



The Mediterranean Migration System

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Chapter 8

The Mediterranean Migration System



Abstract Together with the border between the US and Mexico, the Mediterranean is the largest migration area in the world. The stock of migrants resident in the Mediterranean countries was 42.6 million in 2020. About 2/3 of these international migrants are found in 4 countries (France, Spain, Italy, Turkey) and 20% in the rest of the Near East (Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Palestine). The absolute number of these international migrants can vary greatly from one country to another; the migrants can thus represent a significant share of the overall population. The Mediterranean Basin has been historically characterised by a regular circulation of people within the region. The period after World War II till today (1948–2022) has been characterised by several changes in the Mediterranean migration system, which were largely driven by economic and political factors. Through a chronological approach, we can identify five periods that synthesise the evolution of migration in the Mediterranean region during this period.

Keywords International migrations · Migration system · High skilled migration · Irregular migration · Mediterranean

8.1 Introduction

Together with the border between the US and Mexico, the Mediterranean is the largest migration area in the world (Venier & Oliveau, 2023). The stock of migrants resident in the Mediterranean countries was 42.6 million (Fig. 8.1) in 2020. About 2/3 of these international migrants are found in 4 countries (France, Spain, Italy, Turkey) and 20% in the rest of the Near East (Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Palestine). The absolute number of these international migrants can vary greatly from one country to another; the migrants can thus represent a significant share of the overall population. For example, they represent more than 20% of the population in Malta, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel.

46.1 million people (representing 16.4% of all international migrants) is the stock of emigrants whose country of origin is one of the Mediterranean countries and

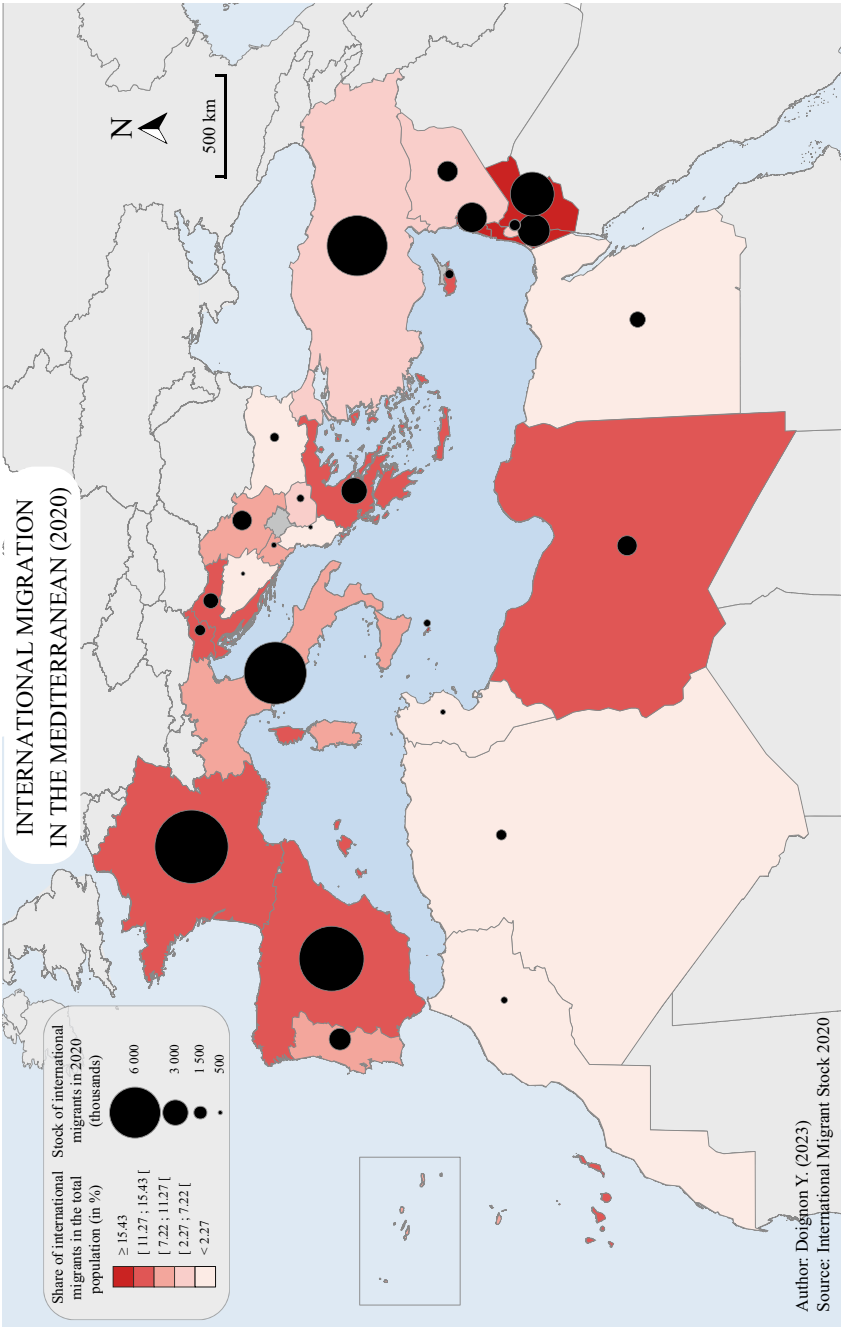


Fig. 8.1 Stock of migrants and share of total population (in %) in the Mediterranean (2020) (*Source* International Migrant Stock [2020] [United Nations])

who have emigrated all over the world (including other Mediterranean countries) from their country of origin. Indeed, a significant proportion of these Mediterranean emigrants moved within the Mediterranean region: 22.6 million emigrants moved from their home to another country belonging to the Mediterranean Basin.

The migration in the Mediterranean region is largely influenced by the unequal age structure of the resident population which is a consequence of the so-called demographic transition. As discussed elsewhere in this book (see Chaps. 3 and 4), the countries of the Mediterranean Basin are at a different transition stage. As a consequence, while the median age in most of the ageing countries of the North Mediterranean is over 40 years (except Albania and Montenegro), in the Southern and Eastern shores, the median age is less than 30 years, resulting in a much younger age structure. This favourable demographic situation, known as a youth bulge, has great potential from an economic point of view: according to the demographic dividend theorists, it may cause rapid economic growth due to a higher level of education and labour market participation (Bloom et al., 2017). However, countries of the Southern and Eastern region of the Mediterranean have not yet benefited from the demographic dividend. The youth population is much more educated and qualified compared to the generations of their parents, nonetheless, the economic opportunities for these generations are still yet to come. Indeed, the labour supply is higher than the demand, resulting in high unemployment rates. High inflation rates and increasing income inequalities characterise the economy of most of the countries. Therefore, the young generations belonging to the youth bulge, instead of benefitting from the demographic dividend, were at the heart of the protests, which culminated in the so-called Arab Spring, at the beginning of the second decade of the 2000 (Martin & Bardak, 2011). Political and economic problems affecting the Arab Mediterranean countries act as a major driver of migration to European and Near Eastern countries (Etling et al., 2020).

The Mediterranean Basin has been historically characterised by a regular circulation of people within the region. The period after World War II till today (1948–2022) has been characterised by several changes in the Mediterranean migration system, which were largely driven by economic and political factors (De Haas, 2011). Through a chronological approach, we can identify five periods that synthesise the evolution of migration in the Mediterranean region during this period: 1950–1995 (1950–1963; 1963–1973; 1973–1995), then 1996–2022 (1996–2010; 2011–present).

8.2 Migration in the Mediterranean (1950–1995)

One of the main characteristics of the first period (1948–1963) of this first large period is the post-war reconstruction of Northern and Western European countries. The main region of origin were Southern European countries. In the early 1960s, the number of immigrant residents in Western Europe attained the record number of 7.6 million. Another characteristic of this period is that migration in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries was mostly internal.

The main characteristic of the following period (1963–1973) is a sharp decrease in the flows from Southern Europe to Western European countries and an increase in migration flows from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries to this region. More specifically France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and Austria were the main destination countries. France and Germany were the main receiving countries in Europe during this phase: in France there was a strong presence of migrants from the Maghreb, while in Germany the number of migrants from Turkey steadily increased, replacing migrants from Southern European countries, in particular from Italy.

The early 1970s, characterised by the oil crisis of 1973 mark a slowdown of migration flows in the Mediterranean and correspond to the beginning of the third period (1973–1995). These major changes were largely affected by the process of globalisation, implying a restructuring of the world economy (De Haas et al., 2020). One of the main consequences of this process has been the growth of inequalities within and between regions. The new economic and political configurations had a huge impact on international migration leading to new trends. Coming back to the Mediterranean area, the most important new trend is the change of migration policies in the European countries that have traditionally received migrants. Strongly affected by the economic crisis, they are no longer able (or at least do not have the political will) to receive foreign workers. This new political (and economic) configuration in the Northern shore of the Mediterranean is characterised by restrictive entry policies with the aim of stimulating *en masse* return of migrants to their countries of origin. This policy change has a massive impact in the nature and destination of migration flows. From the 1980s onwards, there is a strong increase in the flow of refugees and asylum seekers to Europe. Family reunification becomes very important because it allows to circumvent the restrictive entry regulations. Migration to this region does not stop, however it changes dramatically assuming different forms compared to the past. One of the main consequences of the new policy configuration is the transformation of the countries of Southern Europe from countries of origin into countries of destination of international migrations. Indeed, the countries of Southern Europe, long-standing labour exporters to other European countries and to America and Oceania, became host countries for migrants originating from countries on the Southern shore of the Mediterranean, from sub-Saharan Africa, from Latin America and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, from Eastern Europe. Another important (unintended) consequence of the oil crisis is the emergence of Persian Gulf countries and Libya as important poles of attraction for international migration, particularly from South-East Asia and the Arab countries, due to strong economic growth. Moreover, in this period Egypt became one of the main regional labour suppliers because of the opening (*infitah*) to emigration decided by Anwar Sadat and the strong population growth.

Two important political changes, the fall of the Iron Curtain and the first Gulf War, characterised the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, generating new migration flows and weakening existing ones. During this period, the countries of Southern Europe, particularly Italy and Spain, have become the favourite destination countries for several populations originating from the Southern shore of the Mediterranean, especially from the Maghreb countries.

Another important political event has characterised the mid-1980s. In 1985, member countries of the European Union signed the Schengen Agreements marking an important breakthrough for the region's migration: a zone of free movement was established within Europe (the effective implementation of the agreements only began in 1995). The internal borders of the Union no longer existed (except for the United Kingdom and Ireland): the internal space of the EU thus became a migration system that includes 26 countries (including non-EU European countries: Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein). On the other hand, the EU's external borders became increasingly controlled and inaccessible to all those subject to the Schengen visa regime, particularly for countries of the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean (Wihtol de Wenden, 2013). From this period onwards, there is the emergence of a new phenomenon, as a direct consequence of the entry restrictions in the Schengen zone, significant flows of irregular migration was followed by massive regularisations.

Lastly, high skilled migration is also increasing; it is characterised not only by the mobility of highly skilled workers but also by the increasing mobility of students.

8.3 Migration in the Mediterranean in the XXI Century

A new migration phase in the Mediterranean region (1996–2010) started at the turn of the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s; thanks to a positive economic situation, a new migration sequence began (Fig. 8.2). It is a period during which new poles of attraction emerge beyond traditional ones.

In the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, Spain and Italy confirmed their role as poles of attraction for unskilled labour, especially migrants from Southern shore countries employed in agriculture, family services, restaurant services, small retail trade and construction. In the first decade of the 2000s, Spain and Italy became host countries for migration flows, particularly from Maghreb countries and Egypt. On the other hand, in these new hosting countries, there is a low incidence of migrants coming from the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean, in particular of migrants from Turkey. The other European countries that traditionally import foreign labour continue to welcome family migration and highly qualified migrants.

Important changes are taking place on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. In some cases, major transformations are taking place: for example, Turkey is turning into a destination country for migration flows. Other countries in the region are becoming transit countries to Europe for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Migration to the Arab countries of the Gulf and to Jordan continues to be central, especially for Egypt and the Palestinian territories.

The first decade of the 2000s ends with two disruptive events that could have dramatically altered migration flows: the global economic crisis of 2008 and the Arab Spring in 2010. Contrary to the crisis of 1973, the global economic crisis that began in 2008 did not have a strong impact on migration: the decline in migration flows was rather small. Labour migration to Southern European countries, especially

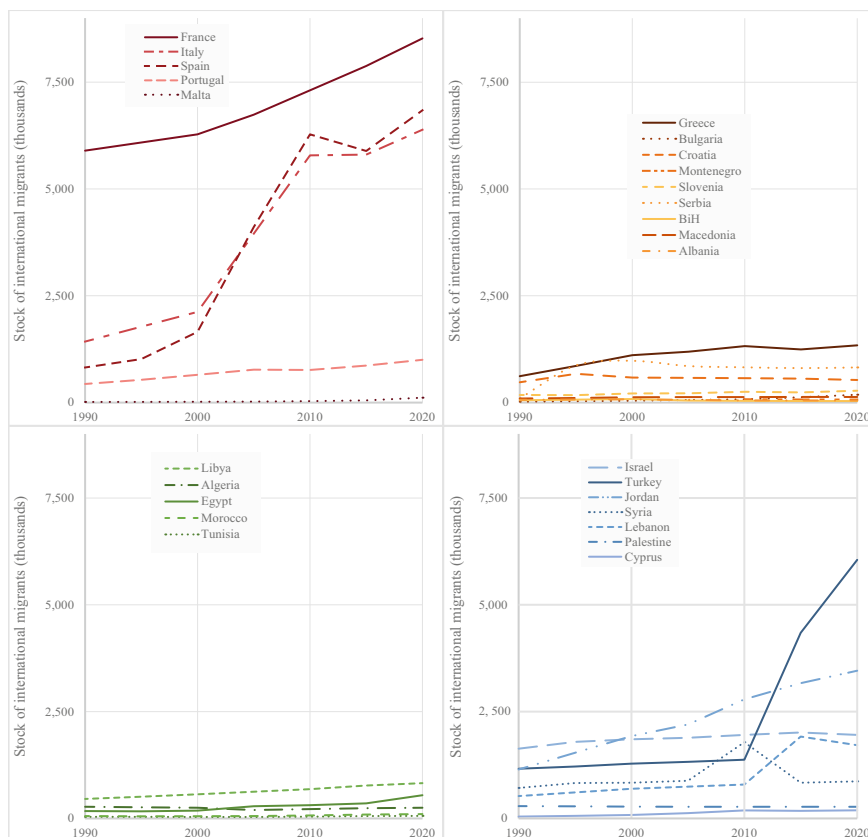


Fig. 8.2 Stock of international migrants in the Mediterranean countries (1990–2020) (Source International Migrant Stock [2020])

Spain was largely affected by the crisis. However, other kinds of migration (family, asylum, etc.) did not change or even increase because of the crisis (Bonifazi & Strozza, 2019).

A major disruptive factor for the entire Mediterranean region (and beyond) involving migration and mobility is linked to the season of institutional transition, known as the Arab Spring, that began in 2010. The political unrest in several countries on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean has radically changed the institutional landscape of the area. It has triggered non-linear and on-going regime-change processes and structured, in essence, the so called “refugee crisis”. In other words, while some policy makers have claimed that economic migrants make up the majority of those arriving, the wars in Syria and Iraq, as well as continuing violence and instability in Afghanistan and Eritrea, were the “real” main drivers of the crisis.

The new political configuration marks the beginning of the ongoing new era of migration (2011–present). At the beginning of the period, thousands of Tunisians

(60,000) and Libyans (26,000) escaped from their home countries which were undergoing a period of political instability to Europe. The Italian Island of Lampedusa became the main entry channel to Europe. The so-called “refugees crisis” has shaken the entire region. Between 2011 and 2014, the significant reduction of the state’s control on the socio-economic settings of most of North African countries has acutely affected the regional and international migration flow dynamics, further growing the relevance of the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) the itinerary referred to as the migration flows coming from Northern Africa towards Italy and Malta across the Mediterranean Sea. In the first stage of the new period, Italy and Malta in the CMR have been at the front stage for rescuing and welcoming migrants.

However, the CMR became much less relevant in terms of flows by the end of Operation Mare Nostrum (OMN), a year-long naval and air search-and-rescue operation promoted by the Italian government in October 2013. Indeed, during 2015, Greece served as the main portal of entry to Europe.

The International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix flow-monitoring system counted 1,005,504 irregular arrivals across the Mediterranean in 2015, including migrants journeying by a or sea to Greece, Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, Malta or Cyprus, with just 3% coming by land. To contrast, there were 280,000 arrivals by land or sea for the whole of 2014. The 2015 surge of migration into Europe (going far beyond EU countries bordering the Mediterranean) was unprecedented in scope, producing a massive humanitarian crisis and creating a political and moral impasse for European governments.

From 2011 onwards, refugee flows toward Europe—which had recorded a declining trend since 2005, have increased: the European countries most affected by these new waves have been Germany, Sweden, Italy and France. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, the main countries of origin of asylum seekers in 2019 were Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia and Kosovo and Eritrea. It is important to stress that migrants are often taking unsafe journeys to Europe: according to IOM estimates, more than 8,000 people died in the Mediterranean Sea between 2014 and 2021 in an attempt to reach Europe (Missing Migrants Project, 2023).

Despite the large attention received by the new and unprecedented number of arrivals and asylum applications faced by European countries, in reality the countries on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean were the most affected, not only numerically speaking, by the crisis. First of all, from the numerical point of view, they have received the largest part of refugees and asylum seekers from neighbouring countries. More specifically Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt are the countries welcoming the highest number of refugees. These countries have been in the past a major recipient of refugees from Palestine, Iraq and Sudan, and they are now hosting Syrians, Palestinians and Somalis. Overall, in the Mediterranean region, there was a steady increase of the total stock of refugees and asylum seekers during the last 10 years: in 2010 they were around 3 million, while in 2017 they reached the record figure of 14.8 million (Fig. 8.3).

As already mentioned, the major receiving countries are located in the Southern and Eastern shore of the region: most of them are internally displaced in Syria

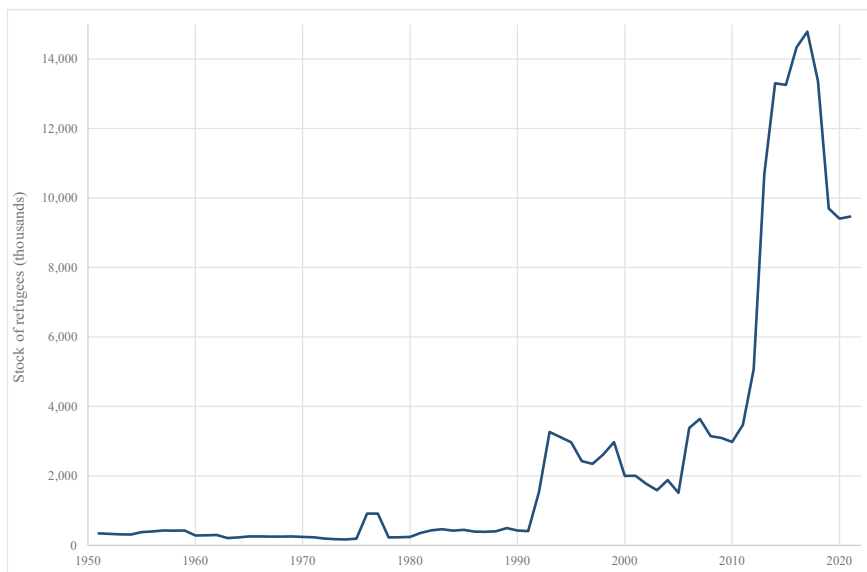


Fig. 8.3 Stock of refugees in the Mediterranean countries (1951–2021) (*Source* Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response, UNHCR [2023])

(7 million) or hosted in Lebanon (over 1 million), Turkey (almost 4 million), Egypt (almost 300 thousand) or Libya (around 375 thousand). In reality, only a minority of asylum seekers and refugees succeeded in reaching the richer countries of the Northern Shore: France (400 thousand) and Italy (354 thousand) being the major host countries among those bordering the Mediterranean. The top countries sending refugees are mainly Syria, Iraq, the horn of Africa (through Libya), Afghanistan, Kosovo and Albania. With the current crisis, Ukraine should also be added to the list of major sending countries at least for Northern Mediterranean receiving countries.

The unbalanced share of asylum seekers and refugees hosted in the Mediterranean countries is in part the results of political and economic agreements. For instance, Turkey has become from 2015–2016 a major receiving country of refugees in the Mediterranean region, together with Lebanon (and Jordan). Turkey has become more involved than ever in the reception of refugees because of the agreement made by the Turkish government with the European Union (EU) in March 2016. According to the so-called EU-Turkey “Joint Action Plan”, in exchange of its assistance in controlling EU borders from irregular migration, Turkey has received from the EU up to 6 billion euros, has been granted visa liberalisation and has been able to reinvigorate talks about its accession to the EU (Panebianco, 2022; Wihtol de Wenden, 2019). The agreement allows EU countries to send back to Turkey irregular migrants who crossed the Turkish borders to reach an EU country. Another important agreement was a bilateral one, involving Italian and Libyan governments. In 2017 the Italian government and Libyan authorities signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in order to train the Libyan Coast Guard and to control land borders. The MoU

has been endorsed by the EU, thus the Libyan Coast Guard is trained by European forces (not only Italian). These agreements with third countries were deemed necessary because the new configuration of migration in the region has caused a great discontent among EU states. In 2015, the countries most affected by the arrivals of refugees, namely EU countries on the Mediterranean shore (Italy, Greece, Malta, etc.) have been asking for a burden-sharing scheme for welcoming refugees among EU countries according to their wealth and population. After long negotiations the then EU commission President Jean-Claude Junker, proposed in May 2015 to implement a burden-sharing agreement. However, far from being cooperative, the response of the EU non-Mediterranean countries, and more specifically of Eastern European countries belonging to the Visegrad group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Croatia), was to close their borders to the entrance of newcomers across the Balkan route. Only after the summer of 2015, the proposal to relocate 160,000 refugees, was finally accepted by EU member states.

The agreements signed with Libya and Turkey are not new to EU policies; on the contrary, they are part of the well-established European migration policy of the past two decades. Indeed, migration policies of EU countries were based on the signature of bilateral and multilateral agreements with third countries, with the aim to externalise migration control (Triandafyllidou, 2013). This process is also characterised by a policy of border externalisation, implemented by externalising to third transit and sending countries some migration control responsibilities (Sterkx, 2008). Therefore, we have to stress that the EU approach has focused predominantly on “securitised” elements such as cooperation agreements on irregular immigration, external border controls making use of logistical and surveillance technologies, and development cooperation in third countries designed to stop irregular migration. However, given the enduring reality of gross global inequalities and continued economic and political instability in the Global South, we hypothesise that this approach will continue to push forced migrants to rely on smugglers, thereby increasing the risk of exploitation, abuse and death. The recent past has shown that in the presence of durable crisis, fighting off migrants and refugees will come to a dead end. We should be aware that there is a continuity (of migration flows) notwithstanding the crises of different nature. The Mediterranean area can be defined by a migration system (Ambrosetti and Strangio, 2016): a system of principles and rules of admission for aliens that is resilient to changes in economic conditions and other exogenous shocks.

8.4 Two Emerging Phenomena: High Skilled and Irregular Migration

More recent migration flows in Europe are characterised by high skilled migration. A common legislation on high skilled migration was adopted by the European Council with the Directive on the EU Blue Card (Directive 2009/50/EC of 25 May 2009 recently reformed by Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of 20 October 2021). The Directive

aims at facilitating the entry and the mobility of highly skilled migrants and of the members of their families and to harmonise procedures for entry and residence in the member countries. High skilled migration has increased in all EU countries since 2010. However it declined in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the EU countries, those belonging to the Northern shore of the Mediterranean do not attract a lot of skilled migrants: among those countries only France is attractive for the category of researchers. A large part of EU Blue Cards are issued in Germany. Highly skilled migrants are mainly of Chinese, Indian, American and Russian origin.

Undocumented migration has been identified as one of the main characteristics of the “Southern European model of migration” (King, 2000). As such, undocumented migration is a phenomenon largely widespread and debated in the Mediterranean region. However, estimating the number of undocumented migrants is a complex exercise, made on the basis of several sources of data, including the number of applications for regularisation.

Estimates of undocumented migration is complicated by its very nature, additionally at the European level, the definitions and categories are not uniform. In the past, the European Commission has funded the Clandestino project (between 2007 and 2009). The project was responding to a specific need for reliable information; at that time, media and the public had a growing interest in this type of migration, who is using “creative” figures. The aim of the project was to harmonise data sources and methodology used to study undocumented migration, in order to build a database on undocumented migration and to guide policies on this difficult topic in Europe.

The Frontex Agency (the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union) was created in 2004 by the European Council and it is operational since October 2005 with the aim to promote, coordinate and develop European border management. Within its tasks, Frontex collects data on flows of illegal crossings of external borders and flows of illegal migrant detections reported within European borders. According to Frontex data, illegal crossing of the external EU borders has been stable between 2009 and 2013 (around 100,000 passages). In 2014, because of the worsening of the Syrian crisis, approximately 283,000 illegal crossings were spotted by Frontex, with 60% (170,000) crossing the maritime border of the centre-road Mediterranean (Italy and Malta) (Frontex, 2015). Illegal border crossing increased in 2015, because of the above-mentioned refugees crisis, and it has reached the record figures of 1.82 million in 2015. Starting from 2016 on, the figures started to decrease when 511,047 illegal border crossings were detected. In 2017, the drop in illegal border crossing continued, decreasing by 60% with respect to 2016, reaching 204,719 detections. The figures followed a decreasing trend in 2018 with 150,114 illegal border crossings. In 2019 and 2020, the number of illegal border crossing was even smaller than 2018, reaching its lowest record in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, the numbers of illegal border crossing increased to about 200,000.

It should be stressed that the data provided by Frontex refer to detections of illegal border crossings, rather than the number of persons, as the same person may cross the external EU border several times. Since 2015, with the worsening of the so-called “refugees crisis”, the European Commission and international organisations

such as the UNHCR and the IOM, put additional efforts in the data production in the Mediterranean region. Data on death at seas and on flows of individuals crossing the borders are nowadays more systematically collected by these agencies. Therefore from 2015, arrivals by sea and land borders in the Northern shore of the Mediterranean are collected by UNCHR and available on their portal, broken down by country of origin, age and gender.¹ 2015 was, as already mentioned in the previous section, a record year for illegal border crossings: more than 1 million. From 2016, there has been a continuous decrease in border crossings because of the above-mentioned agreements with Turkey and Libya. The lowest figures were recorded in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic (95,720). A slow recovery has characterised the last two years with respectively 123,540 and 160,057 sea and land arrivals recorded.

Missing Migrants Project (2023) is an project of IOM aiming to record people who die in the process of migrating to an international destination, regardless of their legal status. It has been implemented in various regions of the world, including the Mediterranean region since 2014.² Since 2014, 25,405 missing migrants and 8,216 deaths of migrants were recorded in Mediterranean by the Missing Migrants Project.

8.5 Conclusions

The Mediterranean migration system has undergone many changes since 1948. While migration from the Southern and Eastern shores to Western Europe was numerous from the 1960s onwards, European countries implemented restrictive entry policies with the oil crises of the 1970s. We are witnessing the emergence of new poles of attraction for international migration, such as the countries of Southern Europe, which have long been labour exporters, but also Libya, Turkey and Jordan. International migration is changing, with an increase in the migration of highly skilled people, including students. More recently, the Arab Spring of the 2010 decade has brought the Mediterranean into the “refugee crisis”. Migration flows of asylum seekers and refugees are becoming unprecedented, with a peak of almost 15 million in the late 2010s. The countries most affected by this “refugee crisis” are those on the Southern and Eastern shores.

Given the demographic, economic and political situation, the Mediterranean region’s migration scenario of the future could be characterised by a strong migration pressure, particularly by young adults from the South-East to Europe. This migration of young adults could be beneficial for the ageing countries of the Northern shore of the Mediterranean. This would, for example, cope with their domestic labour shortages, in particular with the segmentation of the labour market and the need to find care workers to partially respond to structural demographic ageing. Even if international migration will not be able to deal with the massive demographic ageing of the Northern shore countries, it will certainly be able to do so in a partial way in certain

¹ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>.

² <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>.

sectors. To realise this benefit, one path to follow could involve (re-)opening the legal channels of migration, for both humanitarian and economic migrants, making immigration a structural and not a transitory phenomenon. For European countries, this would be an alternative to the migration policy paradigm based on securitisation and solidarity with the poor, and would mitigate political discourse and policy actions dominated by security and emergency issues.

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