

DATA ON RETURNS OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS

The [Return Directive](#) is the main piece of EU legislation governing return procedures. Under this directive, Member States must issue a return decision (an administrative or judicial decision imposing an obligation to leave the territory) for every third-country national found to be irregularly present on their territory unless they grant them an authorisation to stay. (Article 6(4)). Although the Commission proposed to revise the Directive in 2018, no progress was made in negotiations throughout the 9th parliamentary term. In October 2024, the [European Council](#) called on the Commission to table a new proposal urgently.

Enforcement of return decisions

Figure 1 shows the evolution in the number of third-country nationals (TCNs) found to be irregularly present on the territory of the EU-27 and the share among them of male and female adults (over the age of 18) and children (all persons under 18, as set out in Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child). Only people detected by national authorities are recorded in these figures, which may therefore not reflect the total number of people present in the EU on an unauthorised basis.

The right-hand bars display the leading nationalities of third-country nationals detected as irregularly present on the territory of the EU-27 in 2023, with percentages highlighting the variation among country of origin. These patterns of irregular migration into the EU differ by country and population group.

Therefore, while the data for males reveal Syria as the top country of origin with 130 200 (16.9%), followed by Afghanistan and Morocco, a different picture emerges when looking at females, with Ukraine in first place with 18 101 (12.3%), followed by Türkiye and then Syria. For children, the top two countries of origin were similar to those for males, with Syria accounting for 26 610 (25.8%) then Afghanistan, while Türkiye ranked third.

The data also highlight significant differences in the distribution of third-country nationals across demographic groups, with 51.5% of females, 57.9% of males, and 27.2% of children originating from other countries than the top five displayed here. These findings illustrate the diverse origins of third-country nationals found irregularly present in the EU, emphasising the importance of considering demographic factors in understanding migration patterns.

Figure 1 – Third-country nationals found to be irregularly present in the EU and main countries of origin in 2023

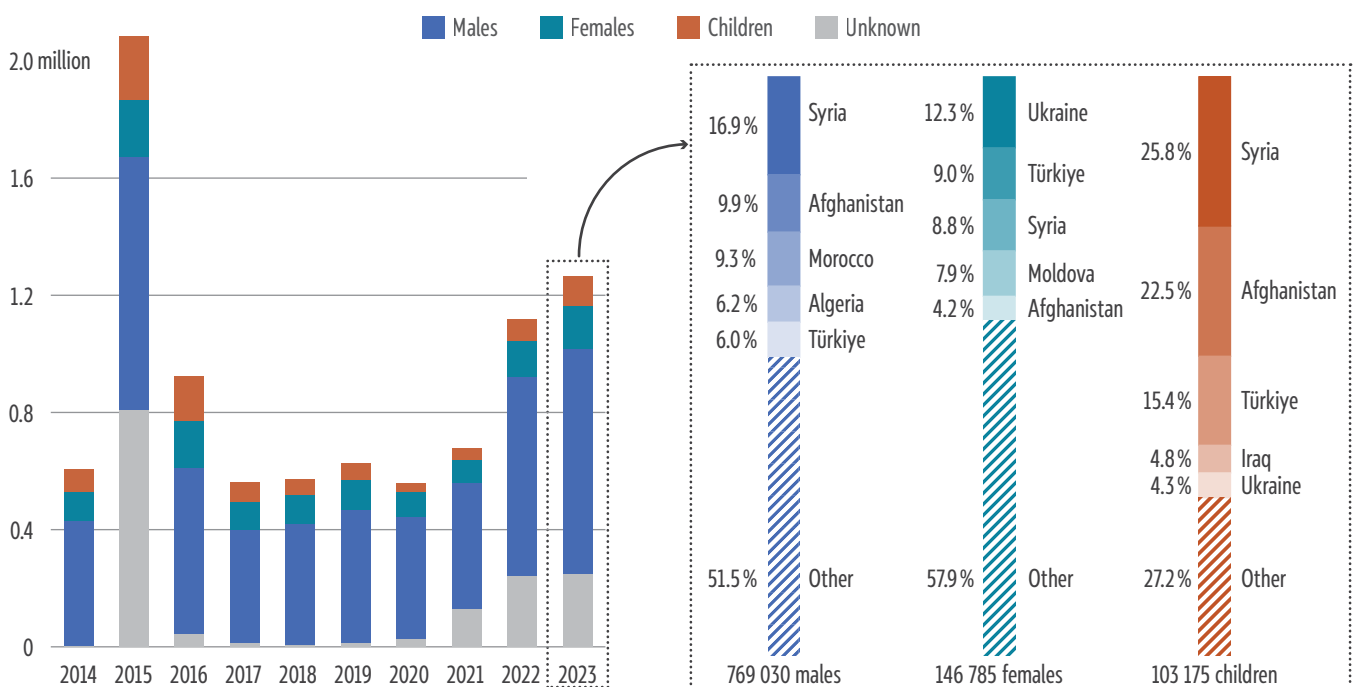


Figure 2 shows the evolution in numbers of third-country nationals ordered to leave EU territory and of those returned. The number of return decisions issued by EU Member States has remained relatively consistent since 2014, fluctuating between 400 and 500 thousand. In 2020 and 2021 – coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic – there was a [considerable decline](#) in return activities owing to the numerous measures taken to contain the virus.

The EU's return rate (the share of TCNs returned after having received a return order over the total number of TCNs who received a return order in the same reference period) was 23% in 2021, and in 2022 it fell to 19% before slowly rising to 23% in 2023. Overall, low return rates reflect the difficulties national authorities face when trying to enforce return decisions. These numbers do not include TCNs transferred from one Member State to another under the [Dublin Regulation](#).

Figure 2 – Third-country nationals ordered to leave and effectively returned in the EU, quarterly data from 2021 to 2023

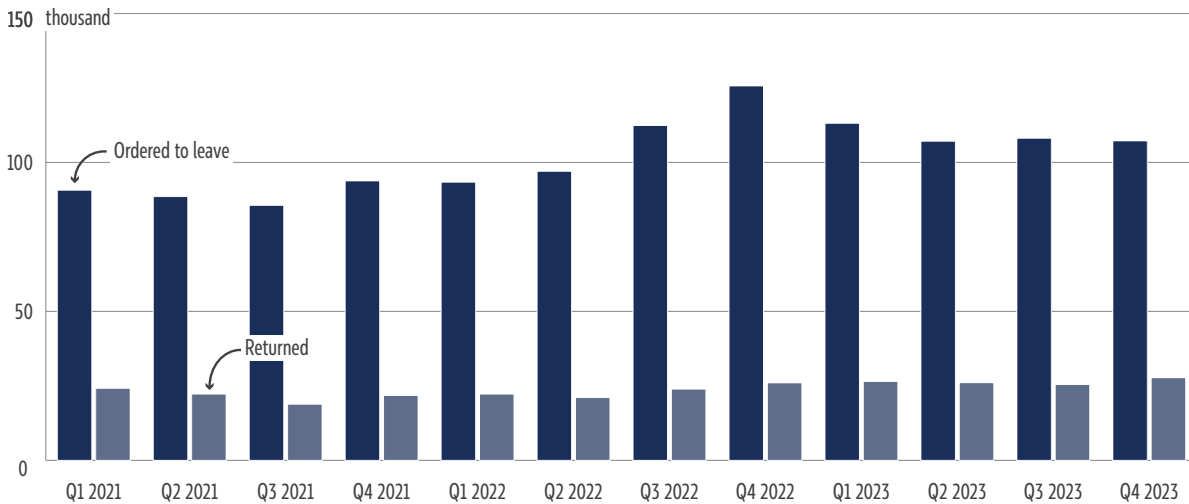
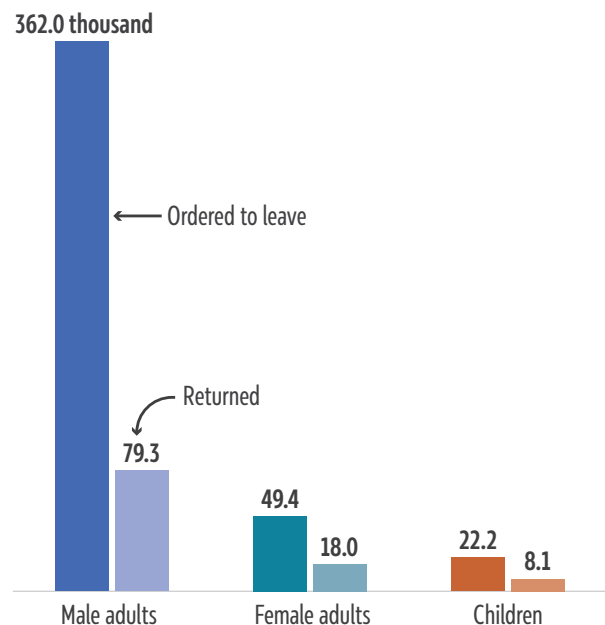


Figure 3a illustrates the aggregated totals of males, females, and children ordered to leave and effectively returned in 2023, highlighting the stark contrast in magnitude between these groups. Figure 3b shows the number of male third-country nationals ordered to leave and those effectively returned by each Member State in 2023. Although for most Member States there is a clear gap between the data on third-country nationals ordered to leave and those effectively returned, Member States' return rates differed widely in 2023. Latvia, Estonia and Malta had return rates approaching 100%, although they have to deal with relatively low numbers. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Belgium and France show 9%, Czechia 8% and Bulgaria 3%, in 2023. The reasons for these differences are manifold and include national authorities' ability to ensure cooperation from returnees' countries of origin, and the willingness of transit countries or third countries to accept returnees from Member States. Figures 3c and 3d show the number of adult females and children from third countries ordered to leave and effectively returned by each Member State in 2023.

facilities in the State of return', in accordance with Article 10 of the Return Directive. Return rates can also vary significantly from one year to another in certain Member States (e.g. Greece had a return rate of 21% in 2018, 24% in 2021 and 19% in 2023). Furthermore, return decisions may be enforced in a year other than the one in which they were adopted. Therefore, the number of people who left the territory may be greater than those who were subject to an obligation to leave in the year concerned. This is evident in Figure 3c, which shows that in 2023, Hungary effectively returned more children than the number of orders issued.

Figure 3a – Total orders and returns in 2023



The collection of data disaggregated by age and sex began in 2018 and such data were not initially available for all EU countries. The information collected shows that return decisions affecting women and children are not evenly implemented, with only a few Member States effectively returning many of them (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia). However, there is no systematic information regarding the number of children who were unaccompanied and who therefore had to be returned necessarily 'to a member of his or her family, a nominated guardian or adequate reception

Figure 3b – Male adult third-country nationals, ordered to leave and effectively returned in 2023

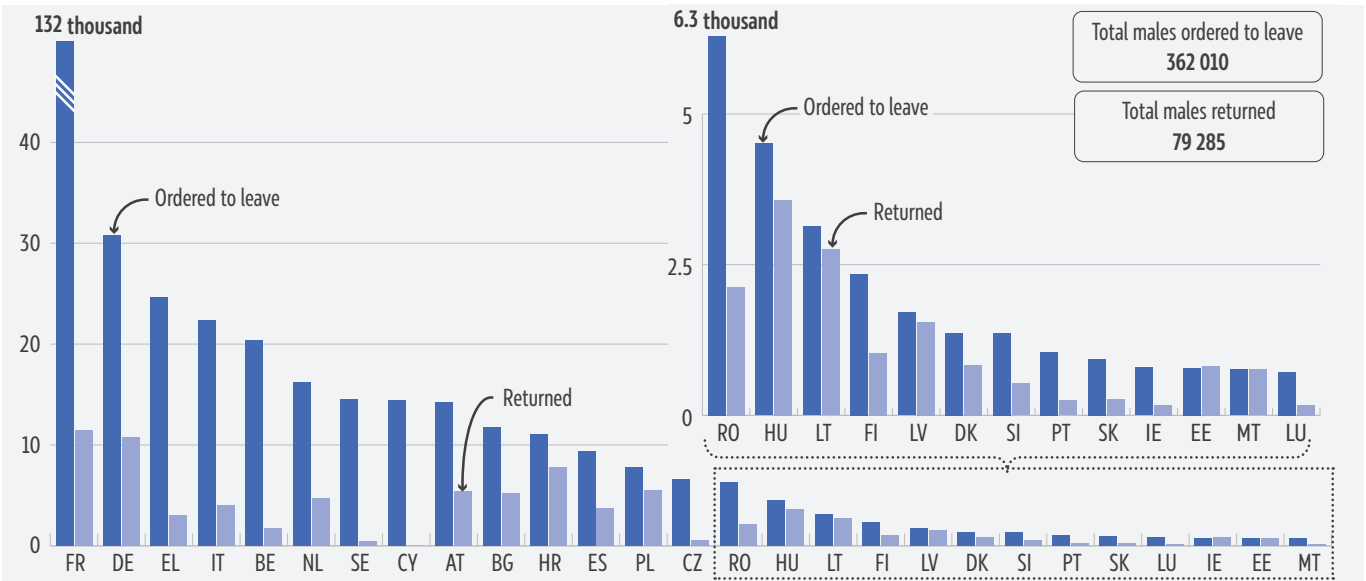


Figure 3c – Female adult third-country nationals, ordered to leave and effectively returned in 2023

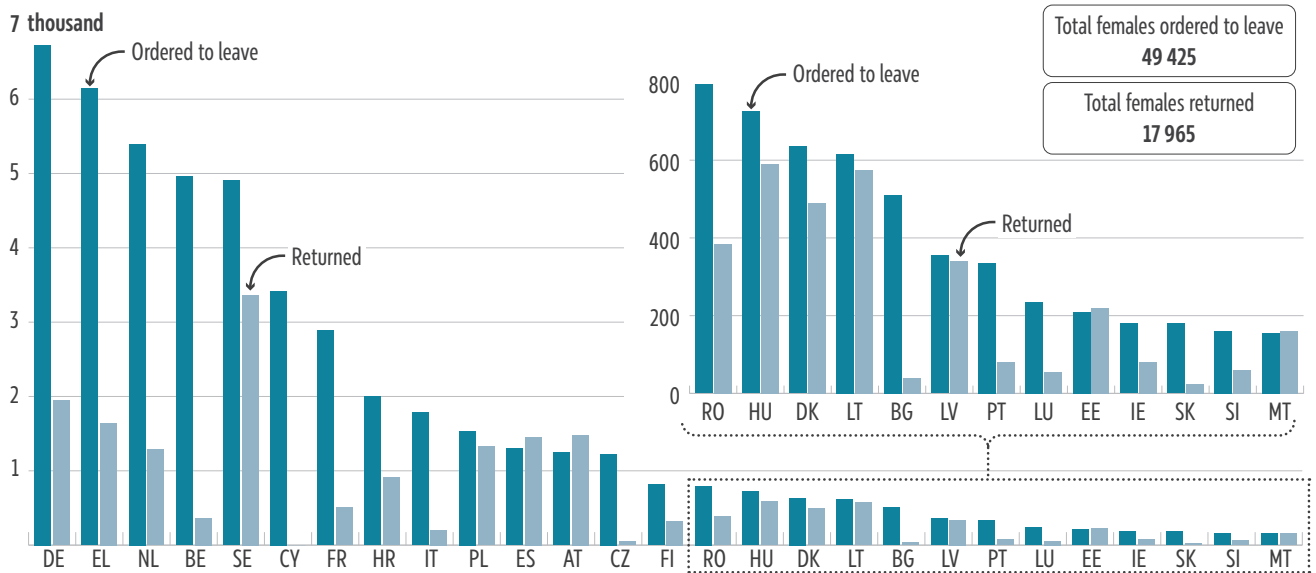


Figure 3d – Children (males and females under 18 years of age) from third countries, ordered to leave and effectively returned in 2023

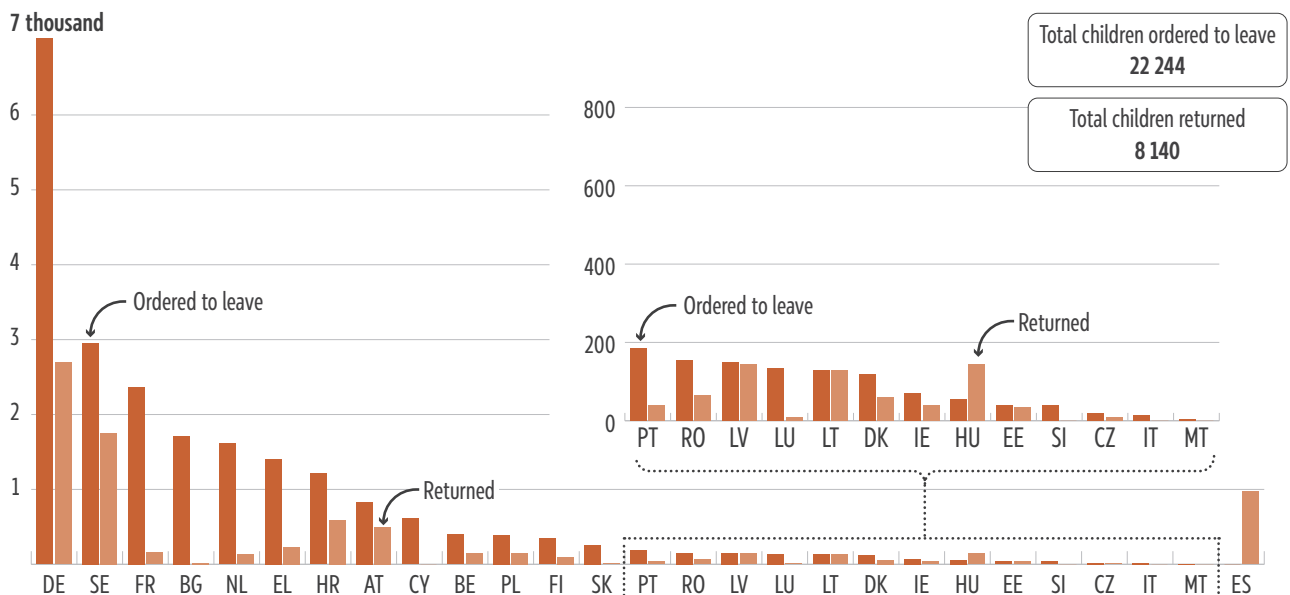
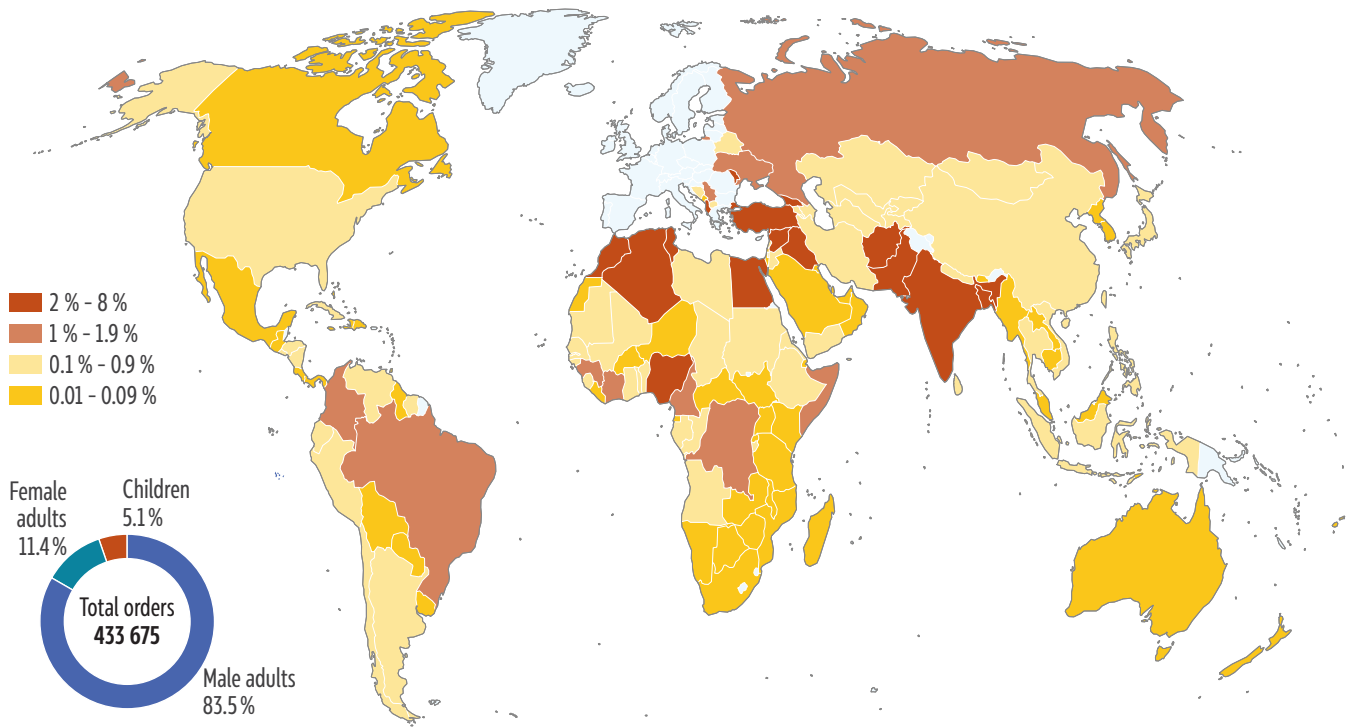


Figure 4 – Top nationalities of third-country nationals with return orders issued in 2023



The map in Figure 4 shows the countries of citizenship for irregular migrants ordered to return in 2023, with Morocco (8.0%), Algeria (7.4%), and Afghanistan (5.5%) having the highest percentages. The percentage of third-country nationals who are successfully returned varies significantly depending on their nationality. This suggests that some countries of origin are more cooperative with return procedures, while others face challenges that prevent the enforcement of return decisions. For example, in countries like Afghanistan and Syria, where returns cannot be enforced due to fundamental rights safeguards (such as concerns about persecution, or other forms of harm).

Figures 5a, 5b, and 5c provide a more detailed breakdown of the data by gender and age group, highlighting trends that emerged in 2023. Among male adults, the top countries of origin are Morocco (33 105) and Algeria (31 345), followed closely by Afghanistan and Tunisia. In contrast, female adults are most often from Georgia (3 435), Iraq (2 145) and Türkiye (2 125), with smaller numbers from China (1 595) and Brazil (1 395). When it comes to children, the top three countries are Türkiye (2 280), Afghanistan (2 025), and Syria (1 925), highlighting Türkiye's prominent role across all groups.

Figure 5a – Top 15 countries of citizenship of male irregular migrants issued with return orders in 2023

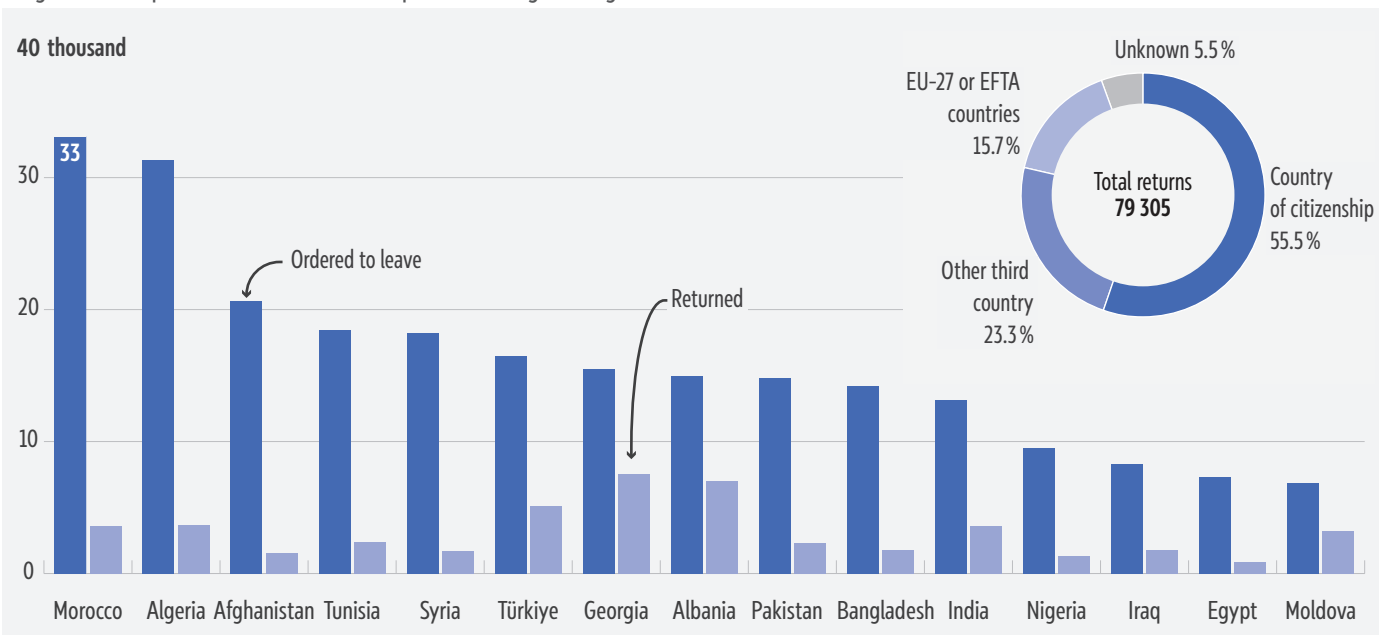
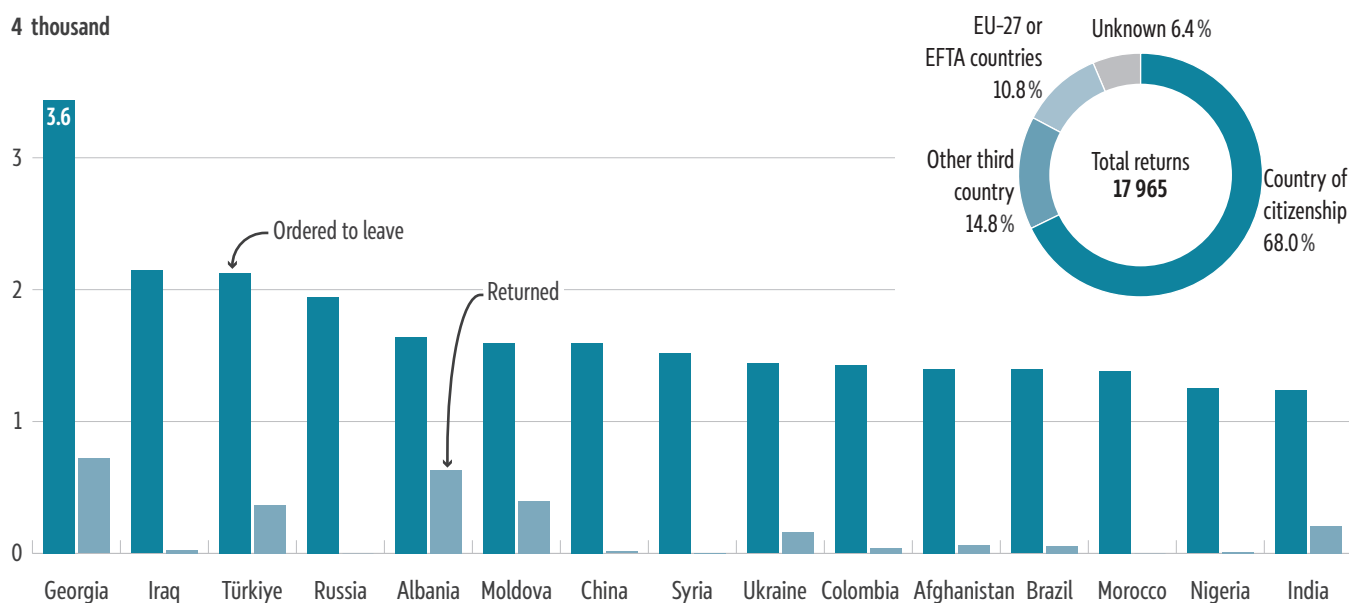


Figure 5b – Top 15 countries of citizenship of female irregular migrants issued with return orders in 2023



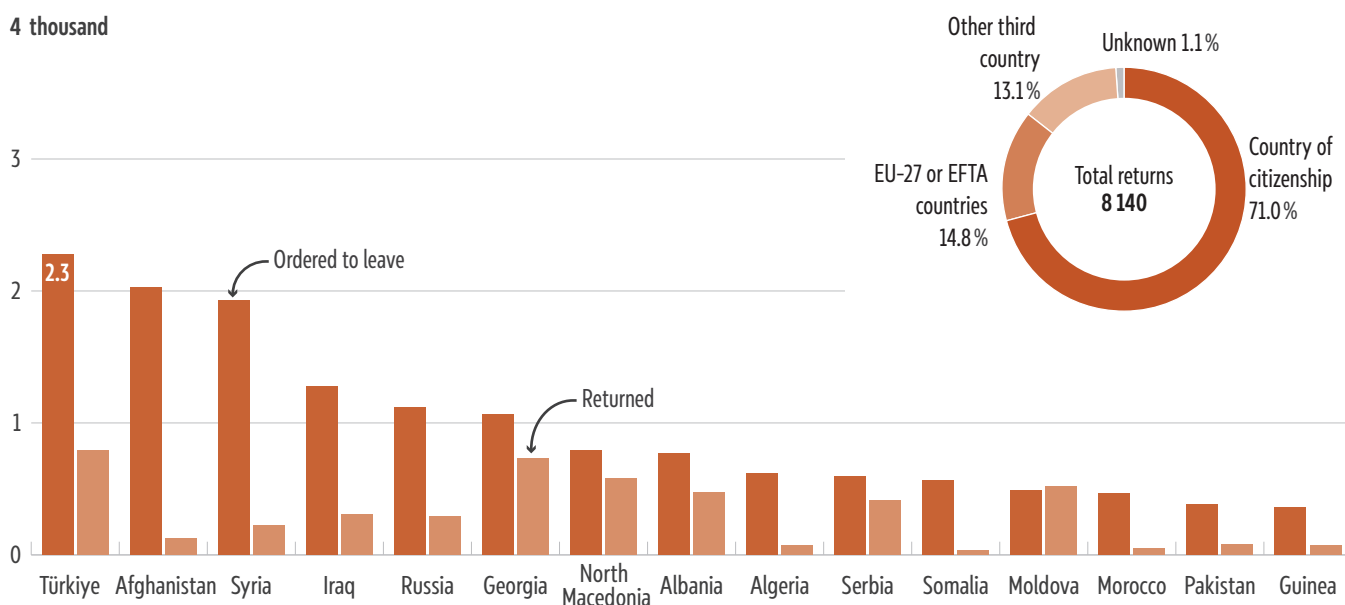
The pie charts in figures 5a, 5b, and 5c show the destinations to which third-country nationals are returned. Returns are categorised into four primary destinations: the individuals' country of citizenship, another third country, a different EU-27 or EFTA country (from the reporting country), or unknown locations. These pie charts show the return dynamics for males, females, and children, offering insights into the effectiveness of current return strategies.

The EU has formal readmission agreements¹ with several countries among the top origin countries, including Albania, Georgia, Türkiye, Russia, and Serbia. These agreements

have proven effective, particularly in facilitating the return of female migrants from neighbouring countries such as Georgia and Albania.

However, some key migration hubs, such as Morocco and Algeria, which consistently rank high for return orders, do not have formal agreements in place. Establishing stronger cooperation with these countries could lead to improved return rates. Additionally, the EU could build on its existing frameworks with Türkiye to enhance collaboration on returns, particularly for minors, given its significant role in managing irregular migration flows.

Figure 5c – Top 15 countries of citizenship of child irregular migrants issued with return orders in 2023



Voluntary return and assisted return

Third-country nationals subject to a return decision can either voluntarily comply with the obligation to return (voluntary departure) or be forced to leave (enforced return), as provided for under the EU Return Directive and national implementing laws. Voluntary returns can be either assisted or non-assisted, resulting in three main types of returns: assisted forced returns, assisted voluntary returns, and non-assisted voluntary returns.

Figure 6 shows that on average at the EU level, over the period, 75% of all returns are assisted. Of these, approximately 70% are forced. As shown in Figure 7, while some Member States, such as Germany, Hungary, and Italy, had 100% of returns enforced, others like Latvia and Lithuania reported a high percentage of voluntary returns (around 97%). This highlights the significant variations in approaches to returns among Member States, and suggests that some countries may be more effective at encouraging voluntary returns. However, it is worth noting that Member States may not have effective tools to capture the full number of non-assisted voluntary returns, which could affect the accuracy of these figures.

Figure 6 – Share of types of returns in the EU in 2023

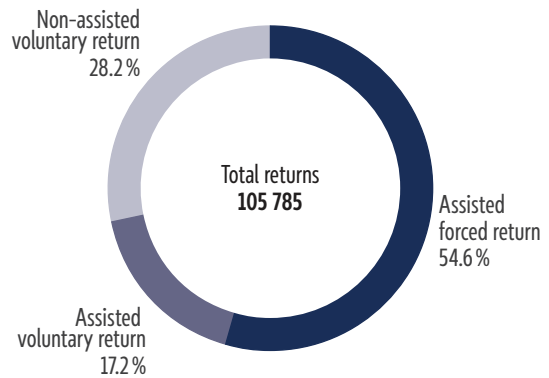
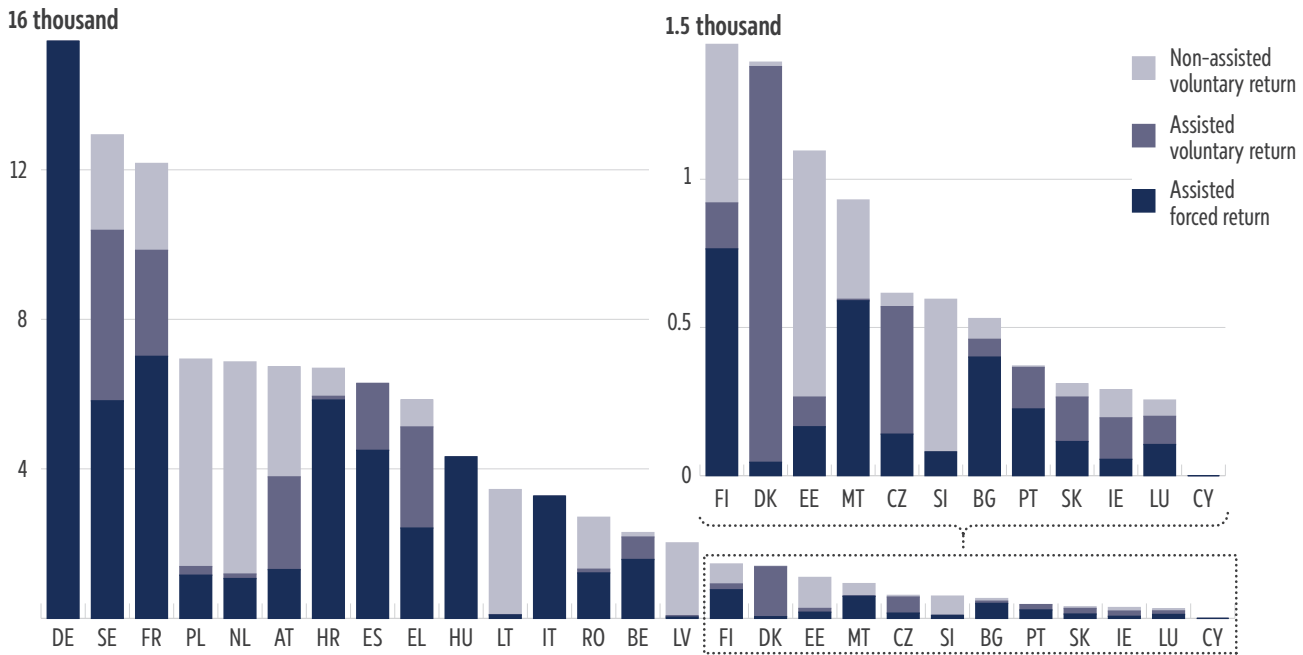


Figure 7 – Difference in types of returns by Member State in 2023



Sources: Figure 1: Eurostat [migr_eipre]. Figure 2: Eurostat [migr_eiord], [migr_eirtn]. Figures 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d: Eurostat [migr_eiord1], [migr_eirtn1]. Figure 4: Eurostat [migr_eiord1]. Figure 5a, 5b, 5c: Eurostat [migr_eiord1], [migr_eirtn1]. Figure 6: Eurostat [migr_eiord1], [migr_eirtn1]. Figure 7: Eurostat [migr_eiord1], [migr_eirtn1].

Notes: ¹The EU has concluded formal readmission agreements with Hong Kong, Macao, Sri Lanka, Albania, Russia, Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova, Pakistan, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Cape Verde and Belarus. It has also made informal (non-binding) readmission arrangements with a number of countries. For an analysis of these different types of agreements, see: European Parliamentary Research Service, European Parliament, *The Return Directive 2008/115/EC*, June 2020, pp.165-189.

Country codes: Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Czechia (CZ), Denmark (DK), Germany (DE), Estonia (EE), Ireland (IE), Greece (EL), Spain (ES), France (FR), Croatia (HR), Italy (IT), Cyprus (CY), Latvia (LV), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Hungary (HU), Malta (MT), Netherlands (NL), Austria (AT), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Slovenia (SI), Slovakia (SK), Finland (FI), Sweden (SE).

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