

## Lives lost at sea

Year after year, tens of thousands of people try to reach the EU from the coasts of Turkey and Africa, risking their lives at sea. Irregular migration to Europe is predominantly concentrated in the Mediterranean, where there are frequent reports of people being rescued at sea and of shipwreck incidents. Between January and June 2022, on average five people died per day during their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, according to the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), and 28 021 persons have been recorded missing since 2014. This is most likely an under-estimate, as many cases go unreported or even completely unnoticed.

### Migration via the Mediterranean routes

Since the mid-1990s, many thousands of people have tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea to seek humanitarian protection or simply a better life for themselves and their families in the EU. The Mediterranean routes are among those most used by migrants who migrate irregularly to Europe. Since 2014, more than [28 000 migrants](#) have been reported **missing in the Mediterranean**. The three main routes across the Mediterranean are dangerous to different extents. The Central Mediterranean route is the sea crossing from North Africa to Italy and Malta ([22 326](#) missing migrants since 2014); the Western Mediterranean route is the sea crossing point between North Africa and Spain ([3 457](#) missing since 2014); and the Eastern Mediterranean is the route for land and sea crossings from Turkey to Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria ([2 304](#) missing since 2014). In addition, according to the United Nations (UN), since 2018 more than 2 700 people have gone missing on the North-west African maritime route, where migrants try to reach the EU via the Canary Islands. Although between 2015 and April 2023, an estimated [615 087 lives](#) have been saved in the Mediterranean and on the Western African routes by EU naval operations, EU agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), it has still been observed that the [first quarter of 2023](#) was the deadliest in recent years in the Mediterranean. [Migrant smuggling networks](#) facilitate most, if not all, irregular sea crossings. They employ [ever more reckless tactics](#), putting those smuggled at risk of serious harm or exploitation, or even worse, death. The **fight against migrant smuggling** is a [priority](#) for the EU. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) contributes to [search and rescue \(SAR\) operations](#) in the Mediterranean, to save migrants' lives and combat migrant smuggling. The naval military operation [IRINI](#) (whose mandate [was extended](#) until March 2025), on the high seas off the coast of Libya, also [contributes](#) to the disruption of the 'business model' of migrant smugglers and traffickers in human beings. Since 2016, the European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC) helps Member States dismantle smuggling networks.

### EU institutions and agencies

During recent years, SAR operations in the Mediterranean Sea have been [organised](#) with contributions from the EU and coastal countries – including operations led by national authorities and by Frontex – and with the increased involvement of private and commercial vessels. However, a lack of coordination in SAR activities and several [legal actions](#) against NGOs active in SAR in the Mediterranean have resulted in vessels being denied access to European ports to disembark migrants, often for weeks on end. At the same time, Member States have been accused of increasingly resorting to [pushbacks](#) and violations of fundamental rights of migrants. In this context, the European Commission, in its [pact on migration and asylum](#), proposed a more **coordinated and multi-pillar approach to SAR issues**. The Commission has consistently [emphasised](#) that SAR is not an EU competence, and underlined the humanitarian dimension of SAR operations. However, following the deadly shipwrecks in Greece and Italy this summer, Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson [stressed](#) the **duty of the EU to save lives**, while underlining the supporting **role of the EU Asylum Agency (EUAA) and Frontex** in SAR. Under the aim of reducing fatalities at sea, the Commission also adopted a [recommendation](#) on cooperation between Member States regarding operations carried out by private vessels for the purpose of SAR activities, [guidance](#) on non-criminalisation of SAR, and a [renewed EU action plan](#) against migrant smuggling.



In 2021, the [European Contact Group on Search and Rescue](#) was established. Frontex, too, has been accused of violating migrants' fundamental rights and being involved in pushbacks. The agency has been the object of several investigations, including by the European Parliament, which set up a [Frontex Scrutiny Working Group](#). In July 2023, [European Ombudsman](#) Emily O'Reilly started [investigating](#) Frontex's response to a series of major [shipwrecks](#) in 2023. This [autumn](#), she is to look further into the role of EU institutions in upholding fundamental rights in border-management activities. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced in her [2023 State of the Union address](#) that the Commission would organise an **International Conference on fighting people smuggling**, with the aim of disrupting the smuggling networks' business model.

Saving lives at sea has figured high on the agenda of the **European Parliament**. On 24 October 2019, MEPs [rejected](#) a motion for a resolution to step up SAR operations by Member States and Frontex in the Mediterranean Sea, as certain [amendments](#) raised controversy at national level. However, during the March 2023 plenary session, MEPs [debated](#) the need for a common EU response to save lives, and for action to ensure safe and legal pathways. Moreover, in [June 2023](#), a delegation of Parliament's Civil Liberties Committee to Lampedusa (Italy) visited the [hotspot](#) and met with the Mayors of Lampedusa and Linosa. During the [July 2023](#) plenary session, MEPs adopted a [resolution](#) expressing their regret and sorrow at the recurring tragic loss of life of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean, while calling for a European SAR operation to prevent the loss of more lives in the Mediterranean. In particular, MEPs requested more EU action and for Member States and Frontex to provide sufficient capacity (vessels, equipment and personnel dedicated to SAR), as well as a more proactive and coordinated approach, to be able to make an effective contribution to save lives at sea. The resolution also called for making full use of vessels operated by NGOs, and condemned migrant smuggling and human trafficking networks.

In February 2023, the **European Council** [called](#) for ensuring effective control of the EU's external land and sea borders. Heads of State or Government stressed the particularity of maritime borders, including as regards safeguarding human lives, and underlined the need for reinforced cooperation regarding SAR activities. They also stressed the importance of intensifying cooperation with countries of origin and transit through mutually beneficial partnerships.

## Stakeholder views

Stakeholders have repeatedly called for extended SAR operations and for the provision of safe and legal migration channels. [FRA](#) has [called](#) on the EU and its Member States to act immediately, and has [published guidance](#) on how to prevent future tragedies at sea. Moreover, in March 2023, FRA [identified the need to save lives as the first of five priority actions](#) to address the fundamental rights challenges **at the EU's external borders**. The UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) called for urgent support to prevent deaths and protect asylum-seekers who try to reach the EU via the Central and Western Mediterranean routes. In addition, [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) Michelle Bachelet recommended that the EU adopt a common and human-rights-based approach for the timely disembarkation of all people rescued at sea. She also urged more determined and effective action by the EU and its Member States, to deploy SAR operations and to support the rescue work conducted by NGOs. In June 2019, two lawyers filed a [complaint](#) at the International Criminal Court (ICC), calling EU Member States' migration policies in the Mediterranean 'crimes against humanity'. They argue that the European policies are responsible for thousands of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and SOS Méditerranée [called on](#) all governments to '**ensure humanitarians can provide lifesaving support at sea without risking their lives**'. More recently, [56 organisations](#) called in a [joint statement](#) for an immediate end to the obstruction of humanitarian assistance in the Mediterranean Sea. Several organisations have also [stressed](#) countries' obligations towards the families of missing people, including missing migrants, under national laws and international instruments. Moreover, the Council of Europe [Commissioner for Human Rights](#) called on member states to 'take all necessary measures to ensure that the disappearance of migrants is prevented and their lives and human dignity, which lie at the core of human rights, are respected', as member states are obliged to take steps to safeguard the lives of those within their jurisdiction ([Article 2](#) of the European Convention on Human Rights – ECHR).

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