



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

African Migrants in Europe

Rainer Muenz and Jemal Yaryeva





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Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party, dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
Rue du Commerce 20
Brussels, BE 1000

For more information please visit
www.martenscentre.eu.

Editor: Vít Novotný, Senior Research Officer, Martens Centre

External editing: Communicative English bv

Layout and cover design: Gëzim Lezha, Brand and Visual
Communications Officer, Martens Centre

Typesetting: Victoria Agency

Printed in Belgium by ABIJ bv.

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

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Table of contents

About the Martens Centre	4
About the authors	6
Executive summary	8
Introduction	14
Africans in the world: an overview of key trends	16
Origins and destinations of African migrants	18
African refugees and IDPs	22
African-born people in Europe	26
Flows of African migrants arriving in Europe	28
Migration pathways from Africa to Europe	29
Regular migration from Africa to Europe	33
Legal immigration to the EU: first residence permits	35
Asylum requests	43
Structure of asylum applications	45
Irregular border crossings	55
Central Mediterranean route	59
Western Mediterranean route	60
Eastern Mediterranean route	62
Atlantic route	63
Potential for future migration	65
Preferred destinations and motives for migration	68
Influencers	69
From wish to reality	70
Conclusions	72
Bibliography	76

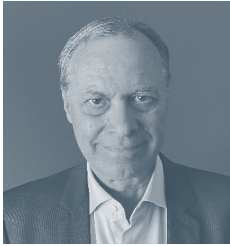
About the Martens Centre



The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, established in 2007, is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre embodies a pan-European mindset, promoting Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values. It serves as a framework for national political foundations linked to member parties of the EPP. It currently has 30 member foundations and one permanent guest foundation in 25 EU and non-EU countries.

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About the authors



Rainer Muenz is an expert in demography and international migration. During his career he has worked as an academic, in the private sector and as a government adviser. He currently teaches at the Central European University and the Austrian Diplomatic Academy (Vienna). Between 2015 and 2019 he was an adviser at the European Political Strategy Centre, the in-house think tank of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. He also chaired the Advisory Board of the UN International Organization for Migration (Geneva). Prior to joining the European Commission, Muenz was head of research and development at Erste Group, a Central European retail bank. He has also been a Senior Fellow at the European macro-economic think tank Bruegel (Brussels), the Hamburg Institute of International Economics, the Migration Policy Institute (Washington, DC) and the Institute for the Mathematics of Finance (TU Vienna).



Jemal Yaryyeva is a research analyst at the Austrian Integration Fund in Vienna. She specialises in migration data collection, analysis and visualisation, and has worked as a consultant on multiple migration-related projects for the World Bank, the European Commission, and the Data and Demographics working group of the World Bank's Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development. Yaryyeva holds an MA in Ethnic and Minority Policy from the Central European University (Vienna).

Executive summary



The reality of African migration to Europe differs substantially from public perception, which mainly focuses on irregular Mediterranean crossings. In contrast to this perception, the majority of African migrants reach Europe in a regular manner. And these regular flows are dominated by marriage migration and family reunion. This publication analyses in detail the distribution of Africans living abroad and the types and the geography of the flows to Europe during the past decade.

In 2024 there were 46 million people of African origin living outside their country of birth. The headline data on African migrants are as follows:

- Of African migrants, 25 million live in another African country—usually in the same region. This is partly related to refugee flows. These migrants represent 55% of all Africans living abroad.
- Another 11 million (or 23% of all Africans abroad) reside in Europe; the majority of them—9 million—live in an EU country. They account for 2% of the EU's total population.
- Europe is a prime destination for marriage and family migration out of Africa, with these reasons dominating the legal pathways to the EU and other European countries. While irregular and refugee migration from Africa to Europe has fluctuated (with peaks in asylum claims in 2016–17 and 2023–24), labour migration has only picked up in recent years.
- The Gulf states are still the prime destination for (mostly temporary) African labour.

Due to geographic proximity, historical ties, established diaspora contacts, and ongoing marriage migration between regions of origin and diaspora-hosting countries, the largest numbers of African-born residents living in Europe are from the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia), followed by Nigeria. Morocco is the top country of origin across most EU host countries and residence permit types.

Over the decade analysed (2014–2023), 4.6 million African citizens immigrated to an EU country. Annual inflows of African citizens to the EU rose significantly during this period, from 370,000 in 2014 to over 600,000 in 2023. About two-thirds of African immigrants arrived in a regular manner with visa and residence permits granted prior to their arrival. The most important 'gates of entry' were marriage migration and



family reunion, with numbers entering in this way increasing from 150,000 to 200,000 people per year and accounting for about 50% of all regular arrivals from Africa.

At the same time, the number of Africans admitted as labour migrants also increased from 20,000–30,000 migrant workers per year coming to the EU between 2014 and 2018 to 90,000–100,000 arriving in 2022–2023, accounting for 20%–25% of all regular inflows. Similarly, the number of African students admitted to the EU rose from 30,000 to 70,000 per year over the same period.

Between 2014 and 2024, almost 2 million African citizens sought asylum in Europe. During the period analysed, there was a shift in the origin of asylum seekers away from refugee-producing countries (namely Eritrea and Somalia) to West African countries of origin (which have little or no state-led violence against political opponents and minorities); lately there has also been an increase in arrivals of Algerian, Egyptian, Moroccan and Tunisian asylum seekers. We have to assume that the citizens from this latter group of countries are seeking economic opportunity rather than political protection. Due to their countries of origin, the majority of them have only a small chance of being recognised as refugees. Many of them are, however, granted humanitarian protection or tolerated temporarily, as deportation or repatriation from the EU to countries in Northern and Western Africa is rather uncommon, not least because many of these countries of origin do not cooperate with the EU and its member states on returns of their citizens.

Between 2014 and 2024 about 4 million people entered the EU in an irregular manner, across the Mediterranean or the Atlantic or via the Western Balkans. Of them, one-quarter—a total of 1 million—were citizens of an African country. During the past five years, the share of African citizens among irregular arrivals has increased, but even since 2020 only about one in two irregular migrants entering the EU has been a citizen of an African country.

Observers sometimes suggest that an increase in regular migration would diminish the incentives for irregular migrants to risk making unsafe journeys. A look at the available migration data does not confirm the validity of this hypothesis. The analysed data clearly show there is no evidence of a substitution between the flows of regular migrants and irregular migrants and asylum seekers. Between 2008 and 2014 there was a decline in the number of work permits granted to North Africans, but no significant increase in the numbers of asylum seekers coming from the Maghreb. Rather, African asylum seekers and irregular



migrants came (and many still come) from sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2014 there has been a rise in regular permits issued by EU countries to sub-Saharan citizens. In recent years, asylum requests from North Africans have dominated, with Morocco and Egypt as the main countries of origin, while more residence permits for employment, marriage and family reunion have also been issued to citizens of these countries.

Available survey data indicate that almost one in two adult Africans have thought about moving to another country. Of those, 27% have given emigration ‘a lot’ of thought. The proportions of those considering emigration more seriously are above average in many countries in Western Africa and in some countries in Southern Africa.

North America (31%) and Europe (29%) are the most commonly mentioned ‘preferred destinations’ among potential emigrants. Nevertheless, a notable proportion—approximately 22%—express a preference for relocating within their own regional neighbourhood or elsewhere on the African continent.

The leading motivation for emigration among Africans is the pursuit of better income and employment opportunities, cited by 49% of respondents. Additionally, 29% report that economic hardship or poverty are among the primary factors driving their desire to leave. It should not be overlooked, however, that there is obviously a big gap between the mobility intentions of Africans who are giving migration serious consideration and making proactive preparations, and the ability to actually move to another country. Compared to the number of Africans who declare an interest in leaving their country, only a little more than 1% have actually done so annually. As a result, within 10 years about 10% of this potential has been realised, with one-fifth of these recent migrants actually moving to Europe. It is unclear today to what extent African migrants will move to Europe in the coming decades. This will depend not least on the migration policy decisions taken by EU countries.

We can assume that, during the coming decades, economic growth and socio-economic development (at least in parts of Africa) will increase the number of people with the skills and aspirations to leave their countries of birth and access to a cash income, thus increasing their ability to become mobile, pay for transportation and profit from deploying their human capital in countries with higher wages. At the same time, rapid population growth in sub-Saharan Africa is projected to continue, despite declining fertility throughout the twenty-first and into the twenty-second centuries. This translates into higher numbers of potentially and



(to a lesser extent) actually mobile young adults. These two trends will most likely lead to higher numbers of Africans living outside their countries of birth. Europe in general and the EU in particular will remain one of their preferred destinations.

It remains to be seen to what extent European countries will return to recruiting citizens of North African countries on a larger scale, as they did in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, or start recruiting citizens of sub-Saharan countries as labour to address the foreseeable shortages of labour and skills caused by Europe's declining native population. If this strategy is chosen, much will depend on the ability to recruit and select people with skills that match the future demands of the European labour markets and the ability to integrate.

Keywords Africa – Europe – Migration – Family migration – Marriage migration – Family reunion – Asylum – Education migration – Labour migration – Legal migration – Irregular migration – Irregular border crossings



Introduction



Migration remains a major issue of concern to policymakers throughout the EU and beyond. This reflects the changing perspectives of the people living in the EU. On the one hand, Europe's demographic situation makes future population growth or even the stabilisation of our current population size and workforce dependent on substantial immigration. This will, however, require a selection and admission process based on the already acquired skills of potential migrants, as well as their ability to match European labour market needs and to integrate into European societies. On the other hand, the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers and irregular migrants has made migration a top concern that European citizens want to be addressed and solved.¹ In this context, immigration from Africa to Europe receives a lot of attention despite the fact that the vast majority of people asking for asylum in an EU member state are coming from Latin America, Afghanistan, Syria and South Asia.²

Since the Valletta Summit, held in November 2015³ between leading African and EU politicians, Africa has been at the centre of various approaches aimed at reducing irregular migration and better managing the regular migration flows from Africa to Europe. These have included establishing migration deals with Egypt, Mauritania and Tunisia; creating additional budget lines for the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa;⁴ and providing additional financial resources for African development projects channelled through the European Investment Bank⁵ via its Africa Investment Platform.⁶ They have also encompassed empowering Libya's⁷ and Tunisia's⁸ coastguards, and making considerable investments in the maritime monitoring, surveillance and response capacities of Frontex,⁹ as well as in the search and rescue operations carried out by European coastguards¹⁰ and naval forces.¹¹ The latter—at least temporarily—not only covered areas close

¹ European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 550: EU Challenges and Priorities* (Luxembourg 2024).

² The authors of this publication would like to thank Vít Novotný for his guidance throughout the project, Peter Hefe for his comments on the first draft, Théo Larue and Communicative English for their proofreading and editing support, and Gëzim Lezha for creating the cover image.

³ Council of the European Union, 'Valletta Summit on Migration', 11–12 November 2015.

⁴ EU, 'Emergency Trust Fund for Africa'.

⁵ European Investment Bank, 'How We Work'.

⁶ The Africa Investment Platform is a blended facility matching private investment as part of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument's Global Europe programme.

⁷ European Union External Action Service, 'EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM)' (2021).

⁸ E. Vasques, 'EU Bolsters Tunisian Navy's Border Control, Migrant Interception Capabilities', *Euractiv*, 25 January 2025.

⁹ Frontex, 'Frontex Launching New Operation in Central Med' (Warsaw, 1 February 2018); Frontex, 'Monitoring and Risk Analysis'; Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2024–25* (Warsaw, 2024).

¹⁰ European Commission, 'Frontex Joint Operation "Triton" – Concerted Efforts for Managing Migration Flows in the Central Mediterranean' (31 October 2014).

¹¹ European Parliament, 'European Union Naval Force – Mediterranean Operation Sophia', Legislative Train 04.2025 (DEVE). The mission was phased out in 2019 and ended in early 2020.



to the territorial waters of EU countries, but also the parts of the Mediterranean that fall under Libyan and Tunisian responsibility.¹²

This report takes the following format. The first section outlines the numbers and distribution of Africans living outside their countries of birth. The subsequent section looks at migration flows from Africa to the EU27 during the period 2014–23, analysing the main reasons/‘gates of entry’ for the countries of both origin and destination. This section also compares the legal and irregular avenues of migration from Africa to Europe, including an analysis of asylum requests by African nationals in the EU. The final, data-oriented section examines the potential for future migrations from Africa to Europe. The text concludes with policy recommendations.

Analysis for the present research¹³ is based on data provided by the Afrobarometer survey, Eurostat, the European Union Asylum Agency, Frontex and the UN Population Division.

Africans in the world: an overview of key trends

Available data suggest that Africans are not becoming more mobile. So far, the number of Africans living outside their countries of birth has only grown hand in hand with overall population growth. It has, however, become more common to leave the continent. Compared to the more mobile citizens of North African countries, who usually move to Europe and the Gulf states, the share of sub-Saharan Africans living outside their

¹² For the ongoing discussions and controversies concerning irregular maritime crossings into the EU and search and rescue operations, see EU Fundamental Rights Agency, *Search and Rescue Operations and Fundamental Rights – June 2024 Update* (Vienna, 1 July 2024); A. Orav, *Responsibility for Search and Rescue of Migrants in the Mediterranean*, European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing PE 762.467 (October 2024).

¹³ Part of the analysis presented in this publication builds on earlier work by the authors: R. Muenz and J. Yaryyeva, *International: Migration From and Within Africa*, European Commission, Directorate-General International Partnerships (Brussels, 2022); S. Migali, F. Natale and R. Muenz, *Many More to Come? Migration From and Within Africa*, EU JRC Science for Policy (Luxembourg, 2017).



country of birth has always been and still is considerably smaller. Large numbers of mobile sub-Saharan Africans are refugees. Similarly, internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa account for almost half of global IDPs. Political instability and armed conflicts are the main drivers of African refugee flows. There has been no evidence so far that extreme weather events and environmental degradation due to climate change have led to significant displacement across international borders.

Out of a total of 1.5 billion African-born people, some 46 million Africans live outside their country of origin (Figure 1). The majority of them are young adults, and almost half of them (44%) are women. These mobile Africans account for 3% of Africa's total population¹⁴ and 15% of the world's global migrant population.¹⁵ Over the past 34 years, their absolute number has more than doubled from 20 million in 1990.

This doubling (from 20 to 46 million) has, however, been in line with the overall increase in the African population.¹⁶ In other words: at an individual level, Africans have not become more mobile over the past three decades as their global share among all people living outside their country of birth has not significantly increased.

Today less than a quarter of all Africans living outside their country of birth reside in Europe. The majority of mobile Africans still live in another African country. Only a small share of African migrants residing in the EU are recognised refugees.

¹⁴ UN, Population Division, 'World Population Prospects' (2024).

¹⁵ Global migrant population in 2024: 304 million (UN, Population Division, 'International Migrant Stock' (2024)).

¹⁶ Worldometer, 'Africa Population'.



Figure 1 Africans living abroad: African-born population (stock data) living outside their countries of birth, 1990–2024, absolute numbers (in millions)



Source: UN, Population Division, 'International Migration Stock'.

Origins and destinations of African migrants

In the early 1990s, one in three of the estimated 20 million African-born international migrants (7 million, 34%) lived outside of their native continent. One-fifth of them (4 million, 21%) were residents of today's EU27, European Free Trade Association (EFTA) or the UK.

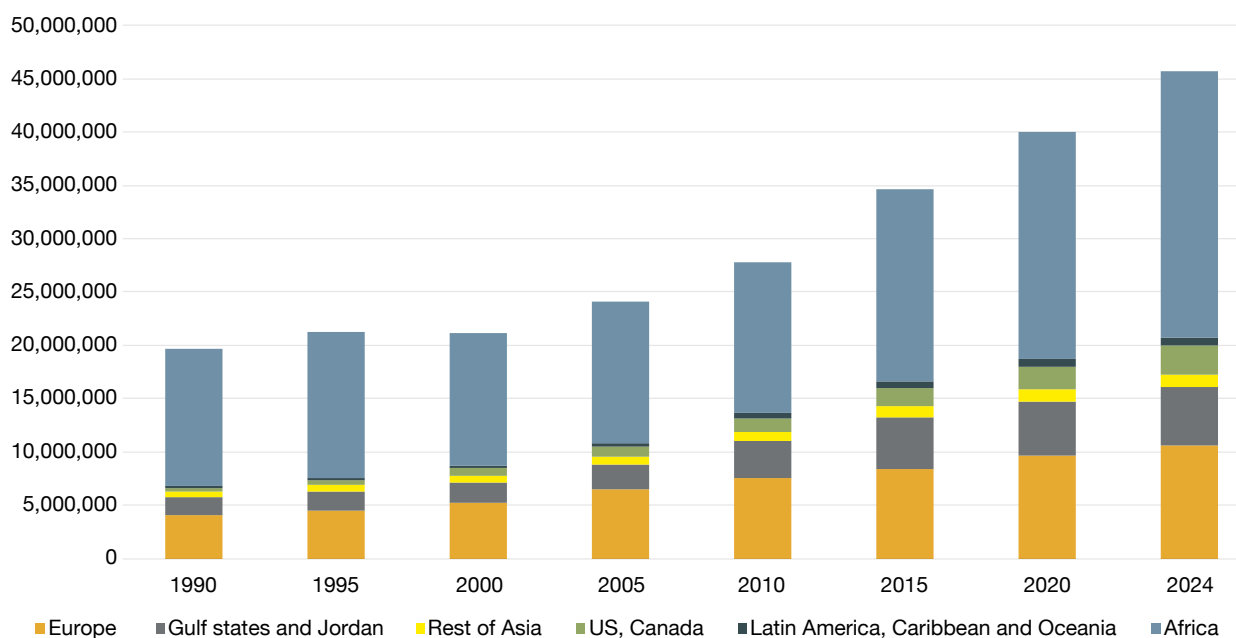
By 2024 an estimated 21 million of the 46 million Africans residing outside their country of birth—almost one in two—had a place of residence outside Africa (see Figures 2 and 3). Of them, 10.6 million were residents of the EU27, EFTA or the UK. In other words, 2% of all people living in Europe (EU27, EFTA, UK)¹⁷ were immigrants born in Africa.

¹⁷ The total population of the EU27, the EFTA and the UK in 2024 was 531 million.



Only a relatively small number of the African migrants residing overseas were recognised refugees.¹⁸ Inside Africa, the numbers and share of refugees among all migrants still living in their native continent was much higher (see Figure 4).

Figure 2 Africans living abroad: African-born population (stock data) by continent of destination, 1990–2024, absolute numbers



Source: UN, Population Division, 'International Migration Stock'.

When it comes to origins and destinations, there is a clear difference between North African¹⁹ and sub-Saharan African migrants. In 2024 some 4.2% of people born in North Africa lived outside their countries

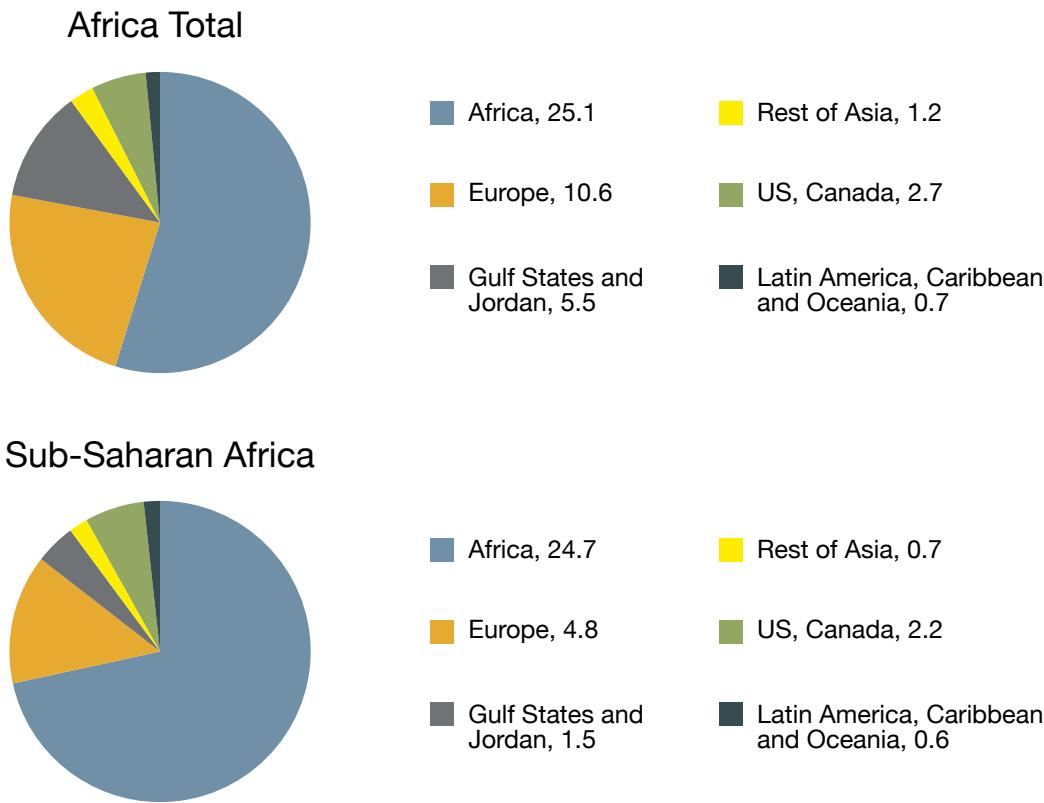
¹⁸ European Union Agency for Asylum, 'Latest Asylum Trends – Annual Analysis' (3 March 2025).

¹⁹ In our analysis, the North African countries are defined as follows: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. The remaining African countries are designated as sub-Saharan.



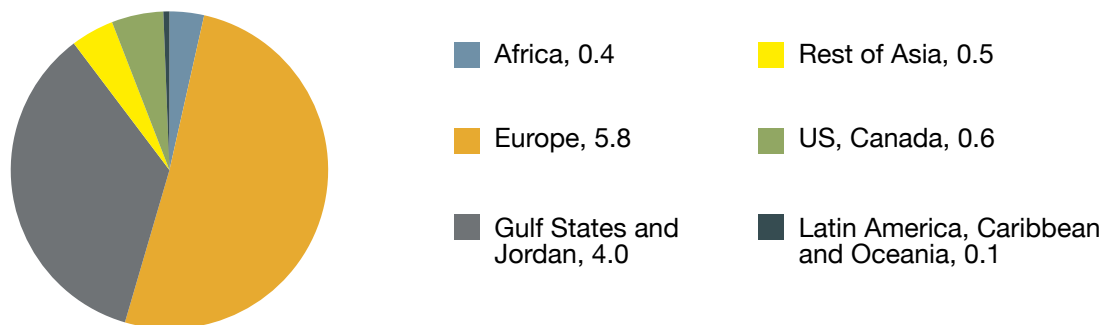
of birth: mostly in Europe and the Gulf states. In contrast, the share of sub-Saharan Africans living outside their countries of birth—some 2.7%—was considerably smaller. The majority of them were living in another African country—mostly in the vicinity of their country of origin. These included considerable numbers of refugees.

Figure 3 Africans living abroad: African-born people living outside their country of birth (stock data) by continent of destination, 2024, absolute numbers (in millions)





North Africa



Source: UN, Population Division, 'International Migration Stock'.

Note: North Africa: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. Sub-Saharan Africa: all other African countries.

The nature and composition of the migration flows vary depending on the main origin and destination countries. Data collected and provided by the UN Population Division indicate the following:²⁰

- Some 55% of internationally mobile Africans are living in another country on their continent—usually in the same African region.
- This is somewhat due to earlier refugee flows between places of conflict and neighbouring countries (mainly in and around the Nile valley, the Horn of Africa and the Big Lakes regions).
- Another element is labour migration. Richer countries in the ECOWAS²¹ region as well as the Republic of South Africa are the main destinations for labour migrants. African migrants also work in Libya and in Egypt.
- A smaller portion of internal African migrants are transiting with the aim of making an irregular entry to Europe. The main transit countries are Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

²⁰ UN, Population Division, 'International Migrant Stock' (2024).

²¹ The Economic Community of West African States, a regional group of 15 countries founded in 1975 to promote economic integration across various sectors. Member countries are Benin, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger had their ECOWAS memberships suspended following military coups in these three countries. They formally withdrew from the organisation on 29 January 2025.



- Europe is a prime destination for regular marriage and family migration,²² as well as student migration. Only a small (albeit gradually growing) volume of African migration to Europe is related to regular labour migration between Africa and the EU.²³
- Europe is also the destination for some irregular migrants, as well as refugees. In recent years about 20%–25% of all people seeking asylum in Europe have been citizens of African countries.
- The Gulf states are a prime destination for Africa's (mostly temporary) labour migrants. This includes a certain volume of irregular labour migrants.
- North America²⁴ and Australia are destinations for student migration, organised refugee resettlement and some cases of marriage/family migration, but the African-born diasporas on these continents are small.

African refugees and IDPs

Seven of the 53 African countries are the sources of most refugee flows within (and partly beyond) the African continent. In recent years registered or recognised refugees have mainly come from three regions: the Nile valley, the Horn of Africa and the Big Lakes region. The main refugee-producing countries in these three regions are the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan (Figure 4). Ongoing political violence and instability in Ethiopia have also led to an outflow of refugees from this (generally refugee-hosting) country. Other major host countries in-

²² Family reunion refers to foreign nationals (spouses and minor children; occasionally parents living outside the EU) obtaining residence permits to join a family member already legally residing in a European destination country. The process reunites existing family units. Marriage migration involves the movement of foreign nationals (living outside the EU) who are marrying an EU citizen or a permanent legal resident and thus acquire the right to a residence permit from a European destination country. This process unites couples that have—so far—not lived together.

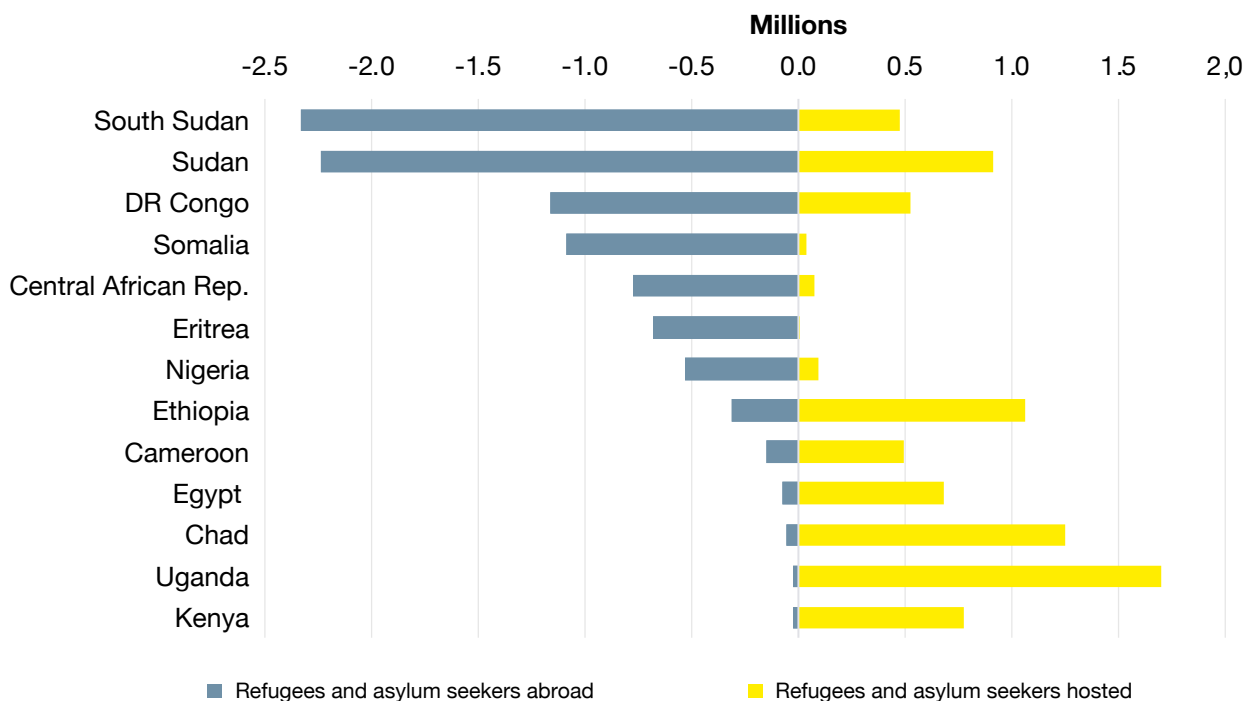
²³ See Figure 11.

²⁴ The vast majority of African Americans are neither born in Africa nor descendants of recent immigrants from Africa. They are largely the descendants of enslaved people who were taken from their African homelands by force to work in the New World between the sixteenth and the early nineteenth centuries (*Britannica*, 'African Americans').



clude Cameroon, Chad, Egypt,²⁵ Kenya and Uganda. A few mainly refugee-sending countries (namely the DR Congo, South Sudan and Sudan) have also hosted considerable numbers of refugees (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 International refugees and asylum seekers in and from Africa (stock data), mid-2024, absolute numbers



Source: UNHCR, 'Refugee Data Finder', data as of 20 July 2025.

Note: There is considerable underreporting of the number of (de facto + de jure) refugees hosted by Egypt. This figure can be assumed to be 9 million instead of 1 million (according to UNHCR Egypt, 'Emergency Response Update').

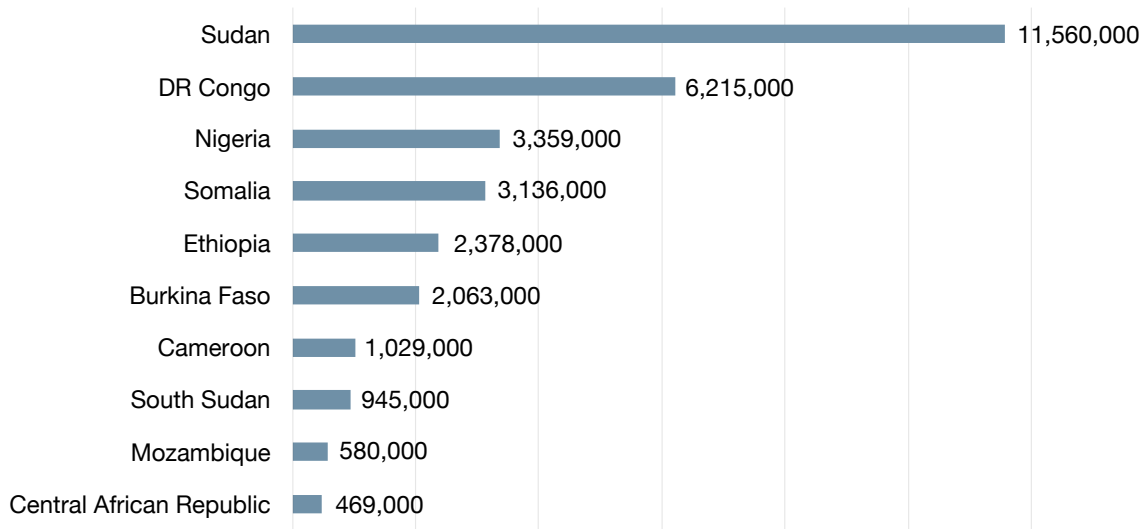
²⁵ UNHCR Egypt, 'Emergency Response Update' (Cairo, 9 April 2025); in mid-2022 the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Egypt estimated that 9 million international migrants were living in Egypt, with most of them originating from Sudan (4 million), Syria (1.5 million) and Yemen (1 million). See IOM, 'IOM Egypt Estimates the Current Number of International Migrants Living in Egypt to 9 Million People Originating From 133 Countries' (7 August 2022). The civil war and the worsening of the humanitarian situation in Sudan have most likely increased that number. At the same time, tight border controls around Rafah have prevented most Palestinians from leaving Gaza Strip towards Egypt despite the large-scale destruction of the war and the human suffering caused by the withholding of food and water supplies, a shortage of fuel, the breakdown of medical services, etc.



IDPs in Sudan and sub-Saharan Africa account for 46% of global IDPs, with millions forced to leave their homes temporarily, for longer periods of time or even permanently.

Political instability, coupled with violence and armed conflict, is the primary driver—particularly in countries experiencing prolonged political crises and civil war. At the end of 2024, Sudan had the highest number of IDPs as a result of political violence, with 11.6 million displaced persons, followed by the DR Congo (6.2 million) and Nigeria (3.4 million). Other severely affected nations included Somalia (3.1 million), Ethiopia (2.4 million) and Burkina Faso (2.0 million).

Figure 5 Internally displaced persons in Africa related to civil war and political violence (stock data), 2024, absolute numbers



Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025*.



Political violence is not the only reason for internal displacement. Natural disasters and extreme weather conditions also play a role. The total number of people affected by such events in the recent past (2019–2024) is about 32 million. The data show that the majority of these people have managed to go home. At the end of 2024 only 5.8 million Africans were still displaced, meaning they had not been able to return to their initial place of residence on a long-term or permanent basis as a result of natural disasters or extreme weather conditions.²⁶

Most of the long-term IDPs driven from their homes by weather and climate-related factors were living in Chad (1.2 million), Ethiopia (757,000) and Somalia (733,000). Notably, Chad has been particularly affected by severe flooding since late July 2024, which has significantly contributed to the high number of IDPs (see Figure 6).²⁷ In contrast to the consequences of violent political conflicts and civil wars, long-term displacement after natural disasters is the exception rather than the rule. And there is no evidence so far to suggest that natural disasters and extreme weather conditions have led to large-scale displacement across international borders.²⁸

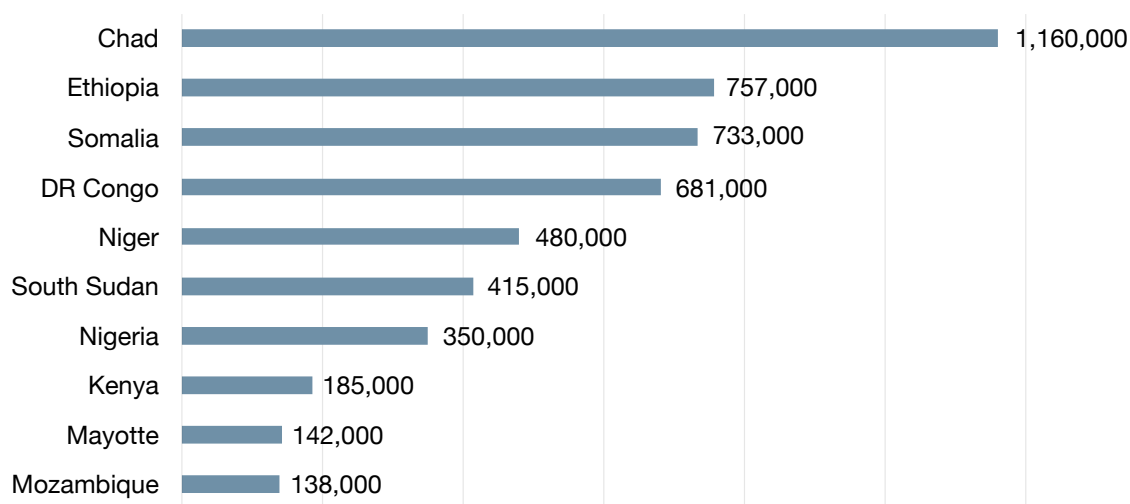
²⁶ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025* (Geneva, 2025).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ M. Czaika and R. Muenz, *Climate Change, Displacement, Mobility and Migration: The State of Evidence, Future Scenarios, Policy Options* (Stockholm: Delmi, 2022).



Figure 6 Internally displaced persons in Africa due to natural disasters (stock data), 2024, absolute numbers



Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, Global Report on Internal Displacement 2025.

Yet, some of the protracted displacements following natural disasters can be explained by ongoing political conflicts and/or severely weakened central governments (in e.g. Chad, the DR Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan), which hamper relief, return and reconstruction efforts or even render them impossible—particularly if disasters occur in remote rural areas or in conflict zones.

African-born people in Europe

African-born people arrive in Europe through a variety of channels. Some are recruited as migrant workers, through a process that has been in place since the 1950s, and others follow these labour migrants



as family members. Still others arrive as students or asylum seekers. A large number of Africans are admitted as newlywed spouses after marrying residents of European countries.

More than one in two African-born people who have left their native continent on a more or less permanent basis now live in a European country. According to UN data, in 2024 Europe was home or host to about 11 million African-born people (Figures 2 and 3) out of the 21 million Africans living outside Africa. Most of those residing in Europe were living in either north-western or southern Europe.

In 2024 the EU27 hosted 9.3 million African-born immigrants, of which 5.8 million were born in North Africa and 3.5 million in sub-Saharan Africa. Europe's western Mediterranean countries are the primary overseas destinations for Africans living abroad. France (4.4 million), Spain (1.4 million) and Italy (1.3 million) host the largest African-born diasporas within the EU. The UK also remains a key host for African-born migrants living overseas (1.5 million).²⁹ This distribution at least partly reflects the role of these countries as former colonial powers, which created economic, linguistic, religious and personal ties between certain parts of Africa and Europe.³⁰

There are various categories of African-born people residing in Europe. First, there are those who were once recruited as labour migrants or who later followed these labour migrants as dependent family members. Most African-born migrants remain in the European destination countries in which they first take up residence. The majority of those arriving between the 1950s and the 1980s are now either retired or have passed away. During the early 2000s recruitment of (usually North) African labour became much less common.³¹

The second category includes those who have arrived more recently, as either foreign students or asylum seekers. In mid-2024, some 0.8 million Africans living in an EU member state were people recognised as refugees, people granted humanitarian protection or asylum seekers with pending claims. Germany (0.2 million) and France (0.2 million) were the two leading EU countries hosting African asylum seekers and refugees.³² Recognised refugees mainly originate from Eritrea and Somalia. Additionally, a certain number

²⁹ According to the most recent UK census, from 2021 (UK, Office for National Statistics, 'Census'). In the UK the majority of African-born residents come from sub-Saharan Africa.

³⁰ P. C. Emmer and L. Lucassen, 'Migration From the Colonies to Western Europe Since 1800', *European History Online*, 13 November 2012.

³¹ Migali, Natale and Muenz, *Many More to Come?*

³² UNHCR, 'Refugee Data Finder'.



of West Africans are now residing as aliens whose asylum claims have been rejected but who have avoided or been spared repatriation.

A third—and quantitatively considerable—group arrives in Europe through marriage (mostly from the Maghreb countries of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) and family reunion. This type of migration is relevant for those European countries that are home and host to larger African diasporas (usually consisting of people with European citizenship or long-term residence permits), which serve as the socio-demographic basis for transnational ‘marriage markets’.

Finally, a number of (mainly North) Africans have been recruited or admitted for economic purposes since 2000. The majority of them have been welcomed on temporary labour and residence permits, but smaller groups were initially admitted for longer periods and are now settled on a more permanent basis. This number has only begun to grow considerably in recent years.

Flows of African migrants arriving in Europe

The majority of African migrants come to Europe in a regular and orderly manner. Most regular immigrants from Africa are North Africans. Between 2014 and 2023, Morocco was and remained the leading country of origin, followed by Algeria and Tunisia. Eurostat data on first residence permits issued by EU countries show that marriage migration and family reunion were not only the main legal pathways for African citizens moving to Europe but also that the number of Africans using these pathways was larger than the number seeking asylum. Recruitment of labour played a much smaller role. In most years in the period analysed, student migration—which might lead to subsequent employment in an EU country—was higher than labour migration, although still much smaller in volume than marriage and family migration. France, Spain and Italy issued the highest numbers of first residence permits to African nationals.

At the same time, Eurostat data indicate that during the last decade (2014–2023) fewer than a third of all newly arriving Africans immigrated without a residence permit, seeking asylum instead. Between 2014 and



2024, most African asylum seekers were young adults aged 18 to 35. The share of female asylum seekers progressively increased, from about one-quarter to about one-third, starting in 2018. Asylum recognition rates varied widely among the various African countries of origin, with Moroccans having the lowest and Somalis the highest recognition rates. There was a higher likelihood of female applicants than male ones being granted protection.

Migration pathways from Africa to Europe

Between 2014 and 2023 annual inflows from Africa to the EU increased from 367,000 (2014) to 480,000–622,000 per annum (since 2021).³³ During these 10 years, a total of 4.6 million African citizens (Figure 7) settled in an EU country—some only for a few years, others on a more permanent basis. Among them were almost 1.8 million citizens of African countries seeking asylum in an EU country (38% of all arrivals).³⁴

The majority of newly admitted Africans were regular immigrants with a residence permit granted prior to their arrival (62%; see Figure 7).³⁵ The main legal gates of entry were marriage migration and family reunion, which gave more than 1.8 million African-born people access to the EU in this period (40% of all Africans immigrating to the EU). Much smaller numbers of Africans were admitted as labour migrants (0.5 million, 10%) or for educational purposes (0.6 million, 12%; Figure 8).³⁶ This shows that labour migration from Africa to the EU only represented a fairly small share of the total inflow.

³³ The analysis only takes into account African-born immigrants who were granted residence permits that entitled them to reside in an EU country for more than 12 months. In this publication, first residence permits issued by EU countries as published by Eurostat (broken down by reason for the permit, origin of the permit holder, issuing country and duration of the permit) are used as a proxy for the flow of legal immigrants.

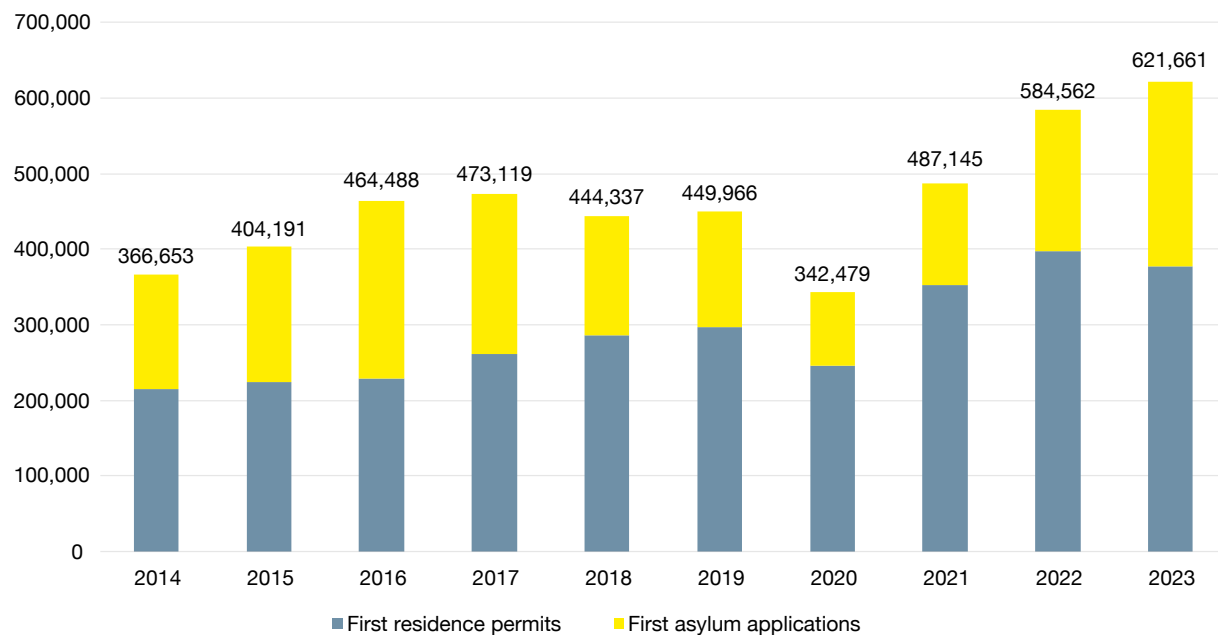
³⁴ Of them, about 1.1 million (62%) had crossed the Mediterranean (or the Atlantic towards the Canary Islands) by boat and entered the EU in an irregular manner (see Frontex, *Frontex Dataset*; Figure 22).

³⁵ In our study, first residence permits issued for a period of 12 months or more are used as a proxy for regular arrivals. First asylum requests serve as a proxy for people arriving without having already been granted a residence permit. A comparison between first asylum requests (Figure 7) and irregular border crossings (Figure 22) shows that more than 60% of all African citizens who asked for asylum during the period 2014–23 had crossed external EU/Schengen borders in an irregular manner. A breakdown by arrival routes indicates that most of them arrived by boat at Spanish, Italian or Greek shores (or were rescued on the high seas). In contrast to this, Latin American asylum seekers usually arrive by plane and enter EU countries in an orderly manner at airports, as the citizens of most Latin American and Caribbean countries do not require travel visas to enter the EU/Schengen area.

³⁶ The analysis only covers residence permits issued for a period of more than 12 months as people staying for shorter periods (e.g. seasonal labour, business visits, contract work, exchange students) do not qualify as immigrants as they do not remain in the country issuing the short-term permit.



Figure 7 First asylum requests made in EU27 countries and regular first residence permits granted by EU27 countries to African nationals (flow data), 2014–2023, absolute numbers

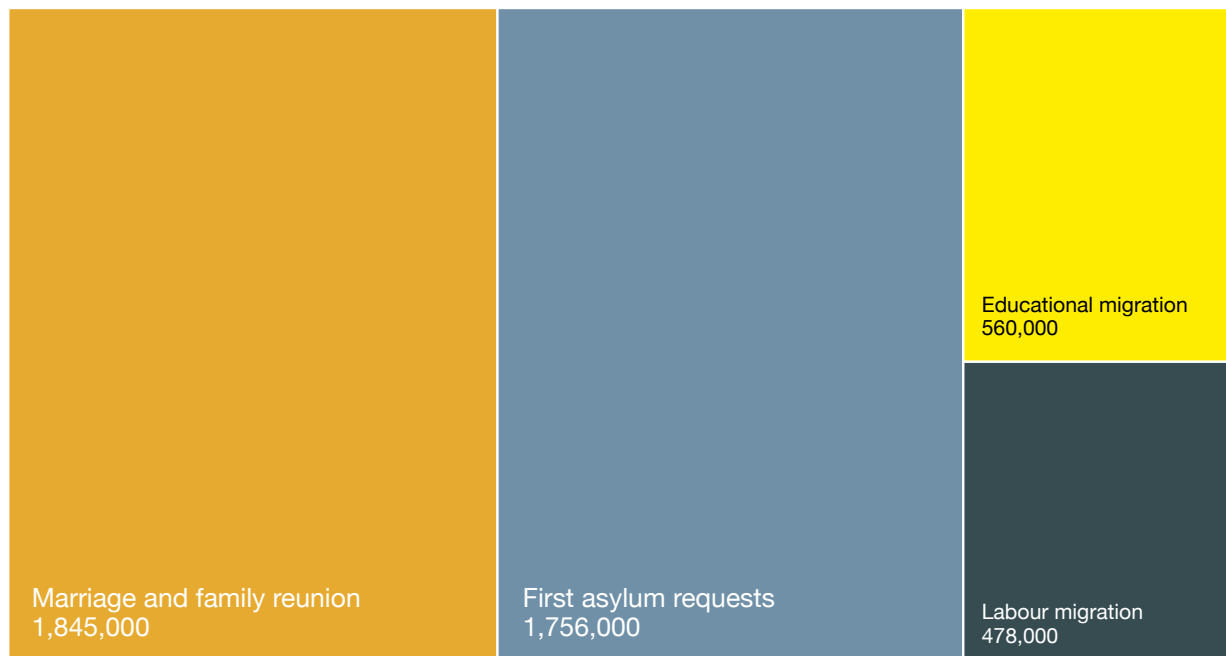


Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst; 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.



Figure 8 Combined inflow of African nationals to the EU27: first residence permits by reason, first asylum requests in the EU27, 2014–2023, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst; 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

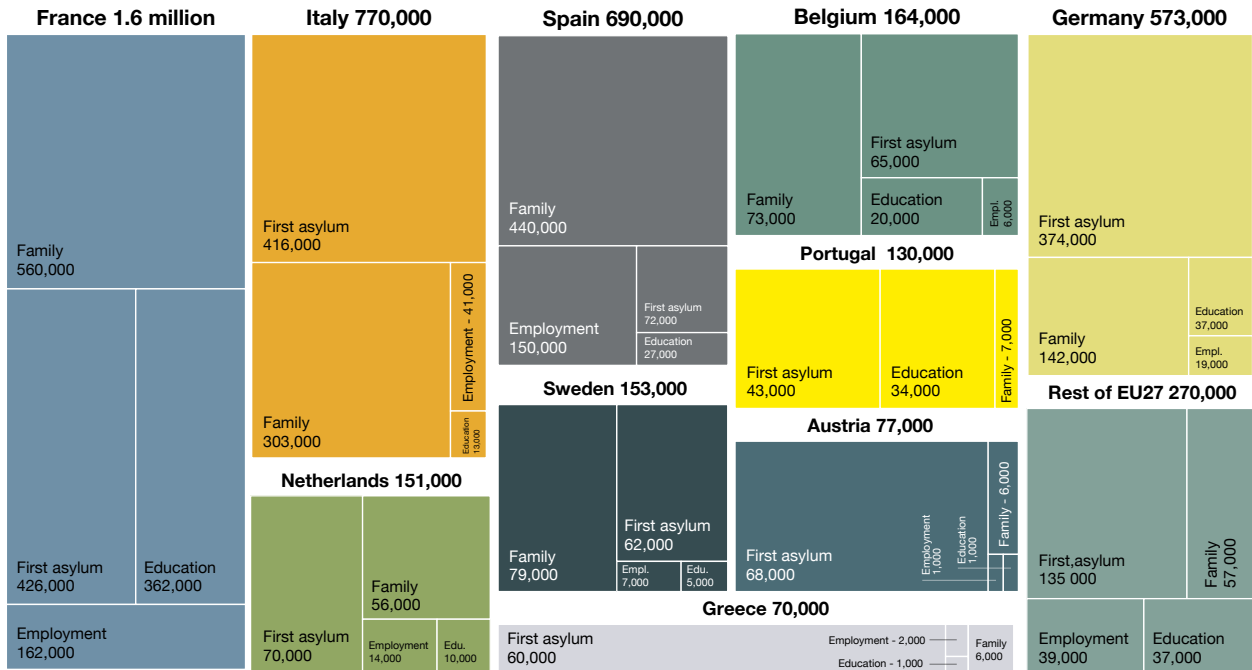
Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.

Between 2014 and 2023, the most important country of destination for African migrants coming to Europe was France (1.6 million), followed by Italy (770,000), Spain (690,000) and Germany (570,000). Smaller numbers of Africans settled in Belgium (160,000), Sweden (150,000), the Netherlands (150,000) and Portugal (130,000).



In Austria, Germany, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands and Portugal, first asylum requests dominated the inflow of African citizens. In Belgium, France, Spain and Sweden, however, marriage migration and family reunion served as the most important gates of entry (Figure 9).

Figure 9 Combined inflow of African nationals by EU destination country, 2014–23, first residence permits by reason, first asylum requests, top-10 EU countries, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst; 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.



Regular migration from Africa to Europe

During the period analysed (2013–24), 2.9 million regular African migrants arrived in the EU. Initially regular flows accounted for only about 50% of total inflows.³⁷ In recent years, however, more than two-thirds of all Africans settling (at least temporarily) in the EU have been regular migrants with valid first residence permits. With the notable exception of 2020, which was marked by Covid-19–related restrictions, annual numbers have been increasing steadily: starting at 214,000 in 2014 and almost doubling to 397,000 in 2022. The 2023 level was very similar to that of 2022 (377,000; see Figure 7).

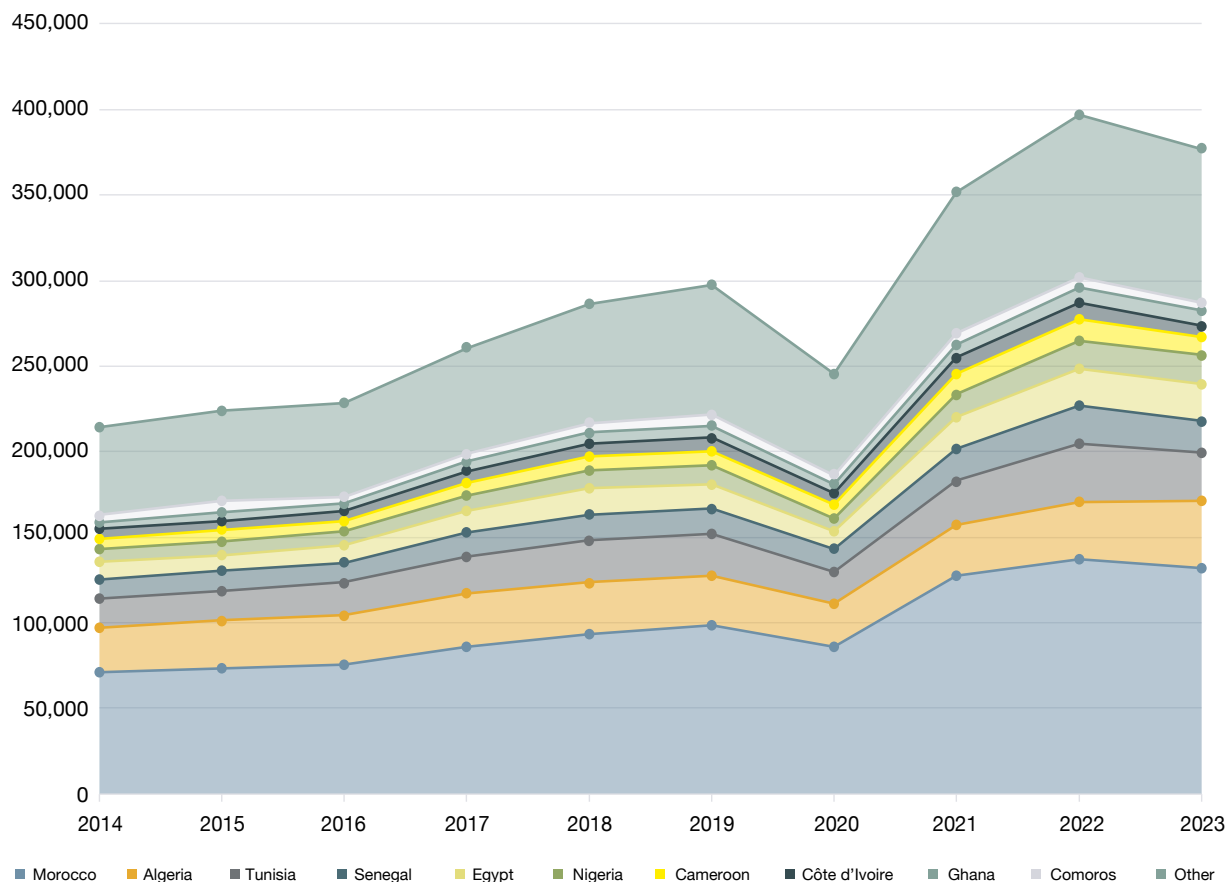
Of all regular immigrants arriving on the basis of residence permits, 57% were North Africans. For the entire period, Morocco remained the leading country of origin, followed by Algeria and Tunisia. More recently, Egypt has also become a more significant country of origin (see Figure 10). All of these countries are African nations with Muslim majority populations.

The remaining 43% of regular African immigrants to Europe over the period 2014 to 2023 came from sub-Saharan countries. During these years, Senegalese formed the largest sub-Saharan group, followed by Nigerians, Ivorians and Ghanaians (Figure 10). Inflows from these countries also added considerable numbers of Christians to Europe's resident population.

³⁷ Regular migrants are defined as people who received a first residence permit for the purpose of work or education or for family reasons (marriage or reunion) for a period of 12+ months. People arriving on short-term permits are not considered migrants.



Figure 10 Regular immigration of Africans to Europe: first residence permits issued by EU27 countries, 2014–2023, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst.

Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.



Legal immigration to the EU: first residence permits

Orderly and legal immigration from Africa to Europe is based on several categories of residence permits issued for the purposes of work or education or for family reasons. Family migration was the most important gate of entry in the years 2013–24, followed by education migration and labour migration. France was the main country of destination for all three of these migration pathways and, as shown in the next section, also for refugee migration. Among regular arrivals from Africa, women were overrepresented in the marriage migration and family reunion category, but heavily underrepresented among those arriving for the purpose of work.

Data for the period analysed clearly indicate that marriage to an EU citizen (or long-term resident) and—to a lesser degree—conventional family reunion were and remain the most important legal gates of entry for African citizens migrating to and staying in Europe. This flow is dominated by brides and grooms from the Maghreb, even though the origins of marriage migration flows are becoming more diverse. Labour migration initially played only a small role after a sharp reduction during the early 2000s, but it has increased in recent years.

During the period 2014–16, EU countries issued some 150,000 to 160,000 first residence permits each year to newlywed non-EU partners and dependent family members coming from Africa. In the years 2017–19 this flow increased to almost 200,000 per year. It fell temporarily to 150,000 in 2020 due to a declining number of marriages, impeded by Covid-19–related travel restrictions, but bounced back to more than 200,000 in 2021–3 (see Figure 11).

In the 1970s and 1980s, family migration to Europe mainly consisted of conventional family reunion. Settled labour migrants who had come a few years earlier were joined by their spouses and minor children.³⁸ Today legal family migration is predominantly linked to marriage migration, mainly from the Maghreb into the well-established Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian diasporas in Europe, namely in France, Italy, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands. This is usually the result of the EU-born children and grandchildren of immigrants (mostly with EU citizenship) marrying (more or less) distant relatives, members of communities in

³⁸ K. Natter, *Fifty Years of Maghreb Emigration: How States Shaped Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian Emigration*, International Migration Institute, Working Paper 95 (Oxford, 2014).



contact with diasporas, or other people still living in the ancestral lands of their parents or grandparents.³⁹ In many cases these marriages are arranged by relatives or trusted go-betweens.⁴⁰ The subsequent reunion between the bride and groom usually takes place in Europe.⁴¹

Available data do not distinguish between marriage migration and classical family reunion, but a comparison with the volume of labour migration from the same countries of origin (which might lead to conventional family reunion) gives a clear idea of the high frequency of transnational marriages which lead to the subsequent immigration of the bride or the groom.

A few examples from the period 2014–23 (comparing Figures 12 and 13):

- France issued 170,000 first residence permits for family reasons to Algerian citizens, but only 10,000 first residence permits to labour migrants from Algeria.⁴²
- Italy issued 131,000 first residence permits for family reasons to Moroccan citizens, but only 10,000 first residence permits to labour migrants from Morocco.⁴³
- Germany issued 17,000 first residence permits for family reasons to Nigerian citizens, but only 1,000 first residence permits to labour migrants from Nigeria.⁴⁴

In contrast to the growing inflow of marriage migrants, first residence permits awarded to Africans for long-term work/occupation reasons (not counting short-term and seasonal labour) fell from levels of 80,000–100,000 annually in the early 2000s to just 28,000 at the beginning of the analysed period (2014),

³⁹ K. Charsley (ed.), *Transnational Marriage: New Perspectives From Europe and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2012); F. A. Mohn, 'Marriage Migration and the Economic Trajectories of First- and Second-Generation Immigrants in Norway', *Acta Sociologica* 63/3 (2019).

⁴⁰ S. Carol, E. Ersanilli and M. Wagner, 'Spousal Choice Among the Children of Turkish and Moroccan Immigrants in Six European Countries: Transnational Spouse or Co-Ethnic Migrant?', *International Migration Review* 48/2 (2014); J. Lievens, 'Family-Forming Migration From Turkey and Morocco to Belgium: The Demand for Marriage Partners From the Countries of Origin', *International Migration Review* 33/3 (1999).

⁴¹ In the UK similar forms of marriage migration take place between newlywed South Asians (from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan) and their UK-based partners; see, for example, A. Shaw, 'The Arranged Transnational Cousin Marriages of British Pakistanis: Critique, Dissent and Cultural Continuity', *Contemporary South Asia* 15/2 (2006).

⁴² First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.

⁴³ First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.

⁴⁴ First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.



before decreasing further to the all-time low of the 22,000 African migrant workers who were admitted to the EU27 in 2015–16.⁴⁵ This was mainly a consequence of the EU enlargements since 2004. In many cases, jobs that had previously been filled between the 1950s and the early 2000s by (mainly North) Africans were suddenly being filled by EU citizens from Eastern/Central and South-Eastern Europe, who were benefiting from the free movement of labour (which had only been fully implemented after a transitional period of seven years between their home countries' accession to the EU and free access to the EU labour markets).

This trend has, however, been reversed in recent years. In the late 2010s, the number of new long-term residence permits granted to African workers (excluding seasonal labour) increased, reaching 43,000 in 2019 and then 68,000 in 2021 (Figure 9). The years 2022 and 2023 witnessed record high numbers of long-term work permits⁴⁶ being issued to African nationals: 105,000 and 94,000 respectively, which represents an almost five-fold increase compared to the all-time low 10 years earlier.

In the early 2000s, the legal migration of African students to EU countries did not play a significant role in migration flows. Just 30,000 residence permits (valid for a period of 12+ months) were issued annually. Since 2014 this flow of educational migrants from Africa has been on the rise, surpassing 70,000 for the first time ever in 2023 (Figure 11).

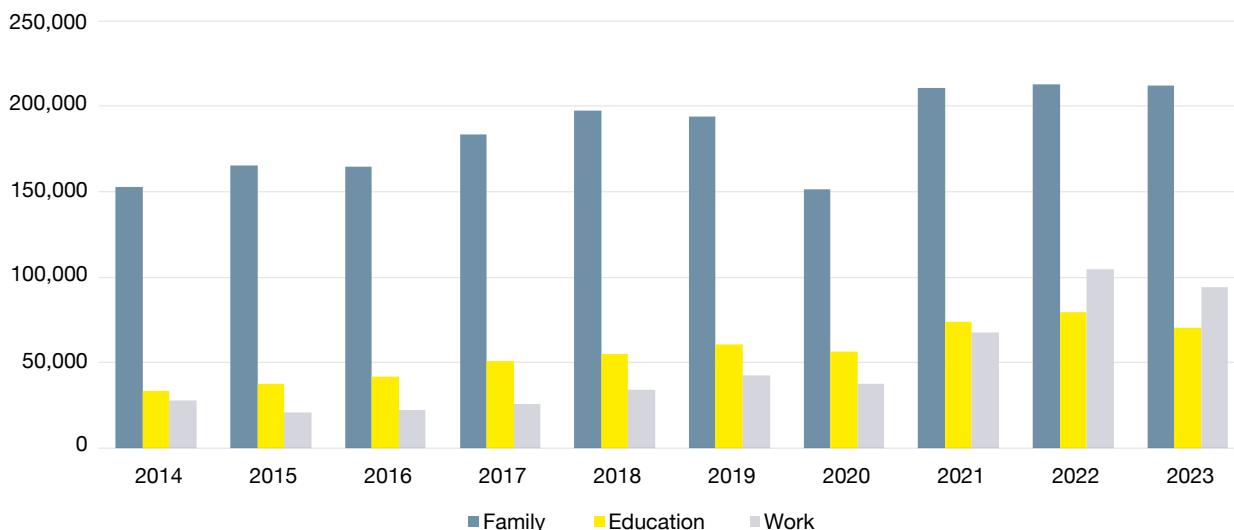
France appears to be the main EU destination for African students. The country issued 362,000 education permits between 2014 and 2023—far more than Portugal (43,000) or Germany (37,000), which rank second and third. Among educational migrants (like those coming via other pathways) Moroccan nationals formed the largest group, particularly in France (94,000), Spain (17,000) and Germany (8,000). Other key countries of origin included Algeria, Tunisia, Senegal and Cameroon. In line with its historical, colonial and linguistic ties, Portugal primarily issued educational permits to African students from Angola, Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and Sao Tomé and Príncipe (Figure 14).

⁴⁵ C. Alcidi, N. Laurentsyeve and A. W. Ahmad Yar, *Legal Migration Pathways Across the Mediterranean: Achievements, Obstacles and the Way Forward*, EMNES Policy Paper no. 9 (June 2019).

⁴⁶ Permits issued for a period of more than 12 months.



Figure 11 Regular immigration from Africa to the EU27: marriage and family reunion, labour migration, educational migration, first residence permits by gate of entry, 2014–2023, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst.

Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.

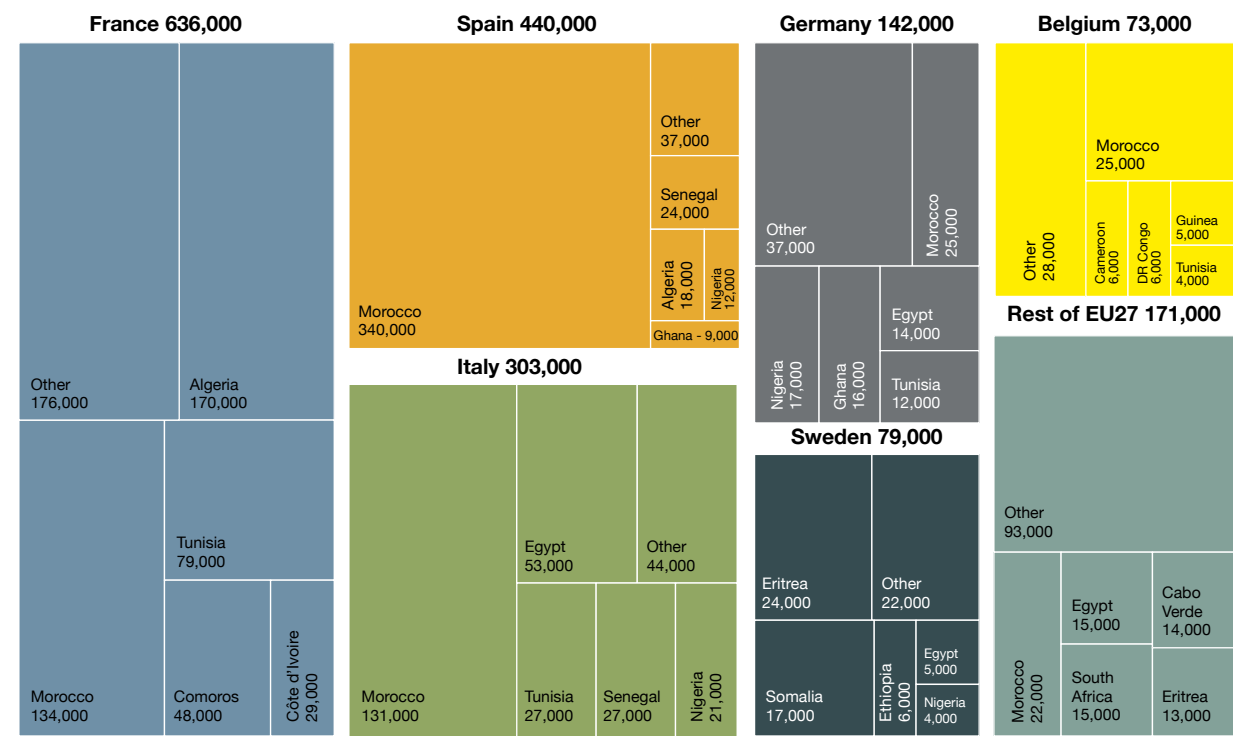
Looking at the regular inflows across recipient countries and immigration categories, between 2014 and 2023, France, Spain and Italy issued the highest numbers of first residence permits to African nationals for both marriage/family and employment reasons, with France leading in all categories (636,000 marriage/family, 363,000 education and 162,000 employment), followed by Spain (440,000 marriage/family, 150,000 employment and 27,000 education) and Italy (303,000 marriage/family and 41,000 employment, but only 6,000 education; see Figures 9, 12 and 13).

Turning to sending countries, Morocco was the top country of origin across nearly all relevant EU destination countries and permit types, dominating marriage/family-related permits in Spain (340,000), France (134,000) and Italy (131,000), and employment permits in Spain (90,000) and France (54,000). Other key countries of origin included Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Senegal and Nigeria, with regional patterns reflecting



historical/colonial and linguistic ties, but also the earlier recruitment of soldiers and labour⁴⁷ which created the demographic basis for today's diasporas. Germany and Sweden had lower numbers of regular immigrants from Africa—in part reflecting the lack of colonial impact—but more diverse origin profiles, which included Eritrea, Somalia⁴⁸ and Ghana. Employment-related permits in Portugal largely reflected Portuguese-speaking connections and the Portuguese colonial past, with the majority of residence permits issued to nationals of Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau and Angola (Figures 12 and 13).

Figure 12 First residence permits for marriage/family reasons, 2014–2023, by top countries of destination and top countries of origin, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst.

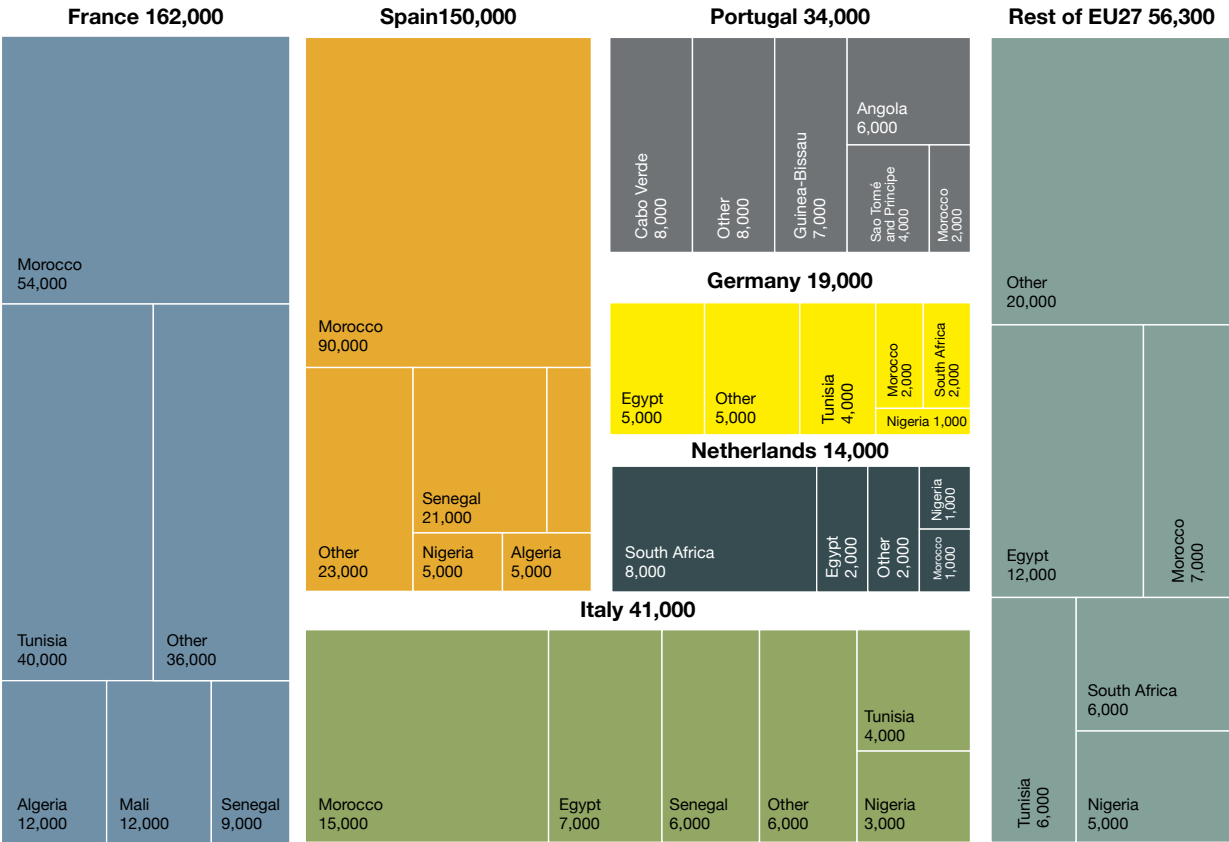
Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.

⁴⁷ Emmer and Lucassen, 'Migration From the Colonies to Western Europe Since 1800'.

⁴⁸ The majority of Eritreans and Somalis arrived as labour migrants.



Figure 13 First residence permits for employment reasons, 2014–2023, by top countries of destination and top countries of origin, absolute numbers

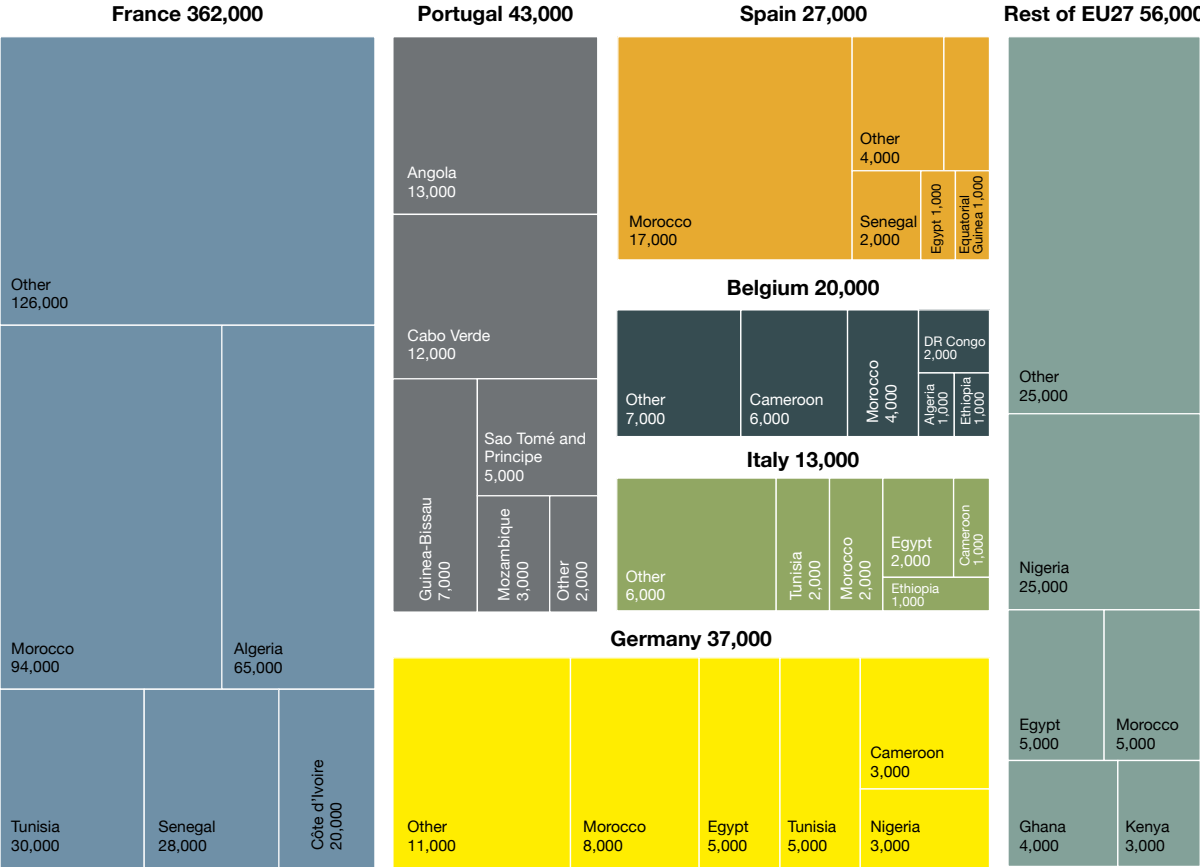


Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst.

Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.



Figure 14 First residence permits for education reasons, 2014–2023, by top countries of destination and top countries of origin, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst.

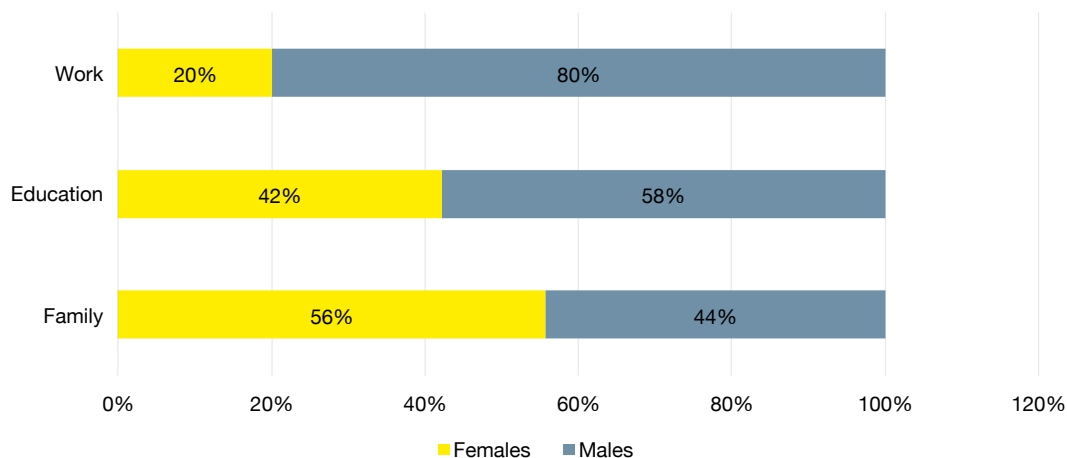
Note: First residence permits with a duration of 12+ months.



Regular migration from Africa to Europe clearly has a gendered structure. While the total number of African men and women arriving in a regular manner with a visa and a residence permit is about the same, their distribution by main gate of entry differs considerably, meaning that trajectories and gates of entry are—on average—different for men and women.

Women are overrepresented among those coming via marriage migration and family reunion (in 2023, 56% of visas were granted for this reason). Women are slightly underrepresented among African students admitted to EU countries (in 2023, 42%). In contrast, men constitute the vast majority of regular labour migrants moving from Africa to an EU country (in 2023, 80%). The admission of African women as labour migrants remains an exception (see Figure 15).

Figure 15 Regular immigration to the EU27 from Africa: marriage and family reunion, labour migration, educational migration by gender, 2023 (% of total number of first residence permits issued for each gate of entry)



Source: Eurostat, 'First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity and Citizenship', migr_resfirst.

Note: Data for Slovakia and Malta are missing. Total number of first permits issued for a period of 12+ months.



Asylum requests

Asylum requests made by African citizens in the EU fluctuated in the period 2014 to 2024. Peaks appeared in the years 2016–2017 as well as 2023–2024, when requests surpassed 200,000 per year. A low was recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic, with 100,000 requests in 2020. Until 2020, asylum seekers mainly came from West Africa and the Horn. Since 2021 inflows of asylum seekers have been dominated by North Africans.⁴⁹

Between 2014 and 2024, almost 2 million Africans applied for (first) asylum in an EU country. France (484,000), Italy (469,000) and Germany (408,000) were the top destinations. These three countries alone accounted for almost 70% of all first asylum applications made by African citizens in the EU (Figure 19).

France received the highest number of requests from Guinea (61,000), the DR Congo (56,000) and Côte d'Ivoire (54,000). Italy's top countries of origin were Nigeria (94,000), Egypt (46,000) and Gambia (40,000), while Germany reported the largest numbers from Eritrea (79,000), Nigeria (61,000) and Somalia (58,000).

Spain (102,000 first asylum requests) and the Netherlands (79,000) had lower totals, with applications to Spain coming mostly from Moroccans, Malians and Senegalese, while the Netherlands recorded higher numbers of applicants from Eritrea, Algeria and Morocco. The rest of the EU27 accounted for an additional 370,000 applications, with key countries of origin including Somalia (57,000), Morocco (51,000) and Eritrea (46,000).

The 2 million African citizens requesting (first) asylum in an EU country (2014–2024) represents a reversal of the situation observed at the beginning of the 21st century. The number of asylum requests made by African citizens arriving in EU countries was small during the early 2000s (about 60,000 to 70,000 per year).⁵⁰ They started to rise in 2011–12 and peaked in 2016 (240,000). In 2020 the number of requests dropped to 100,000 (which can be partly explained by Covid-19–related travel restrictions and administrative shortcomings), but has been increasing again since (in 2021: 140,000; in 2022: 190,000). In 2023 some

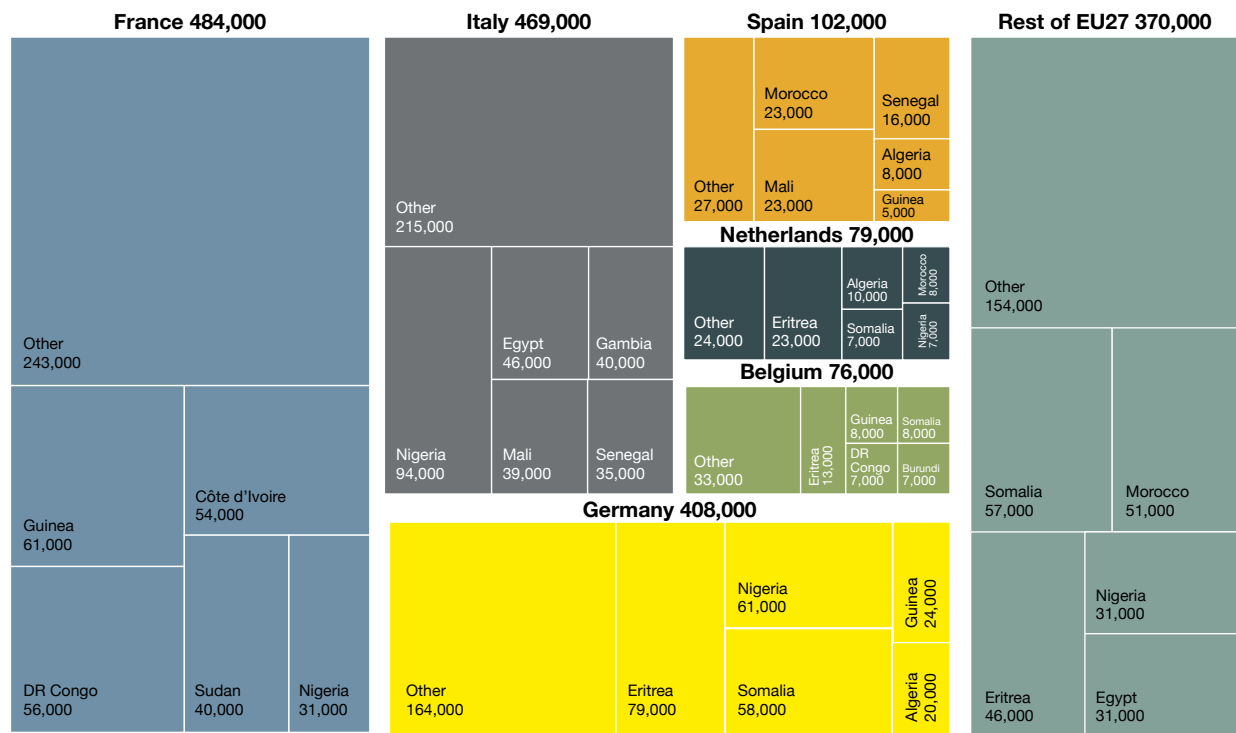
⁴⁹ Only about 60% of these asylum seekers arrived in an irregular manner, crossing an external EU/Schengen border without valid documents and permits. The other 40% of African asylum seekers consisted of people (a) arriving in a regular manner with a Schengen visa or residence permit, but later requesting asylum; (b) arriving after an orderly scrutiny process through family reunion with an already established refugee entitled to sponsor his/her spouse and minor children and registered as asylum seekers after arrival; or (c) arriving in an irregular manner and not detected when crossing an external EU/Schengen border, but asking for asylum at a later stage (see also the section on irregular border crossings).

⁵⁰ See Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex' (2024), [migr_asyappctza](#).



245,000 African citizens requested asylum in an EU country, the highest number registered so far within a year. In 2024 numbers were only slightly lower (230,000; see Figure 17).⁵¹

Figure 16 First asylum applications, 2014–2024, by top countries of destination and top countries of origin, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: 2024 figures for Portugal are missing.

⁵¹ The figures for Portugal are missing from the 2024 Eurostat statistics.



Structure of asylum applications

The 2 million first asylum requests from African citizens recorded in an EU country between 2014 and 2024 accounted for just under a quarter of all applications submitted in the EU during this period (EU27: 8.5 million). If one adds the 4.3 million Ukrainians living under temporary protection in the EU⁵² to this total figure, the share of Africans requesting protection drops to 16%.⁵³

Major countries of origin were those experiencing permanent political repression or military conflict: Somalia, Eritrea and the DR Congo. In recent years Mali has joined this group, while refugees leaving civil war-torn Sudan have not yet reached Europe in substantial numbers.⁵⁴ All the aforementioned countries also had much larger refugee populations within Africa. However, between 2021 and 2024 an increase in asylum requests made by citizens of Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia could be observed in the EU. At the same time, first asylum requests from Eritreans and Nigerians fell, while requests from Somalians continued to play an important role.

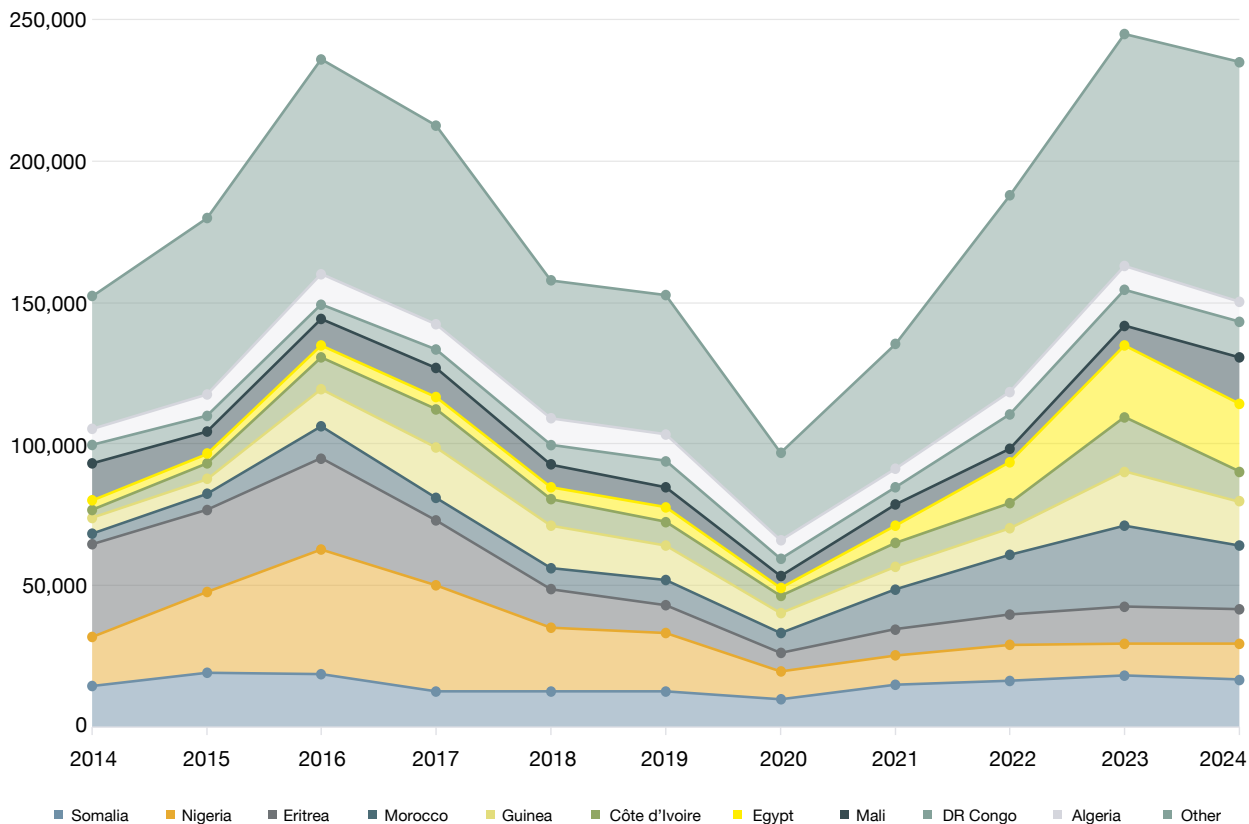
⁵² Eurostat, '4.3 Million Under Temporary Protection in December 2024', 24 February 2025.

⁵³ With Africans comprising 2 million out of the total of 12.8 million first asylum seekers and Ukrainians under temporary protection.

⁵⁴ Most of them are in Egypt and South Sudan.



Figure 17 First asylum applications made by African citizens in the EU27 by country of citizenship, 2014–2024, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: Data for Portugal are missing from the 2024 Eurostat statistics.



During the first part of the analysed period, the fluctuations in asylum requests were mainly related to the rise (until 2016), subsequent decline (2016–2020) and modest resurgence (2021 and 2022) of asylum claims made by citizens of sub-Saharan African countries (primarily Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Guinea, Nigeria and the DR Congo).

Until 2020 asylum requests from North African citizens were not very common. However, they have been increasing during the current decade: from 21,000 in 2020 to 76,000 in 2023, which was the highest number of asylum requests made by North Africans ever recorded in the EU. In 2024 the number reached almost the same level (70,000). The main countries of origin for North African asylum seekers were Egypt and Morocco; to a much lesser extent, Algeria; and most recently also Tunisia.

Within Africa, the rise of refugee populations and IDPs can clearly be seen to be a result of civil wars (in the DR Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan) or oppressive governments (Eritrea and Sudan; see Figure 4). However, it is much more difficult to understand the circumstances and triggers that lead to fluctuations in the arrival of African asylum seekers in Europe. This is particularly true for the sudden rise in the numbers of asylum seekers coming from North African countries, all of which are included in the 2025 EU list of safe countries of origin.⁵⁵

In the early 2000s the number of asylum requests made by African nationals was quite small. After 2012 asylum and humanitarian protection channels became a major gate of entry, first for sub-Saharan Africans and later also for North Africans, accounting for almost half of all arrivals from Africa (during the period 2014–19). In recent years, the share of asylum seekers has fallen to comprise only a third of all Africans migrating to the EU.⁵⁶

The initial increase in asylum claims by African citizens that began in 2013 was linked to two different developments. On the one hand, numbers of irregular arrivals increased, with no single reason to explain this genuine increase. On the other hand, the intensification of controls at disembarkation points in Sicily and Calabria in Italy, in Spain, and in Greece and the Western Balkans not only gave more visibility to irregular entries, but also led more often to asylum requests from people who might otherwise not have

⁵⁵ A. Ismail, 'EU Issues List of "Safe Countries" for Migrant Returns that Includes Egypt, Tunisia', *Reuters*, 16 April 2025.

⁵⁶ Please also see the section on irregular border crossings for more information.



asked for protection but instead tried to integrate directly into the informal economy. In contrast to this, since 2015–2016 most irregular migrants have been registered upon arrival on European shores and yet many of them moved on to north-western Europe before seeking asylum. These secondary movements have led to a massive redistribution of African asylum seekers, with France hosting the largest and Germany the third-largest numbers of African asylum seekers and recognised refugees, despite the fact that there were (almost) no irregular arrivals on French or German shores (see Figure 16).

Table 1 Asylum applications of African nationals in EU27, 2024

Asylum seekers with African citizenship	
Egypt	23,930
Morocco	22,530
Somalia	16,775
Mali	16,535
Guinea	15,350
Tunisia	12,685
Nigeria	12,665
DR Congo	12,455
Senegal	12,320
Eritrea	12,295
Côte d'Ivoire	10,585
Sudan	9,550
Algeria	7,070
Cameroon	5,695
Mauritania	5,095
Burkina Faso	4,670



Ethiopia	4,485
Gambia	4,345
Angola	3,895
Sierra Leone	2,510
Other	19,445
Total	234,885

Source: Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: Data for Portugal are missing from the 2024 Eurostat statistics.

Many African asylum seekers do not arrive from countries characterised by high levels of internal state-led repression or violence against political opponents or members of ethnic/religious minorities. This is the case, for example, for citizens of Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Morocco, Nigeria and Tunisia. These countries have not produced significant refugee populations within Africa in the recent past, yet many of their citizens have asked for asylum in Europe.⁵⁷ However, in some African countries—for example, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali and Nigeria—violence is perpetrated on a regular basis by radicalised non-state actors and (occasionally violent and deadly) conflicts can erupt between sedentary farmers and semi-nomadic herders over land use.⁵⁸

Claiming asylum (even if the chances of being granted refugee status are very small⁵⁹) at least gives citizens of the Maghreb and West African countries access to temporary status, along with some financial support, access to housing and healthcare, and, in the case of arriving minors, also to education.

In 2024 around 230,000 African citizens asked for asylum in an EU member state, representing one in four asylum seekers in that year. Egyptians and Moroccans formed the largest groups, followed by citizens of Somalia, Mali, Guinea and Tunisia (see Figure 14 and Table 1).

⁵⁷ Between 2014 and 2024, Algeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Guinea, Morocco and Nigeria were among the top-10 countries of origin for Africans asking for asylum in the EU (see Figure 17).

⁵⁸ T. N. Pinto, 'Farmer–Herder Tensions Ignite Across Africa', *GIS Reports Online*, 5 February 2025.

⁵⁹ European Union Agency for Asylum, 'Latest Asylum Trends'.



Observers sometimes suggest that an increase in regular migration would diminish the incentives for irregular migrants to risk making unsafe journeys.⁶⁰ When comparing origins and annual numbers of regular African migrants arriving with a valid residence permit, African asylum seekers and citizens of African countries arriving via irregular border crossings (a subgroup of asylum seekers), the data does not confirm the validity of this hypothesis.

The analysed data clearly show that in the case of African migration to Europe there is no evidence of a substitution between the flows of regular migrants and asylum seekers and irregular entries. Between 2008 and 2014, the number of work permits issued to North Africans by southern EU countries declined, but there was no corresponding significant rise in the number of asylum seekers from the Maghreb. Rather, African asylum seekers and irregular migrants came (and many still come) from sub-Saharan Africa (with a peak of 200,000 first asylum requests in 2016–17).⁶¹ Since 2014 there has been a rise in regular permits issued by EU countries to sub-Saharan citizens: from 89,000 in 2014 to 155,000 in 2023. More recently, asylum requests from North Africans have become dominant, with Morocco and Egypt as the main countries of origin (Table 1), while more residence permits for employment, marriage and family reunion have also been issued to citizens of North African countries.

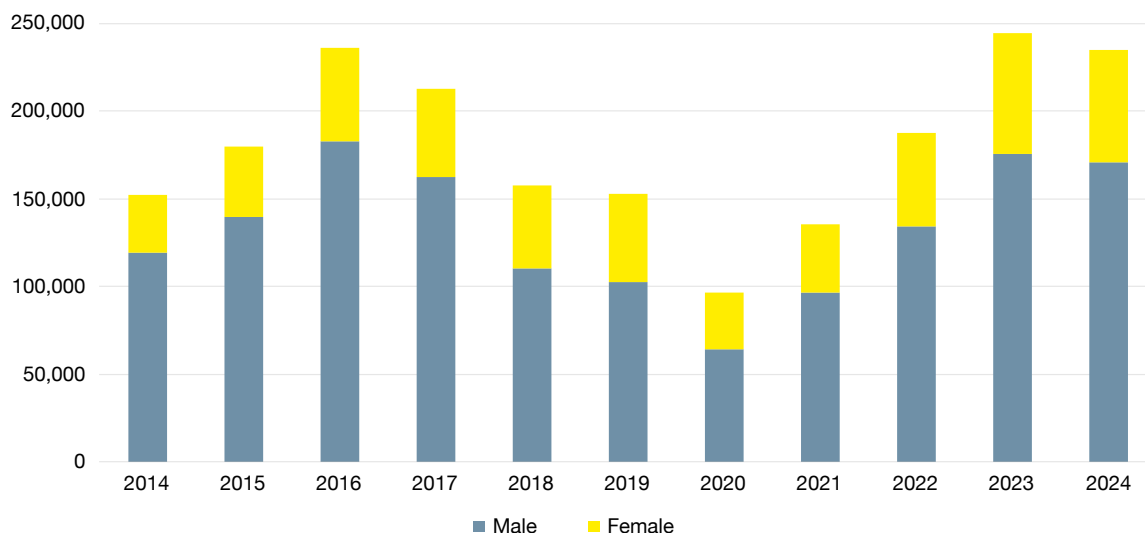
Between 2014 and 2017, only about a quarter of all Africans seeking asylum in Europe were women. Since 2018 the share of women among all African asylum seekers has increased to about a third (Figure 18).

⁶⁰ For example: J. Bither and A. Ziebarth, *Creating Legal Pathways to Reduce Irregular Migration? What We Can Learn From Germany's 'Western Balkan Regulation'*, Migration Strategy Group on International Development, Robert Bosch Foundation (Stuttgart, 2018).

⁶¹ Migali, Natale and Muenz, *Many More to Come?*



Figure 18 First asylum applications of African citizens by gender, 2014–2024, absolute numbers



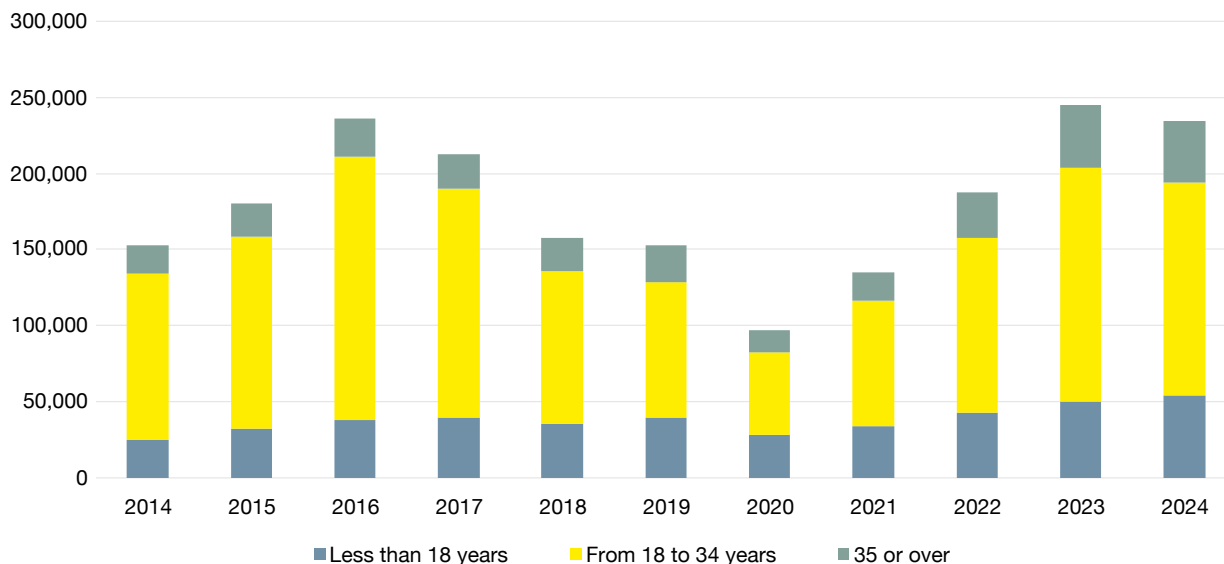
Source: Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: Data for Portugal are missing from the 2024 Eurostat statistics.

A breakdown by age shows that during the past decade, the vast majority of African asylum seekers were young adults between the ages of 18 and 35. Depending on the year of arrival, between 16% and 25% were below the age of 18: some were travelling with their mothers, fathers or an older sibling, but most were unaccompanied minors reaching Europe on their own. In absolute terms, the number of African minors arriving as asylum seekers has doubled from 25,000 in 2014 to 50,000 in 2023 and 54,000 in 2024 (see Figure 19).



Figure 19 First asylum applications made by African citizens by age, 2014–2024, absolute num-



bers

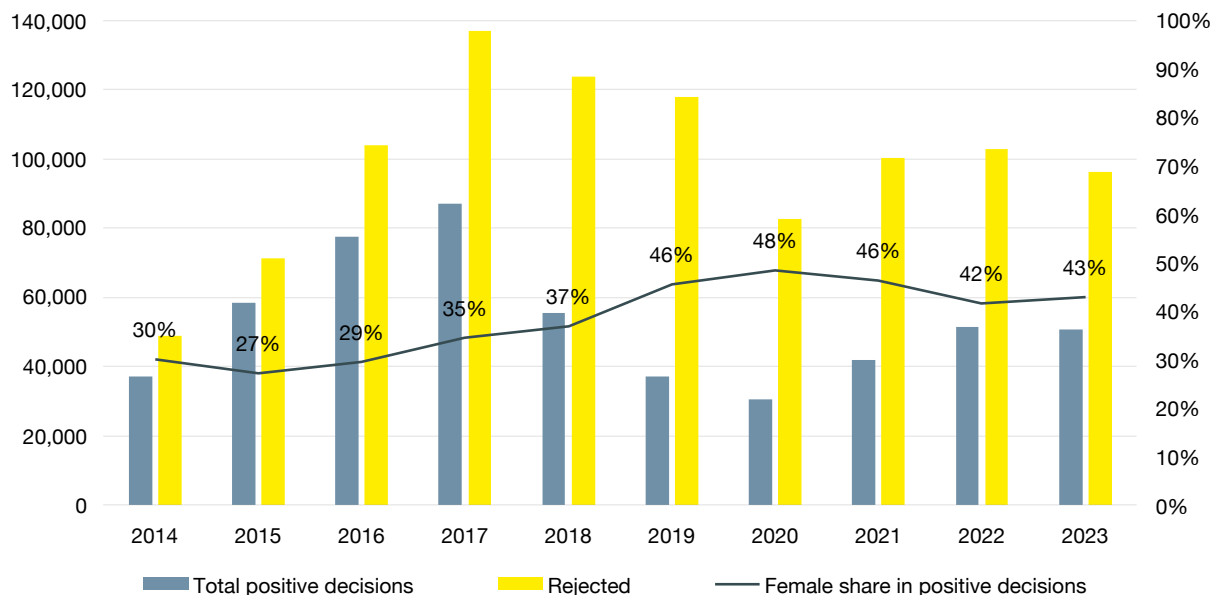
Source: Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: Data for Portugal are missing from the 2024 Eurostat statistics.

Over the past decade, depending on the year and the composition of the flow, between 24% and 45% of all first asylum requests made by African citizens in the EU led to a positive decision at the first instance (see Figure 20). People were granted refugee status, or subsidiary or humanitarian protection based either on general conditions in the country of origin or on the individual characteristics and needs of the asylum seeker (e.g. pregnancy, arrival with a child, severe illness that could not be treated in the country of origin).



Figure 20 First-instance decisions on the asylum applications made by African citizens, absolute numbers; share of female applicants among positive decisions, in %, 2014–2023



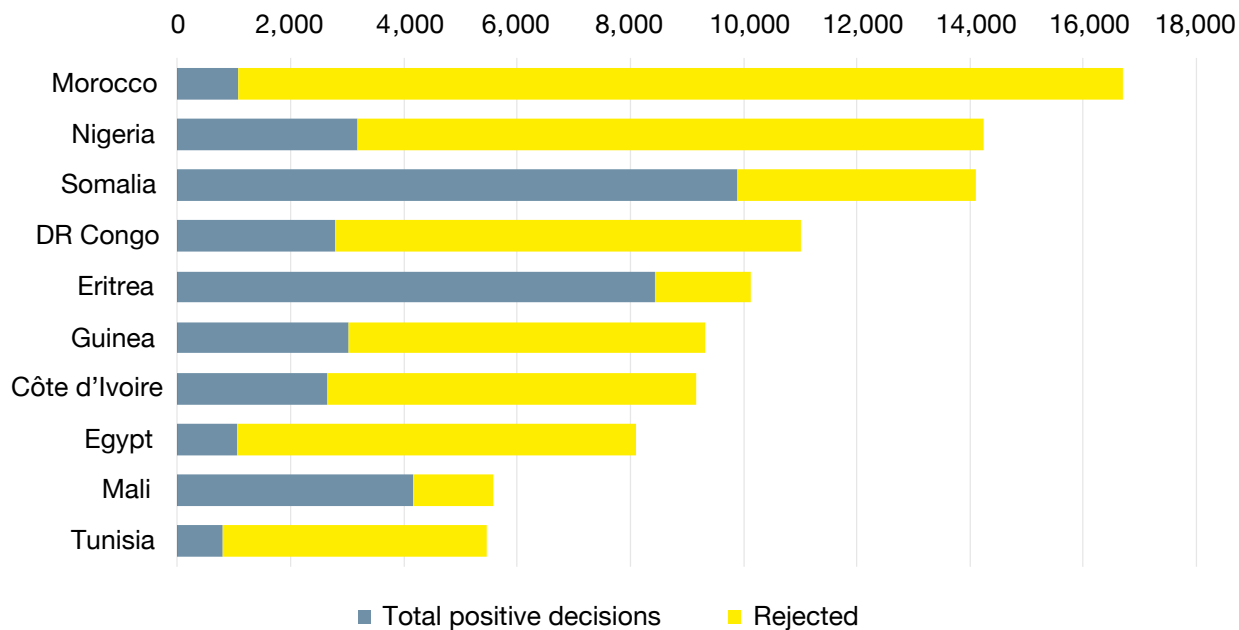
Source: Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

In recent years the chances of women being granted asylum have been considerably higher than those of men. While the female share of African asylum seekers in the EU increased from a fifth to just under a third during the analysed period, the likelihood of female applicants receiving a positive decision rose from 27%–30% in 2013–2015 to 42%–48% in 2020–2023 (Figure 21).

In 2023 citizens of Somalia, Eritrea and Mali had the highest likelihood of being granted refugee status. Asylum requests from North Africans (from Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia) were mostly rejected (Figure 21).



Figure 21 Positive and negative first instance decisions on the asylum applications made by Africans, by citizenship, 2023, absolute numbers



Source: Eurostat, 'Asylum Applicants by Type, Citizenship, Age and Sex', migr_asyappctza.

Note: The figures for Portugal are missing from the 2023 Eurostat statistics.

In recent years a ranking of the third-country nationals ordered to leave an EU country saw Algerians and Moroccans top the list. Malians, Tunisians and Senegalese ranked sixth, seventh and eighth respectively.⁶² The actual return rates of Africans only totalled about 10%.⁶³

⁶² See Eurostat, 'Third Country Nationals Ordered to Leave by Citizenship, Age and Sex – Quarterly Data' (migr_eiord1).

⁶³ Eurostat, 'Returns of Irregular Migrants – Quarterly Statistics'.



The majority of irregular African migrants whose asylum claims are rejected and who are ordered to leave remain in the EU, as most African countries of origin only reluctantly cooperate with EU member state authorities on the return and readmission of their own citizens.

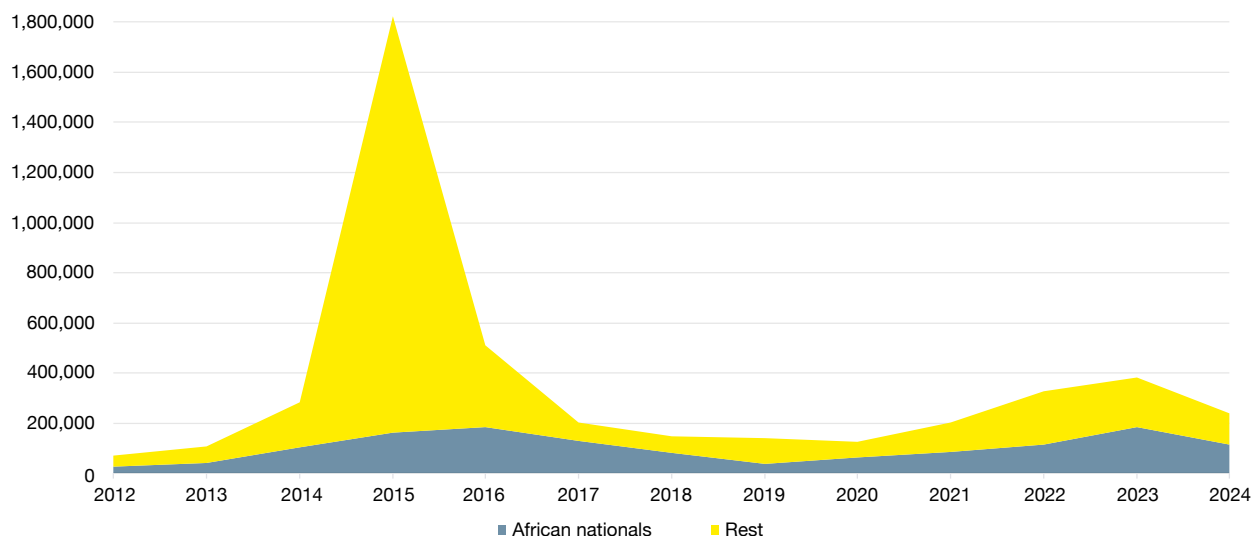
Irregular border crossings

During the past decade, about 60% of all African asylum seekers reached Europe in an irregular and often dangerous manner by crossing the Mediterranean or the Atlantic. On average, African citizens accounted for one in three irregular border crossings into the EU, but this share varied significantly. It was lowest in 2015 when irregular crossings reached an all-time high, and highest in 2023–2024 when the overall numbers crossing were more moderate.

Between 2012 and 2024 there were about 4.4 million registered irregular crossings into EU countries with an external EU/Schengen border. A bit more than 50% of all these crossings were registered in 2015–2016; another 16% occurred in 2022–2023. About 1.3 million of the people arriving irregularly were citizens of an African country. While accounting for more than a third of the entries in the early years, the proportion dropped sharply to just 9% in 2015 amid the arrival of large numbers of Afghans, Iraqis and Syrians. Since then, the share of Africans among irregular arrivals has gradually rebounded, reaching a high of 63% in 2017. In 2023–2024, it remained relatively stable, between 47% and 48%, accounting for almost half of all irregular crossings (see Figure 22).



Figure 22 Irregular border crossings of African versus non-African nationals into EU countries, 2012–2024, all routes combined



Source: Frontex, *Frontex Dataset*, data as of 5 May 2025.

Note: Crossings into the EU at external EU/Schengen land and maritime borders only.

A comparison between figures for first asylum requests made by Africans (Figure 17) and data on irregular border crossings made by Africans (Figure 22) shows the following. During the past decade, slightly less than 60% of all African citizens asking for protection in the EU⁶⁴ had crossed the Mediterranean or the Atlantic (towards the Canary Islands) in an irregular and—in most cases—dangerous way (Figure 22). These arrivals increased between 2014 and 2016 and again between 2022 and 2023, with the majority of journeys made by Africans terminating in Italy and Spain. Smaller numbers of Africans also reached Greece.

⁶⁴ A total of 1.7 million between 2014 and 2023 (Figure 8).



The remaining almost 40% of African asylum seekers consisted of people (a) arriving in a regular manner with a Schengen visa or residence permits, but later asking for asylum; (b) arriving after an orderly scrutiny process through family reunion with an already established refugee entitled to sponsor his/her spouse and minor children;⁶⁵ or (c) arriving in an irregular manner and not detected when crossing an external EU/Schengen border, but asking for asylum at a later stage.⁶⁶

In absolute terms, the largest EU-bound flows of irregular migrants occurred in 2015–16 between Türkiye and Greece.⁶⁷ The vast majority of people taking that route initially were Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis; more recently, Pakistanis, Indians and Bangladeshis have also arrived via this route. In comparison, the number of Africans arriving in the EU via Türkiye and Greece or Bulgaria was relatively small.

The political disintegration of Libya after the Western military intervention in 2011, combined with the rise in human smuggling activities and the increase in large-scale search and rescue operations carried out by European coastguards and naval forces, played a significant role in shaping migration across the Mediterranean. More recently Tunisia has become highly relevant, not only as country of transit and but also as a country of origin. Conversely, Morocco's varying but mostly restrictive border-policing efforts at its land (Ceuta, Melilla) and sea borders with Spain have a restrictive impact on irregular flows. The agreement between the EU and Türkiye concluded in 2016 also led to much smaller flows in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A widely used typology of the routes used by irregular migrants entering the southern/south-eastern regions of the EU and the Schengen area distinguishes between the Atlantic, Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, and Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes (Figure 23). The reasons for the changing migrant numbers on the different main routes are complex and beyond the scope of this paper, although it is safe to say that visa policies, the intensity of border control and anti-smuggling opera-

⁶⁵ UNHCR, *Families Together: Family Reunification for Refugees in the European Union* (Geneva 2025).

⁶⁶ In addition, many EU (and other) countries which grant asylum register newborn children as asylum seekers (they usually receive the status of their mother/parents; see UNHCR, 'Born Into a Refugee Life' (2025).

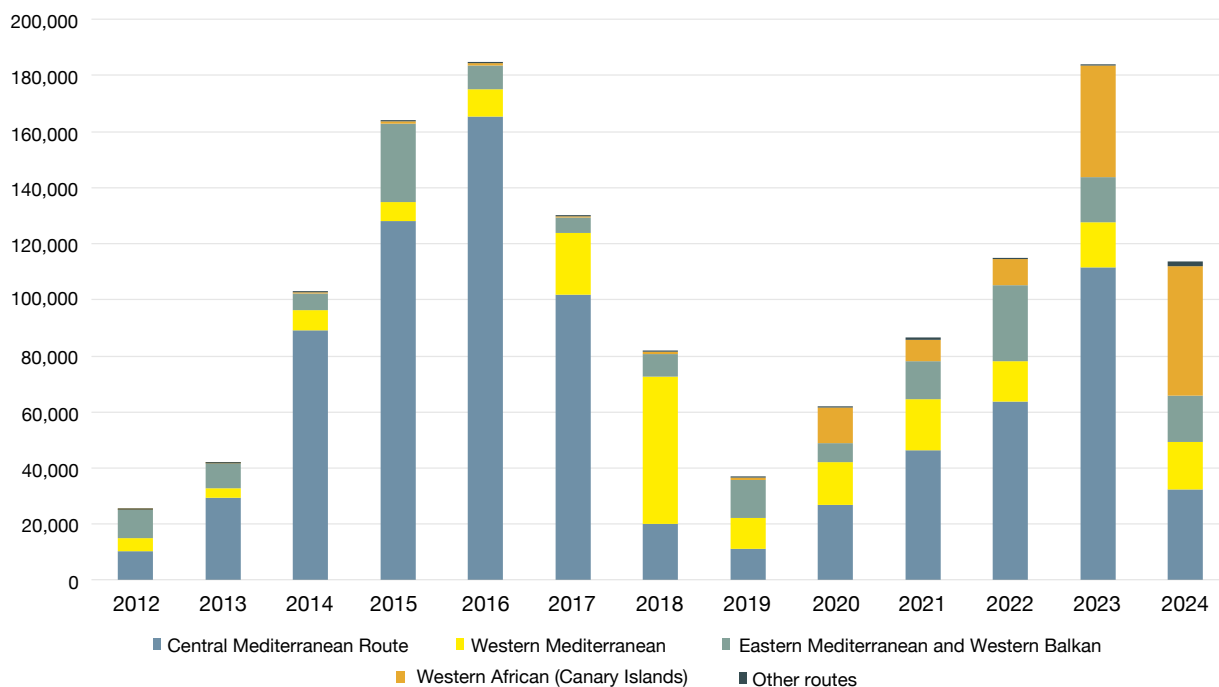
⁶⁷ Accounting for more than 50% of all irregular arrivals during the period 2012–24 (Figure 21).



tions in the countries of transit and departure, and the number of interceptions at the point of departure,⁶⁸ are among those reasons.

The following section briefly describes the recent evolution of the irregular arrivals of Africans and their share among all irregular arrivals on these routes.

Figure 23 Irregular border crossings made by African nationals into the EU by route, 2012–2024, absolute numbers



Source: Frontex, *Frontex Dataset*, data as of 5 May 2025.

Note: Crossings into the EU at external EU/Schengen land and maritime borders only.

⁶⁸ M. Czaika, M. Bivand Erdal and C. Talleras, 'Exploring Europe's External Migration Policy Mix: On the Interactions of Visa, Readmission, and Resettlement Policies', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 49/12 (2023), 12; ECCHR, 'Severe Deprivation of Liberty in the Mediterranean Sea and in Libya – The ICC Must Investigate' (Berlin, 2024); Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, *Tunisia: Irregular Migration Reaches Unprecedented Levels* (Geneva, 2024); *HESPRESS English*, 'Report: Morocco Thwarts Thousands of Irregular Migrants, Driving Sharp Decline in African Migration', 11 July 2025.



Central Mediterranean route

Irregular journeys on the Central Mediterranean route increased from approximately 10,000 crossings made by Africans in 2012 to over 165,000 in 2016, followed by a marked decline and then a resurgence to more than 111,000 in 2023. In 2024 numbers were down to just 32,000 (Figure 24). However, the total number of irregular crossings on this route was larger, as 35,000 non-Africans also used this route in 2024.

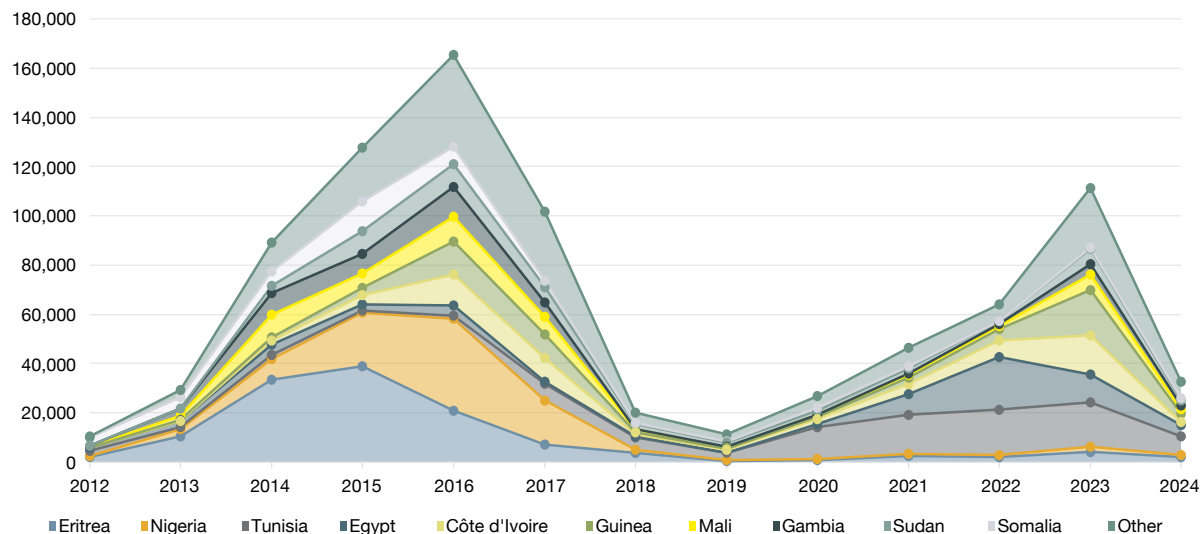
Reinforced control efforts in Libya and Tunisia, as well as upgraded and improved Libyan and Tunisian search and rescue operations, led to a reduction in irregular arrivals of sub-Saharan Africans on Italy's southern shores between 2017 and 2020. Numbers of arrivals rose again in 2021, 2022 and 2023, however, despite increased operations, including by the Tunisian coastguard. In 2024 there was a sharp drop in the number of irregular migrants arriving in Italy via Algeria, Libya and Tunisia. In 2025 these numbers increased again, against the general trend.⁶⁹ By contrast, irregular arrivals of and asylum requests made by African citizens in Malta fell significantly between 2018–19 and 2021. Today Malta is no longer a relevant destination for irregular migrants.

At the beginning of the period analysed (2012–13), Somalia, Eritrea and Tunisia accounted for the largest numbers of Africans using the Central Mediterranean route. By the mid-2010s (especially 2014–16), arrivals from Eritrea and Nigeria had increased sharply with the numbers of Eritreans peaking in 2015, and those of Nigerians in 2016. In the subsequent years, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea became increasingly prominent countries of origin, while the numbers of irregular migrants from Tunisia have resurged notably since 2020.

⁶⁹ Frontex, 'EU External Borders: Irregular Crossings Drop by 20% in First Half of 2025' (10 July 2025).



Figure 24 Irregular border crossings made by African nationals into the EU on the Central Mediterranean route by nationality, 2012–2024, absolute numbers



Source: Frontex, *Frontex Dataset*, data as of 5 May 2025.

Note: Crossings into the EU at external EU/Schengen maritime borders only.

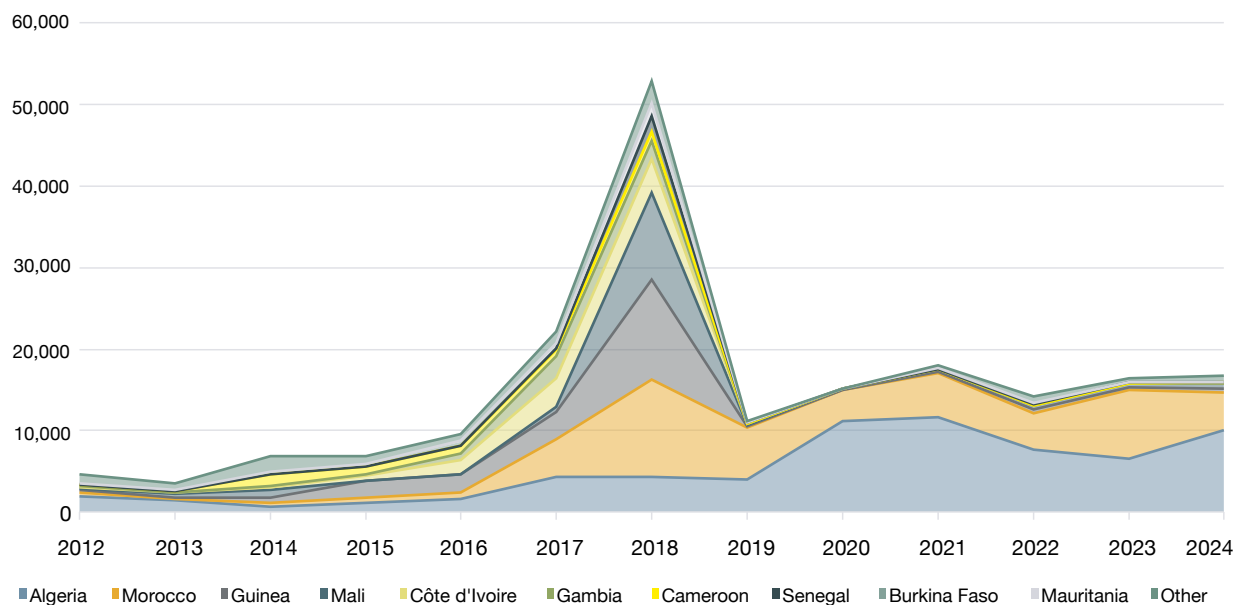
Western Mediterranean route

The Western Mediterranean route was popular among irregular African migrants in the early 2000s; flows receded after 2006, but it then became more widely used again after 2016. Crossings surpassed 50,000 in 2018, before stabilising at 14,000–17,000 per year between 2020 and 2024. From 2017 onwards, Algerians and Moroccans became the most prominent groups using the Western Mediterranean route. Crossings made by citizens of Guinea and Mali briefly surged in 2017–18, but the numbers of migrants from these two countries then became irrelevant from 2019 onwards. More recently, Algerians have become the largest group using this route, with notable peaks in 2020–1 and again in 2024, surpassing the numbers of Moroccan (Figure 25).



In the case of Spain, irregular entry (a) to the Spanish exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla (located on the African continent adjacent to Moroccan territory) via the common land border, and (b) across the Strait of Gibraltar and the Western Mediterranean towards Spain's Andalusian shores played a role. Most of the time, Moroccan border forces and coastguards were instrumental in preventing irregular migrants from reaching Spain.⁷⁰

Figure 25 Irregular border crossings made by African nationals into the EU, 2012–2024, Western Mediterranean route, by nationality, absolute numbers



Source: Frontex, *Frontex Dataset*, data as of 5 May 2025.

Note: Crossings into the EU at external EU/Schengen land and maritime borders only.

⁷⁰ HESPRESS English, 'Border Surveillance Units Thwart Irregular Migration Attempts off Mediterranean Coast', 2 January 2024; HESPRESS English, 'Morocco Strengthens Border Security Amid Surge in Irregular Migration Attempts', 28 December 2024.



With about 17,000 irregular arrivals using the Western Mediterranean route in 2024, this option continued to play a smaller role. More than 95% of all migrants arriving in Europe via this route were citizens of African countries.

Eastern Mediterranean route

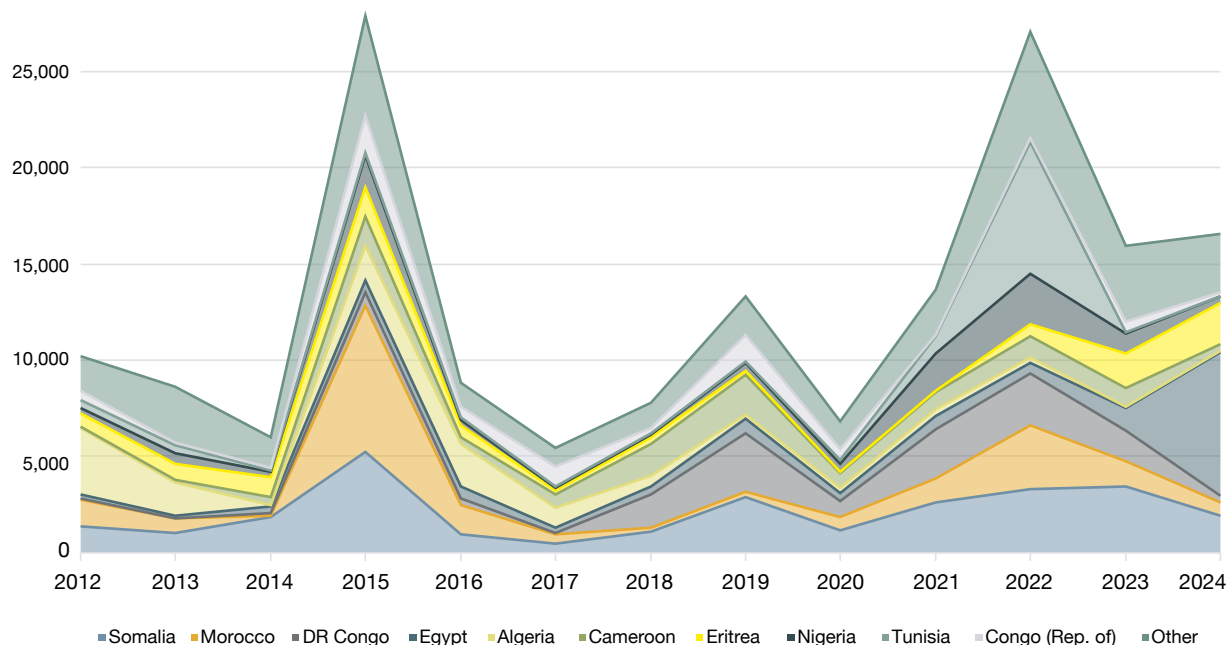
Crossings in the Eastern Mediterranean and across the Western Balkans route displayed considerable variability, with different nationalities taking centre stage in different periods. The number of African nationals crossing via the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans peaked at nearly 28,000 in 2015 but subsequently declined. This was in line with the overall inflow of irregular migrants and asylum seekers to the EU via this route. The vast majority of those arriving in the EU via Türkiye were, however, citizens of Middle Eastern and Asian countries.

Among Africans using this route, Algerians were the most significant group in 2012–2013, while crossings of Somalians became more frequent after 2014. The number of Moroccans arriving via Türkiye peaked in 2015 and again in 2022. Tunisians also played an important role in 2022. Finally, irregular migrants from Egypt stand out for becoming the largest group in 2024 (Figure 26).

In 2024 fewer than 17,000 Africans arrived in the EU via the Eastern Mediterranean or the Western Balkans. They represented just over 20% of all irregular arrivals using this route.



Figure 26 Irregular border crossings made by African nationals into the EU, Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan route, by nationality, 2012–2024, absolute numbers



Source: Frontex, *Frontex Dataset*, data as of 5 May 2025.

Note: Crossings into the EU at external EU/Schengen land and maritime borders only.

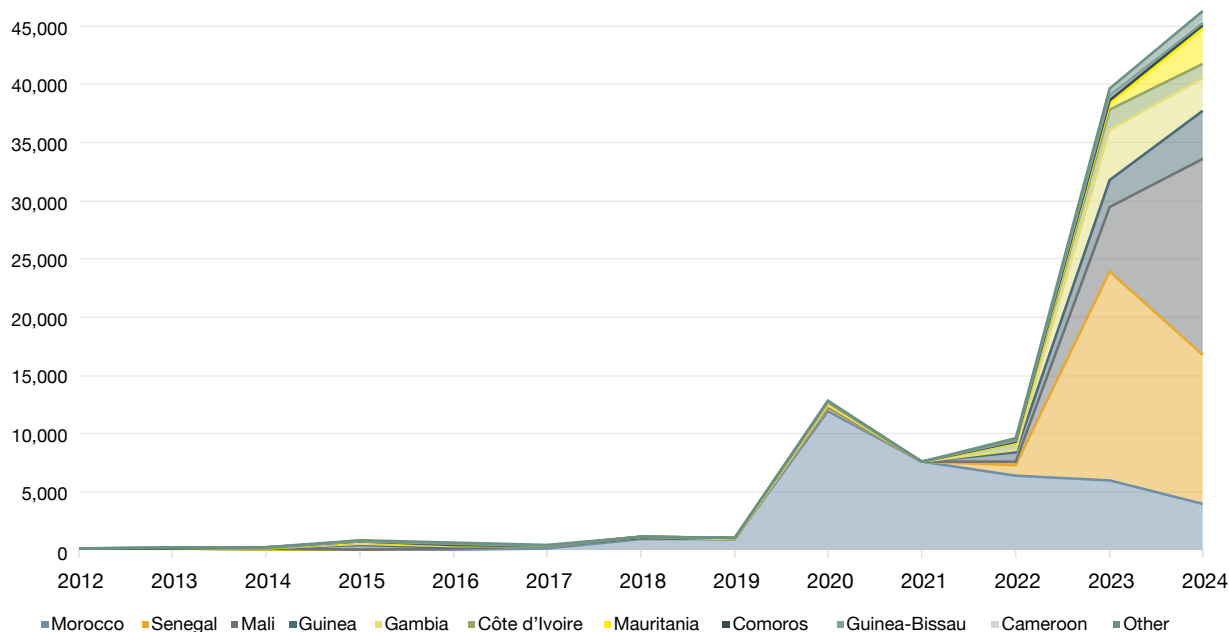
Atlantic route

The number of people leaving African shores hoping to get to the Canary Islands was high in the early 2000s but later became negligible. Since 2020, however, this West Africa–Atlantic route has become relevant again, with irregular arrivals of Africans on the Canary Islands reaching almost 40,000 in 2023 and exceeding 46,000 in 2024 (Figure 27).



Moroccans led this surge early on, from fewer than 1,000 irregular arrivals per year prior to 2019, rising to almost 12,000 in 2020. Since then, their numbers have been receding again (in 2024 there were just 4,000). Arrivals of Senegalese and Malian nationals rose sharply in 2023–24, with well over 10,000 nationals from each country crossing. At lower levels, the numbers of crossings made by Gambians and Guineans also increased. Points of departure stretch way beyond Morocco's Atlantic coast to also include Mauretania and Senegal.

Figure 27 Irregular border crossings made by African nationals into the EU, West African route (to the Canary Islands), by nationality, 2012–2024, absolute numbers



Source: Frontex, *Frontex Dataset*, data as of 5 May 2025.

Note: Crossings into the EU at external EU/Schengen maritime borders only.



Potential for future migration

The prospect of large numbers of Africans heading towards the EU is often mentioned in public debates and supported by images of irregular migrants arriving via the Mediterranean. Available survey data provide snapshots of migration intentions among Africans. However, it remains unclear to what extent these intentions might be realised in the future. And the shares that will try to and eventually manage to settle in Europe will not least depend on the migration policy decisions taken by EU countries and the EU as a whole.

Data on potential African migrants who might be interested in moving from one African country to another or to overseas destinations cannot be retrieved from official statistics. The main source of this information is the survey responses based on interviews. According to an Afrobarometer⁷¹ survey carried out in 2024, almost half (47%) of the adult respondents interviewed in 24 African countries (aged 18+) could be identified as potential migrants. About half of those respondents (27%) said that they had thought about migration more concretely (see Figure 28).

General migration considerations (with the African average at 47%) were highest in Liberia (78%), Gambia (68%), Cabo Verde (64%) and Ghana (61%). Conversely, interest in leaving one's country was very low in Tanzania, where only 9% of respondents expressed such thoughts.

The percentage of people who reportedly think 'a lot' about emigration was highest in Gambia (53%), Liberia (51%), Ghana (44%), Angola (38%) and Lesotho (37%). This list includes both very low-income countries,⁷² where most people have no significant cash income, as well as resource rich countries⁷³ with more developed, cash-based economies. The lowest percentages of people thinking 'a lot' about emigration were surveyed in Tanzania (5%), Mauritius (12%), Morocco (16%), Côte d'Ivoire (18%) and Botswana (19%). Except for Tanzania, all these countries have a GDP per capita well above the African average.

⁷¹ Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance and quality of life.

⁷² Gambia, Lesotho and Liberia.

⁷³ Angola and Nigeria.



Compared to the results from the 22 countries in which citizens had been interviewed by Afrobarometer in 2016/2018, the proportion of people who were thinking about emigration had increased by 9%.⁷⁴

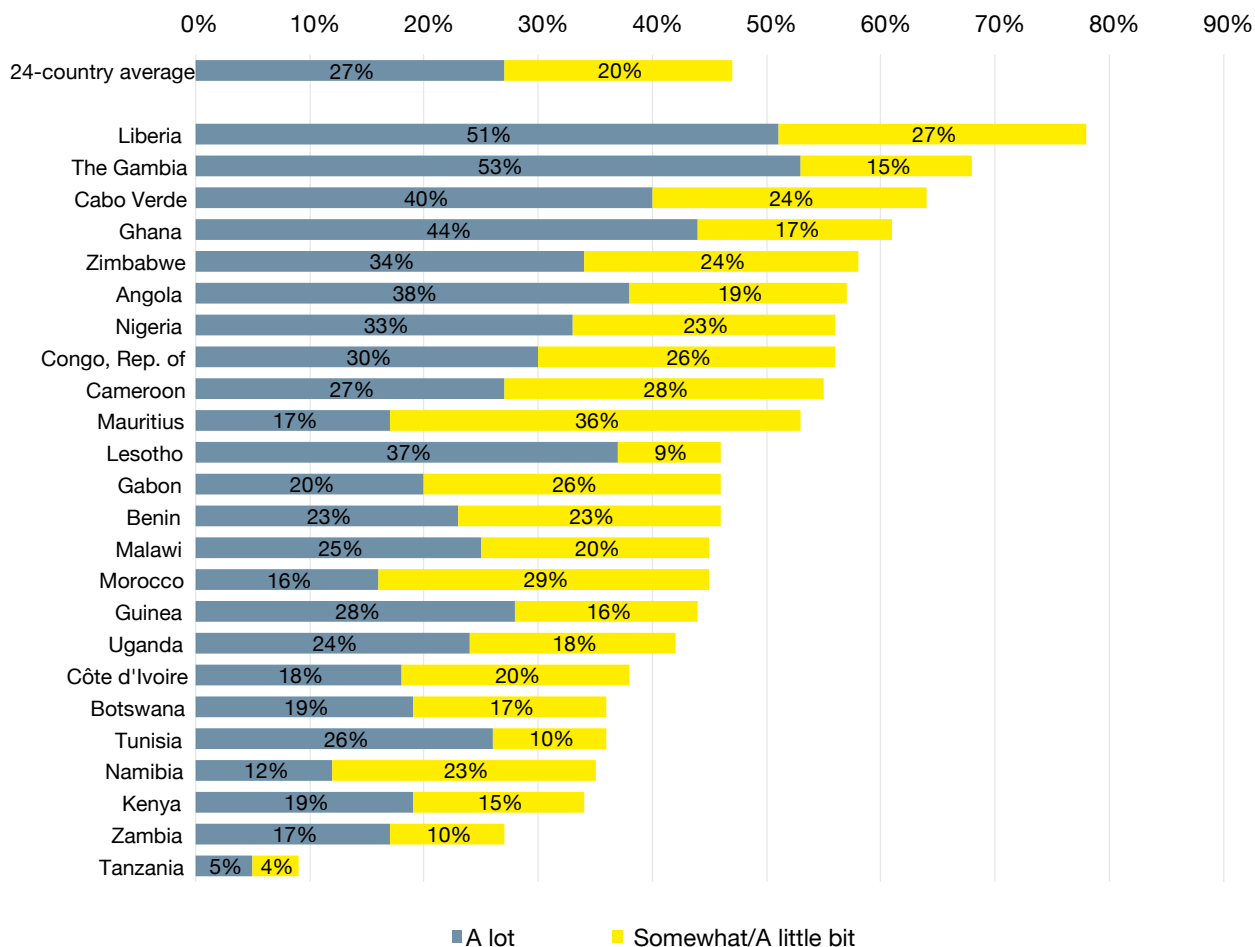
If one extrapolates the results for the 24 countries in which people were surveyed in 2024, assuming that they are representative for the whole of Africa, we can assume that just over 200 million African adults⁷⁵ think ‘a lot’ about moving to another country. That is more than four times the number of African-born persons currently living abroad.

⁷⁴ Afrobarometer, ‘International Migrants Day: Almost Half of Africans Have Considered Emigrating, Afrobarometer Survey Shows’, Press release, 18 December 2024.

⁷⁵ Out of a total adult population of about 800 million (aged 18+) in 2025.



Figure 28 Africans considering emigration to another country among the population aged 18+, 2024 (%)



Source: Afrobarometer, 'International Migrants Day', 2.

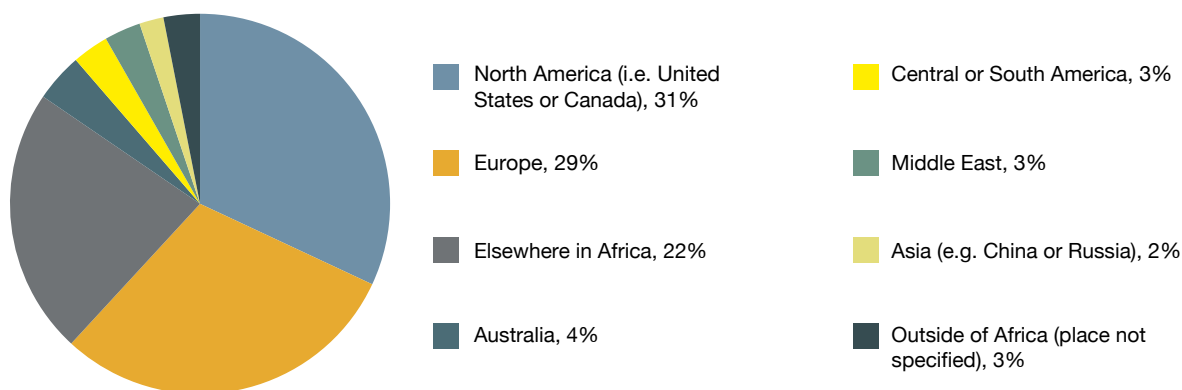
Note: Representative sample; people in 24 African countries surveyed. Respondents were asked: How much, if at all, have you considered moving to another country to live?



Preferred destinations and motives for migration

When asked about their preferred destinations, North America (31%) and Europe (29%) emerged as the top choices. Still, a significant number—about 22%—indicate a preference for relocating within Africa (which actually remains the most likely destination for African migrants). A smaller portion of respondents indicated preferences for Australia (4%), Central and South America (3%), the Middle East (3%), Asia (2%) or unspecified locations outside Africa (3%; see Figure 29).

Figure 29 Preferred destination for emigration of Africans, 2024 (%)



Source: Afrobarometer, 'International Migrants Day', 4.

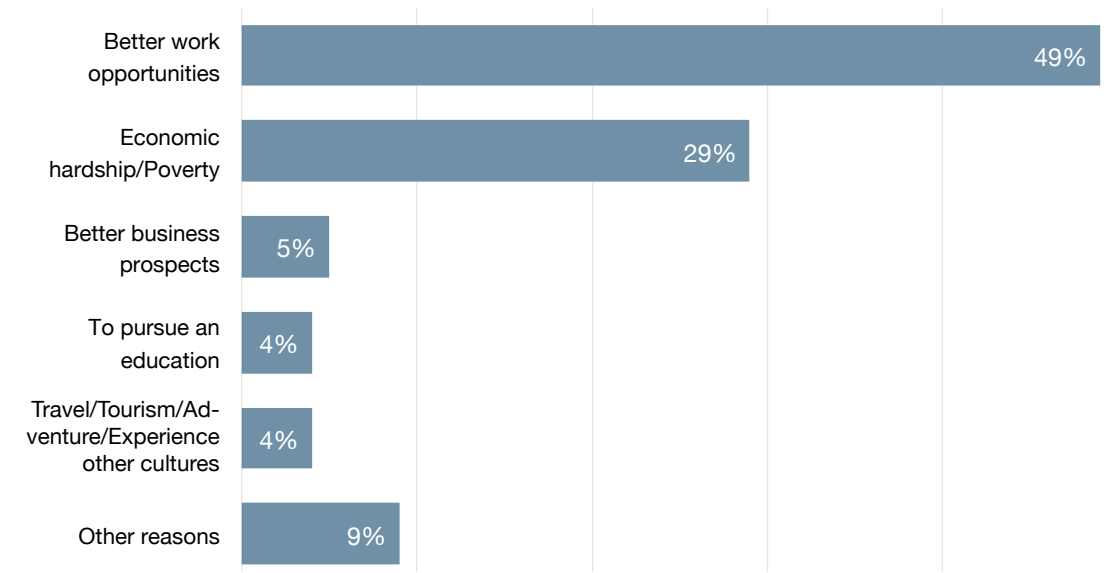
Note: Representative sample; people in 24 African countries surveyed.

Among those considering migration, employment opportunities were the primary motivation for about 49%. Another 29% cited escaping poverty or economic hardship as their main reason. Smaller percentages mentioned business opportunities (5%). In total five in six potential migrants (83%) stated that their main



reason for considering moving was economic. Pursuing education, and the desire for travel, adventure or cultural exchange each accounted for 4%. An additional 9% selected other reasons (Figure 30).

Figure 30 Reasons for considering emigration mentioned by Africans, 2024 (%)



Source: Afrobarometer, ‘International Migrants Day’, 4.

Note: Representative sample; people in 24 African countries surveyed.

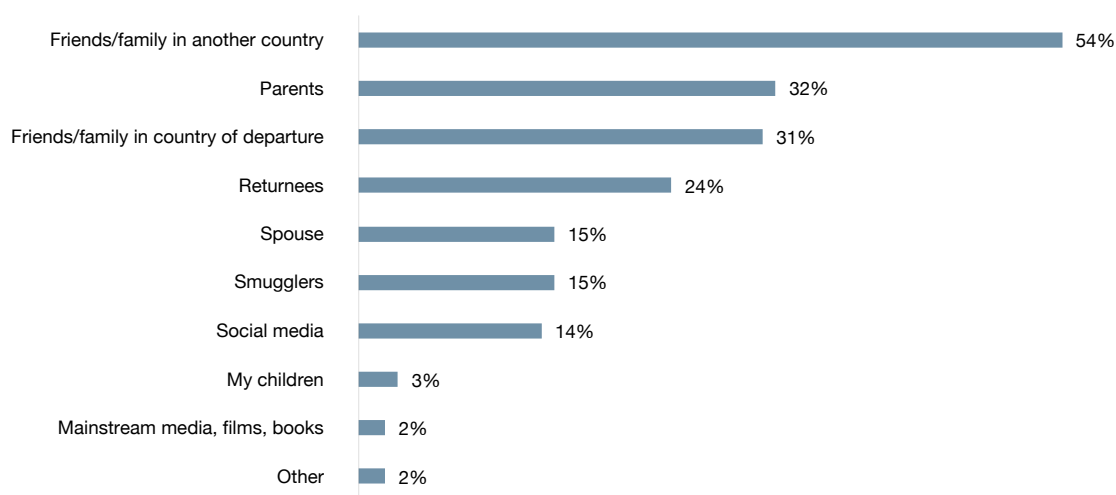
Influencers

Apart from economic, political and environmental drivers, other less tangible factors contribute to migration aspirations and decision-making. In a survey carried out in 2021 among Africans who had actually moved to another part of their continent, 65% of respondents stated that they had been influenced in making their migration decision. These influences were overwhelmingly from close personal contacts such as diaspora members in the country of destination (‘friends/family in another country’, 54% of respondents), parents



or spouses (48%), or 'other friends/family in the country of departure' (31%). In addition, social media was a relevant source of influence for 14% of the respondents, while 15% stated that people smugglers had influenced their decisions (Figure 31).

Figure 31 Sources of influence: the biggest influences on migration decisions (%)



Source: Mixed Migration Centre, *Migration Drivers and Decision-Making of West and Central Africans on the Move in West and North Africa*, p.15.

Note: Respondents were asked: What were the biggest influences on your decision to migrate? N=1.361 Respondents were allowed to mention more than one source of influence.

From wish to reality

In the recent past some commentators have hinted at the possibility of Africans arriving in Europe in much larger numbers than today.⁷⁶ Survey data indicate that there is such a potential, underpinned by the wishes of Africans to leave their countries of birth. And demographic projections clearly show that this potential will increase during the coming decades as a result of rapid population growth in Africa. Such

⁷⁶ For example: *Economist*, 'Emigration From Africa Will Change the World', 24 April 2025.



potential existed in the past, but compared to the number of Africans who declared an interest in leaving their country, only a little more than 1% actually did so annually.⁷⁷ As a result, in the 10-year period between 2014 and 2023, only about 10% of this potential (= 1% p.a.) has been realised, with one-third of these recent migrants (= 3% of the identified potential) actually moving to Europe.

It is unclear today how many African migrants will move to Europe in the coming decades. Part of the answer will depend on the migration policy decisions taken by EU countries. As Africa will remain the only demographically growing part of the world throughout the twenty-first and well into the twenty-second 'century'⁷⁸ it is quite possible that European countries will start recruiting Africans well beyond current levels in a more distant future.⁷⁹ At the same time, it should not be overlooked that a big gap persists between the mobility intentions of Africans and their serious consideration and active preparations, and their ability to actually move to another country.

⁷⁷ An estimated 2.2 million people per year; see G. J. Abel and X. Bolló, 'Global Migration Data Explorer'.

⁷⁸ See UN, Population Division, 'World Population Prospects'.

⁷⁹ *Economist*, 'Emigration From Africa Will Change the World'.

Conclusions



To sum up: 46 million African-born people live outside their country of origin. About 9 million of them have moved to an EU country, accounting for 2% of all people residing in the EU.

In contrast to widespread perception, during the past 10 years, the majority of irregular migrants crossing into the EU were not African citizens. Furthermore, the majority of African immigrants were neither asylum seekers nor irregular migrants. This does not, however, hint at economically favourable selection, but has to do with selective migration. During the past 10 years, the main destinations for African-born labour migrants were a few other African countries (mainly in West Africa, Libya and the Republic of South Africa) and the Gulf states. In the same period, Africans migrating to Europe were mainly admitted based on rights (family, asylum), and to a much smaller extent based on skills. As a result, marriage and family reunion have become the main legal gates of entry. And migrants arriving as asylum seekers or as dependent family members on average take 5 to 10 years to join the labour market of a European destination country.⁸⁰ This is particularly true for female migrants admitted for marriage or family reunion purposes (especially from North African countries).

This might be one of the reasons why there is a particular political focus on migration from Africa to the EU despite the fact that Africans only represent between one in four and one in five migrants settling in Europe. There has been a lot of consideration given to conditionality, making European engagement in the fields of trade, investment and development assistance dependent on the willingness and ability of African nations to cooperate with EU countries in the field of irregular migration and returns.⁸¹ Critical voices have argued that this might push African countries further towards seeking financial and military support from China, Russia and other non-European actors.⁸²

In recent years the number of Africans admitted as migrant labour has increased from an annual range of 20,000–30,000 African migrant workers coming to the EU between 2014 and 2018 to 90,000–100,000 in 2022–2023. This, however, represents less than 20% of all the Africans settling in the EU. As a result, the positive contribution to the labour market and the economic gain from African migrants is comparatively small and delayed because of the—on average—slow socio-economic integration.

⁸⁰ OECD and European Commission, *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In* (Paris, 2024), 38 (based on EU Labour Force Survey data from 2021).

⁸¹ See, for example, G. Sorgi, 'Africa Must Stop Migrants Reaching Europe to Keep EU Cash, Plans Show', *Politico*, 9 July 2025.

⁸² See, for example, N. Willén, *Stepping up Engagement in the Sahel – Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States*, Egmont Institute, Policy Brief 375 (Brussels, 2025); F. Mintoiba, 'Footsteps of Change: Rising Footsteps of China and Russia in Africa', *Daily Sabah*, 3 October 2024.



Economic growth and socio-economic development in parts of Africa will increase the number of Africans with skills, aspirations and access to a cash income, thus increasing their ability to realise mobility aspirations, pay for transportation and profit from deploying their human capital in countries with higher wages. At the same time, rapid population growth in sub-Saharan Africa will increase the absolute number of potentially and (ultimately) actually mobile young adults. These two trends will lead to higher numbers of Africans leaving their countries of birth. For many of them Europe will remain a preferred destination.

It is unclear if EU countries and the EU as a whole will address the issue of marriage migration. As migrants arriving via this legal channel are not selected for their skills and usually do not join the labour market swiftly, pre-departure measures, at least, should be considered. These could include language acquisition and subsequent testing. EU countries should also consider only recognising transnational marriages where both partners have reached a certain age and are not closely related.⁸³

It remains to be seen to what extent European countries with ageing and declining native populations and workforces will either go back to recruiting citizens of North African countries, as some did between the 1950s and 1970s, or start for the first time to recruit citizens of sub-Saharan countries as labour on a larger scale.

If European countries are likely to turn to Africans when dealing with the foreseeable and partly already existing shortages of labour, they will need to change the composition of inflows, with an emphasis on employability and a higher probability that migrants will be willing to integrate. It is important that any such recruitment favours the citizens of African countries that demonstrate a willingness to control the exit of their own citizens towards Europe and to readmit them should they end up without a valid residence permit for an EU country. It can be assumed that many African countries would become more cooperative in the field of migration policy if a considerable number of their own citizens could get legal access to European labour markets, which would increase the amount of domestically available hard currency transferred via remittances. This is also a field in which Europe has an advantage over China and Russia, as these countries do not admit labour from Africa.

Linking the admission of labour migrants to cooperation in the fields of exit control and readmission

⁸³ See A. Shaw, 'The Arranged Transnational Cousin Marriages of British Pakistanis'.



could create an additional benefit: European citizens would regain confidence in the functioning of migration and border-control policies at both the national and the EU levels.

Finally, it needs to be discussed how the future recruitment of African labour and skills can be organised in a mutually beneficial way. Measures need to be taken to prevent the recruitment policies of European countries from depleting the talent pool in African countries of origin, which would have the consequence of slowing down these countries' socio-economic development.

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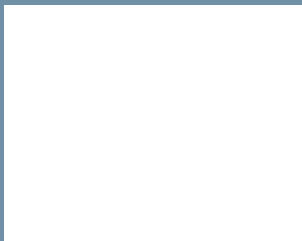
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This paper examines the numbers and distribution of Africans living outside their countries of birth as well as migration flows from Africa to the EU27 during the period 2014–23. The paper finds that Africans have not become more mobile over the past three decades and that most African migrants reside in other African countries. Some 9 million Africans live in an EU country, accounting for 2% of the EU population. The largest numbers of African-born residents living in Europe are from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. France is the main country of destination for all categories of arrivals from Africa.

The reality of African migration to Europe differs substantially from public perception, which focuses on irregular Mediterranean crossings. Between 2014 and 2023, about two-thirds of African immigrants arrived in the EU in a regular manner. As for the volume of flows, in the analysed period the bloc received 4.6 million African citizens. Out of this total, the EU admitted 3.6 million African citizens through rights-based migration. Marriage migration and family reunion were the main gate of entry, giving access to the EU to more than 1.8 million Africans; almost the same number were granted asylum in the EU. Only some 0.6 million came as students and 0.5 million as labour migrants. If European countries want to employ more Africans to fill vacant jobs, they will need to change the composition of inflows, with an emphasis on employability.

The volume and characteristics of future migrations from Africa to Europe are uncertain. Although survey data show the potential for more Africans arriving in the EU, migration policy decisions taken by EU countries will play an important role.



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

