian citizens but one victim was Israeli. The vast majority (14) of these deaths happened at Ukraine's external borders, 2 deaths happened in Spain and one in Italy. The most common cause of death was drowning (10), followed by sickness or lack of access to healthcare (3) and by vehicle accidents (2). Only one person suffered a violent death.

While even one death is one too many, fatalities of people fleeing Ukraine are remarkably low when compared to the number of people on the move, more than 25 million border crossings from Ukraine into neighbouring countries have been recorded since February 2022.<sup>5</sup> In comparison, MMP has recorded a much larger death toll of people fleeing other armed conflicts. For example, in 2015, more than one million people arrived on European shores, and over 78 per cent of them were fleeing conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (48% of total), Afghanistan (21%) and Iraq (9%).<sup>6</sup> That same year, 4,055 deaths of people en route to Europe through the Mediterranean were recorded, including at least 273 Syrians, 39 Afghans and 42 Iraqis, while 1747 people (43%) remained unidentified.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2015, people were allowed to transit the Western Balkans migration route mostly freely to facilitate the movement of people towards Western European countries. However, as the reception capacities of Western European countries became exhausted, countries in the Balkans started increasing the security at their borders through various means, which go from erecting fences to electronic sensors and drones. For more information see: <https://borderviolence.eu/about/the-balkan-route/> and <https://ecre.org/balkan-route-commission-increases-support-to-western-balkans-amid-increase-in-violence-and-pushbacks/>.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR's Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>. Consulted on 15 October 2023

<sup>6</sup> IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix, <https://dtm.iom.int/europe/arrivals>.



Mariia and her family fleeing Ukraine into the Republic of Moldova. © IOM/ Alissa Everett

In the late hours of 4 March 2023, around 60 refugees were transported by bus from Ukraine to Romania and further to Hungary. Reports indicate they were kept waiting for hours at the Romanian-Hungarian border (Csengersima) for border controls. According to witnesses, Katheryna (pseudonym), a 61-year-old Ukrainian woman had a heart attack when the Hungarian authorities informed them that, due to a lack of proper documents they would be taken to a special centre until their identity was clarified. She died on the way to the hospital.

## DEATHS OF EUROPEAN NATIONALS

Besides the deaths of Ukrainians fleeing Ukraine, only six other deaths of European nationals have been recorded, since 2014. A stark contrast with other regions. Two of these deaths took place at the U.S.-Mexico border, one Ukrainian man and one Russian man drowned on different occasions while attempting to cross the Rio Grande towards the United States of America. The other four deaths occurred within Europe. One Albanian male citizen died attempting to cross the English Channel to the United Kingdom. One Georgian man died during migration in a vehicle accident in Greece. Two other men, both Ukrainian, died due to police violence at the borders of Russia and Portugal, respectively. All these deaths, except for the ones related to violence, happened during irregular migration journeys.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA QUALITY

IOM's Missing Migrants Project (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 non-nationals in transit, and when available, data are often incomplete. MMP collects data through official sources such as the coast guard 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 inherent difficulty of collecting data on deaths and disappearances during migration. No European country systematically reports data on this issue, despite its inclusion as an indicator of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, data on migrant deaths in Europe are derived primarily from local police, media reports, non-governmental actors, and IOM country offices. Unlike other regions where data limitations are due to a 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 maritime routes to Europe, estimates of people missing at sea must be collected from survivors or families of missing migrants, as most governmental SAR actors do not report estimates of migrants lost at sea. Beyond this, the aforementioned 'invisible shipwrecks' are nearly impossible to verify and the number of people missing is always a minimum estimate. 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 sources for recorded incidents in 2022 by route.

| Route   | Single media source | Multiple media sources | Civil Society Organizations/ International Organizations | Official Sources |
|---|---------------------|------------------------|--|------------------|
| Central Mediterranean                                 | 3.8%                | 10.4%                  | 70.9%  | 14.9%            |
| Eastern Mediterranean                                 | 0%                  | 3.1%                   | 7.8%   | 87.5%            |
| Western Mediterranean                                 | 6.9%                | 23.5%                  | 62.7%  | 6.9%             |
| Western Africa / Atlantic route to the Canary Islands | 7.4%                | 40.8%                  | 33.3%  | 18.5%            |
| Türkiye-Europe land route                             | 10.9%               | 19.6%                  | 45.7%  | 23.9%            |
| Western Balkans                                       | 6.9%                | 10.3%                  | 31.0%  | 51.7%            |
| Ukraine to Europe                                     | 33.3%               | 44.4%                  | 0%   | 22.2%            |

Sources of 2022 data on deaths and disappearances during migration in Europe

<sup>7</sup> See SDG indicator 10.7.3 metadata, available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/files/Metadata-10-07-03.pdf>.

## CONCLUSION

The high number of migrant deaths and disappearances on routes to and within Europe in 2022 reported by IOM's Missing Migrants Project (MMP) highlights one of the great failures of our time. Most deaths occurred on sea routes to Europe, with the Central Mediterranean remaining the deadliest known migration route in the world, and there was an increase in deaths on the Western Mediterranean route. The humanitarian crisis of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean is persisting and while large shipwrecks still make international news, it seems that these deaths have become normalized. The 2022 death toll in the Central Mediterranean, the highest since 2017, comes amidst reports of delays in State-led rescue responses and hindrance to the operations of NGO search and rescue (SAR) vessels. Saving lives at sea is a legal obligation for States. There is an urgent need for proactive State-led search and rescue across all sea routes to Europe and for an immediate end to the criminalization, obstruction and deterrence of the efforts of those who provide such assistance, including NGOs and commercial ship operators.

In contrast, a significantly higher number of individuals fleeing the war in Ukraine transited through Europe in a considerably safer manner. Despite the fact that millions of Ukrainians were forcibly displaced across international borders in 2022, only 17 deaths of people fleeing the country were recorded that year and none of them died a violent death.

Despite the limitations of the data, it is clear that the situation of migrant deaths in Europe remains dire due in large part to the lack of access to safe, legal routes for many. It is essential that States do a better job of collecting and using the available data on fatalities during migration to inform their migration policies and to facilitate family tracing and identification of remains. Preventing deaths during migration requires dedication from States to uphold the commitments they acquired in the Global Compact for Migration and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.



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