
IRREGULAR MIGRATION IN EUROPE

By Christal Morehouse and Michael Blomfield

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Executive Summary

Irregular migration frequently makes headlines, and in Europe, policymakers are under increasing public and political pressure to address both the flows and stocks of unauthorized migrants in each country. Within European Union (EU) Member States, national governments define, identify, and respond to irregular migration in very different ways. However, with the removal of internal borders within the Schengen area, European governments are collaborating intensively on the management of their external borders. They are doing this with the support of EU institutions, particularly the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union, which coordinates Member States' joint border enforcement and return operations. This agency, better known as Frontex, has also led increased data collection and analysis on patterns of irregular migration to the European Union.

The detected annual flow of irregular migration into Europe decreased from 2007 to 2010, although there was a notable quarterly surge in the summer of 2008. The estimated stock of irregular migrants in the EU-15 countries has declined on average for almost a decade since 2002. Yet due to increased entry at certain points along the EU external border, this trend has often been masked by localized surges. While detections along the EU's eastern border have remained traditionally low, the focus on unauthorized entry has shifted from the Southern Mediterranean (Spain and Italy), toward the Southeastern land border between Greece and Turkey. EU joint operations to combat illegal border crossing may merely displace, rather than reduce, the volume of unauthorized crossings, while the reduction in numbers may have more to do with reduced economic demand for foreign workers within the European Union itself. The total number of detected illegal entries to the European Union in 2010 remained stable with those in 2009. However, data for the third and fourth quarters showed a significant increase in detections compared to the same quarters the previous year. This was driven by a marked increase in the number detected illegal crossings of the European Union's external land borders, which was isolated to a single "hotspot" along the Greece-Turkey land border.

The first quarter of 2011 saw a reversal of this trend. The data shows that during that period there were fewer detected illegal crossings of the European Union's external land borders than for any other quarter during the previous three years. This was attributed to a combination of poorer weather for migrants seeking to make the crossing along the Greece-Turkey border and an increase in operations to combat illegal crossings in the area. However, the first quarter of 2011 also witnessed a significant increase in the number of detected illegal crossings of the European Union's external sea borders, which had been in decline over the previous two years. This increase was almost exclusively due to higher rates of irregular migration from North Africa during the "Arab Spring," which led to the largest number of detected illegal border crossings into the European Union of any first quarter in recent years.

The detected and estimated scope of irregular migration in the European Union has remained below the peak levels of summer 2008 in recent years. Yet combating irregular migration is likely to remain challenging as European economies recover from the recession and migratory flows begin to increase again. In comparison, irregular migration to the European Union is on a far smaller scale than that evidenced in the United States, despite the EU population being significantly larger than that of the United States (approximately 500 million and 300 million respectively). It is estimated that 1.9 million to 3.8 million unauthorized immigrants resided in the European Union in 2008, compared to over 11 million in the United States during that time.

The reactive nature of EU irregular migration to border management operations and return policies suggest that continued and large-scale investments in border enforcement are likely to be needed alongside related policies that combat the root causes of such migration.



I. Introduction

Irregular migration¹ has been the subject of increasing and ongoing public debate in both Europe and the United States in recent years. In Europe, this issue rose to greater public prominence during the summer of 2008, with daily reports of unauthorized migrants reaching Mediterranean shores and others tragically losing their lives in the process. Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic are under political and public pressure to reduce irregular migration, with majorities across countries viewing it as a problem. It is commonly believed that irregular migration negatively impacts host communities by undermining the rule of law, fostering labor exploitation, increasing poverty (by taking jobs away from native workers or adding to numbers of poor in a country), and putting pressure on public services.

The *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* survey suggests that majorities in the six European countries surveyed were more worried about irregular migration than legal migration, even though the size of the unauthorized migrant population has been on the wane. The survey also found that the majority of American, British, and Spanish respondents viewed immigration generally as a problem. In the United Kingdom, 33 percent believed *legal* immigrants increase crime; while the perception was shared by 46 percent in Germany and 56 percent in Italy.² Similarly, the European Union's public opinion survey (Eurobarometer) for 2009 shows that Europeans ranked immigration as one of the top three issues on which EU-level policies should focus.³ However, there is little consensus among the 27 EU Member States on how to comprehensively address irregular migration *within* a country. Rather, a continuum of policies is in place. At one end of this continuum are policies easing immigration controls to allow more people to enter legally, or granting one-off or even successive regularizations (known as legalizations in the United States). At the other end, are policies maintaining highly selective immigration, tightening border controls, and imposing strict penalties for immigration violations, including involuntary repatriation.

Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic are under political and public pressure to reduce irregular migration, with majorities across countries viewing it as a problem.

However, the European Union is unique in that its Member States (with the exception of the United Kingdom and Ireland, and future participants Cyprus, Romania, and Bulgaria) have removed internal borders (as have Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland). The resulting area of free movement is known as the Schengen area.⁴ Thus the primary focus for EU border officials responding to irregular migration has become the Schengen area's 42,672 kilometers (26,515 miles) of external sea borders and 8,826 kilometers (5,484 miles) of external land borders. The establishment of the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the

1 Irregular migration is the term preferred in European policy circles, while illegal immigration is typically used in the US context. See Box 1 for full explanation of terminology.

2 Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States were surveyed; German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS), *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration 2010* (Washington, DC: GMFUS, 2011), www.gmfus.org/trends/immigration/doc/TTI2010_English_Key.pdf.

3 European Commission, *Standard Eurobarometer 71: Public Opinion in the European Union*, (Brussels: European Commission, 2009): 60, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb71/eb71_std_part1.pdf.

4 The Schengen area allows for freedom to move within this space for all travelers, regardless of citizenship, involving 22 Member States of the European Union (EU) and European Economic Area (EEA) partners Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, and Lichtenstein.



European Union (known as Frontex) in 2005 has transformed Member State cooperation in this area.⁵ Frontex has improved data collection and reporting on irregular migration in the European Union and undertaken comparative risk analysis and reporting, while coordinating Member States' joint enforcement and return operations. The creation of Frontex has led to increased resource pooling, as it is subsidized by EU Member States and Schengen-associated countries. In light of its success, Frontex's budget has grown extensively, from approximately 6.3 million euros in 2005 to nearly 88 million euros in 2010.⁶ In addition, border control agents now act according to the Schengen Borders Code, which sets out standards and procedures for external border management.⁷

Over the last decade, the estimated stock of unauthorized migrants in the EU-15⁸ has decreased.⁹ Since 2007, data have been available for detected annual flows into Member States, which also show an overall decline.¹⁰ The reduced detected flow coincides with an increase in border protection policies and the onset of the global economic crisis. Yet due to increased entry at specific points along the EU external border, which garners vast public and media attention, this trend is often masked by specific localized surges. The strength of the economy and the availability of jobs for unauthorized migrants are key factors in determining how many such migrants attempt to enter Europe and Schengen-associated countries. Frontex emphasized this dynamic in an August 2009 report: "The current decreasing trend of illegal migration generates a kind of pause or postponement of unauthorized migration, ending when labor demand in Member States starts to rise."¹¹ The report also highlighted that the seemingly steady decrease in detected irregular migration might only be part of a larger trend that is still emerging, in which irregular migration could increase as European economies regain strength.

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This report explores how irregular migration occurs in destination countries, examines its detected scope, and analyzes its estimated scale in the European Union. It also draws some general comparisons with the United States. This report does not evaluate specific policies aimed at stemming irregular migration or comment on the critical debate surrounding border-control methods.

- 5 Frontex is an independent EU agency based in Warsaw, Poland, that has a mandate to coordinate the operational cooperation between Member States in the field of border security. A European Council regulation from October 2004 set the cornerstone for Frontex and the agency became fully operational in October 2005.
- 6 Frontex, "Budget increase 2005-2010" (Budget and Finance report, 2010), www.frontex.europa.eu/showImage.php?src=image/Z2Z4L2Zyb250ZXgvZW4vZGVmYXVsdF9vcGlzeS80LzgvMQ/2027059518.jpg;RnJvbnRleCBidWRnZXQgaW5jcmVhc2UgMjAwNS0yMDEw.
- 7 European Commission, "Regulation (EC) No 562/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2006 establishing a Community Code on the rules governing the movement of persons across borders (Schengen Borders Code)," *Official Journal of the European Union* (L105/1, 2006), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:105:0001:0032:EN:PDF>.
- 8 The EU-15 is comprised the countries that were EU Member States prior to the accession of ten candidate countries in 2004: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
- 9 Clandestino Project, *Clandestino Project Final Report* (Athens: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, 2009), <http://clandestino.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/clandestino-final-report-november-2009.pdf>.
- 10 In 2007 the Frontex Risk Analysis Network (FRAN) began releasing quarterly updates of data on the number of detected illegal crossings of the European Union's external borders. The reports show that there was a decrease in the annual number of detected illegal border crossings over the period from 2007 to 2010. See Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Updates* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2007 to 2011).
- 11 Frontex, *The Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Illegal Migration to the EU* (Warsaw: Frontex Risk Analysis Unit, 2009), www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/libe/dv/frontex/_frontex_en.pdf.



II. Pathways into Irregularity and Terminology

There are eight principal ways in which nonnationals become unauthorized migrants:

- Illegal entry (illegal border crossing)
- Entry using false documents
- Entry using legal documents, but providing false information in those documents¹²
- Overstaying a visa-free travel period or temporary residence permit
- Loss of status because of nonrenewal of permit for failing to meet residence requirements or breaching conditions of residence
- Being born into irregularity¹³
- Absconding during the asylum procedure or failing to leave a host state after a negative decision
- A state's failure to enforce a return decision for legal or practical reasons (toleration).¹⁴

The 27 EU Member States have 27 different immigration systems. The parameters of some elements of those systems are in the process of harmonization (notably asylum), while considerable cooperation has been established in other areas (such as border management). But ultimately, unauthorized migrants are categorized as such by the states into which they migrate, and EU Member States have not reached a common definition of this migrant population. For example, Member States are divided as to whether “tolerated persons”¹⁵ can be treated as part of the unauthorized population. Moreover, some

Box I. Terminology and Political Connotations

The terms *illegal*, *irregular*, *undocumented*, or *unauthorized migrant* can have different connotations in national policy debates across the Atlantic. These terms have sometimes been associated with partisan political agendas.

The 2008 European Union directive on “Common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals” avoided the term illegal migrant in its title. The European Commission’s 2006 “Communication on policy priorities in the fight against illegal immigration of third-country nationals” favored the term illegal immigration, as did its 2002 “Proposal for a comprehensive plan to combat *illegal immigration* and trafficking of human beings.” The United Nations, nongovernmental organizations, and migrant groups in Europe often use the term *irregular* or *undocumented migration*. In the United States, *illegal immigration* is the most common term; alternate terms have been described as euphemisms.

The United Nations’ Global Commission on International Migration addressed the difficulties of finding nonpartisan terminology to address this type of migration in its 2005 report. It asserted that a person cannot be “illegal” or “irregular” and settled on “migrants with irregular status.”

12 Susanne Worbs, *Illegalität von Migranten in Deutschland* (Nuremberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2005): 5-6.

13 Clandestino Project, *Clandestino Project Final Report*: 43-4.

14 Not all Member States agree that tolerated persons are unauthorized migrants.

15 Tolerated persons are immigrants who carry government-issued documents that protect them from removal for a period of time. These persons are registered with national authorities and may be entitled to social benefits or enjoy a right to work. This status does not, however, grant legal residence. Germany, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania are among the states that have issued such documents, mainly to persons seeking refugee status.



states classify a violation of immigration law as merely a misdemeanor, while in others it is considered a criminal offense, for which migrants can be jailed.¹⁶

Table 1. Legal Definitions of Irregular Migration in Select EU Countries

Country	Term / Definition	Law
United Kingdom	Illegal entry	1971 Immigration Act
Germany	Unlawful entry. Foreigners no longer possessing a necessary residence title and a right of residence are required to leave the federal territory.	Aufenthaltsgesetz (Residence Law)
Netherlands	The presence of foreign nationals who are not in possession of a valid residence permit and are therefore obliged to leave the country are defined as “unlawful stay illegals.”	2000 Aliens Act. Linking Act. (Benefit Entitlement and Residency Status Act). <i>Illegalennota</i> (Ministry of Justice, Policy document on Illegal Aliens, 2004).
Spain	There is no term in national legislation for irregular immigration or irregular situation. Clandestine migration means that the foreigner is not a legal resident of Spain.	Ley organica 8/2000. Reglamento de la ley organica 4/2000, de 11 de Enero, sobre derechos y libertades de los extranjeros en Espana y su integracion social (Rules of Implementation of the Law on Foreigners). Penal code
Italy	Foreigners in an irregular position.	Bossi-Fini Law No. 189/2002
Poland	Nelegalni (nonlegal), illegal crossing of the border, residing in the territory without the required visa or permit.	Act on Aliens

Source: Adapted from *Clandestino Project Final Report*, 2009.

Diverse terminology is used to debate irregular migration across EU Member States, yet some common frameworks exist (see Box 1). The 2008 EU Return Directive defines illegal stay as “the presence on the territory of a Member State, of a third-country national who does not fulfill, or no longer fulfils the conditions of entry as set out in Article 5 of the Schengen Borders Code or other conditions for entry, stay or residence in that Member State.”¹⁷ The Commission’s 2006 “Communication on policy priorities in the fight against illegal immigration of third-country nationals” and its 2002 “Proposal for a comprehensive plan to combat illegal immigration and trafficking of human beings” also provide common denominators for jointly addressing the issue.¹⁸

A project funded by the European Commission to collate and review data on irregular migration into Europe — *Clandestino*¹⁹ — adopted the terms *undocumented* and *irregular* migration and

¹⁶ Clandestino Project, *Clandestino Project Final Report*: 119-21.

¹⁷ European Commission, “Directive 2008/115/EC on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals,” *Official Journal of the European Union* (L 348, 2008), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:348:0098:0107:EN:PDF>.

¹⁸ European Commission, “Policy priorities in the fight against illegal immigration” (Brussels: European Commission, last updated March 12, 2007), http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/justice_freedom_security/free_movement_of_persons_asylum_immigration/114525_en.htm; European Commission, “Proposal for a comprehensive plan to combat illegal immigration and trafficking of human beings,” *Official Journal of the European Union* (C 142, 2002), http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/other/l33191b_en.htm.

¹⁹ Officially, the project is an interdisciplinary response to the need for data and policy analysis on irregular migration into Europe.



undocumented immigrant. This report uses the term *irregular migration*, as many unauthorized migrants do indeed possess documents, such as passports and ID cards issued by governments in their country of origin. The term *undocumented* can therefore be misleading.

III. Estimated and Detected Scope

A. Estimated Scope

The current estimated scope of irregular migration stock provides evidence about *longer-term* irregular migration trends in the European Union. In 2008, an estimated 1.9 million to 3.8 million unauthorized immigrants resided in the European Union, which has a population of approximately 500 million.²⁰ The United States has a smaller overall population (approximately 300 million) but a larger unauthorized population — an estimated 11.2 million individuals.²¹ There are currently no reliable estimates for annual irregular migration flows to the European Union (which hereafter refers to EU- and Schengen-associated countries).

Europe's unauthorized population has been estimated to be declining since 2002, both in actual numbers and as a share of the total population. This is due to the expansion of EU borders (to include 12 neighboring countries and their citizens), regularizations in some countries, increased and coordinated border enforcement throughout the European Union, and cooperation with countries of origin on stemming irregular migration. Most recently, the decline in demand for labor in the European Union, due to the recession and slow recovery, have impacted migration flows. In 2008, the European Union's unauthorized migrant population was on average less than 1 percent of the total population of Member States (see Table 2).

Table 2. Unauthorized Migrant Population Estimates in the European Union, 2002-2008

Year	Absolute Population Numbers (millions)		Percentage of Population		Percentage of Foreign Population	
	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum
EU-15						
2002	3.1	5.3	0.80	1.40	14	25
2005	2.2	4.8	0.58	1.23	8	18
2008	1.8	3.3	0.46	0.83	7	12
EU-27						
2008	1.9	3.8	0.39	0.77	7	13

Source: Clandestino Project, *Clandestino Project Final Report*, 2009.

The scope of irregular migration varies widely among the 27 EU Member States. In 2008, 11 Member States had a maximum estimated unauthorized population of more than 100,000 persons: Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, France, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Belgium, the Netherlands, and

20 Clandestino Project, *Policy Brief: Size and Development of Irregular Migration to the EU* (Athens: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, 2009): 4, http://irregular-migration.hwwi.de/typo3_upload/groups/31/4.Background_Information/4.2.Policy_Briefs_EN/ComparativePolicyBrief_SizeOfIrregularMigration_Clandestino_Nov09_2.pdf.

21 Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2011): 9, <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/133.pdf>.



the United Kingdom.²² Some have complained that the policies of one state — whether enacting a regularization or tightening border controls — affect immigrant flows to neighboring Member States.

B. Detected Scope

Publicly available comparative statistics on irregular migration in the European Union can be drawn from two key data sources: Frontex reports and the EU-wide biometric database, EURODAC.²³

Frontex records and reports on seven categories of irregular migration:

- Detections of illegal border crossing *between* border crossing points
- Detections of illegal border crossing at border crossing points
- Detections of suspected facilitators
- Detections of illegal stay
- Refusal of entry
- Asylum applications
- Detections of false documents.

Data and reporting on the first category of indicators, namely detections between border crossing points, is the most extensive and will be analyzed here.

The detected scope of irregular migration depends on the amount of effort that is put into uncovering clandestine migration by authorities, as well as the magnitude of the flows. While this data category can serve as an indicator for shifting trends in irregular migration to the European Union, it is not a substitute for the actual scope, which is thought to be much greater and which also encompasses those who initially enter the territory on a legal basis and overstay.

It is important to take into account that the border of the European Union has shifted several times in recent years, significantly changing the definition of who is legally allowed residence. The expansion of the border and scarcity of comparable data makes a longitudinal comparison of irregular migration in the European Union extremely difficult. The European Union's most recent enlargements occurred on May 1, 2004 and January 1, 2007,²⁴ enabling free movement within the European Union of citizens from the 12 new Member States. As a result, any citizens of the new Member States who had been residing in the EU area without authorization received *de facto* legal status overnight. Therefore, it is more useful to examine the shifts in illegal entry after January 1, 2007. Frontex reporting has also become increasingly sophisticated, producing more detailed information from 2008 onward.

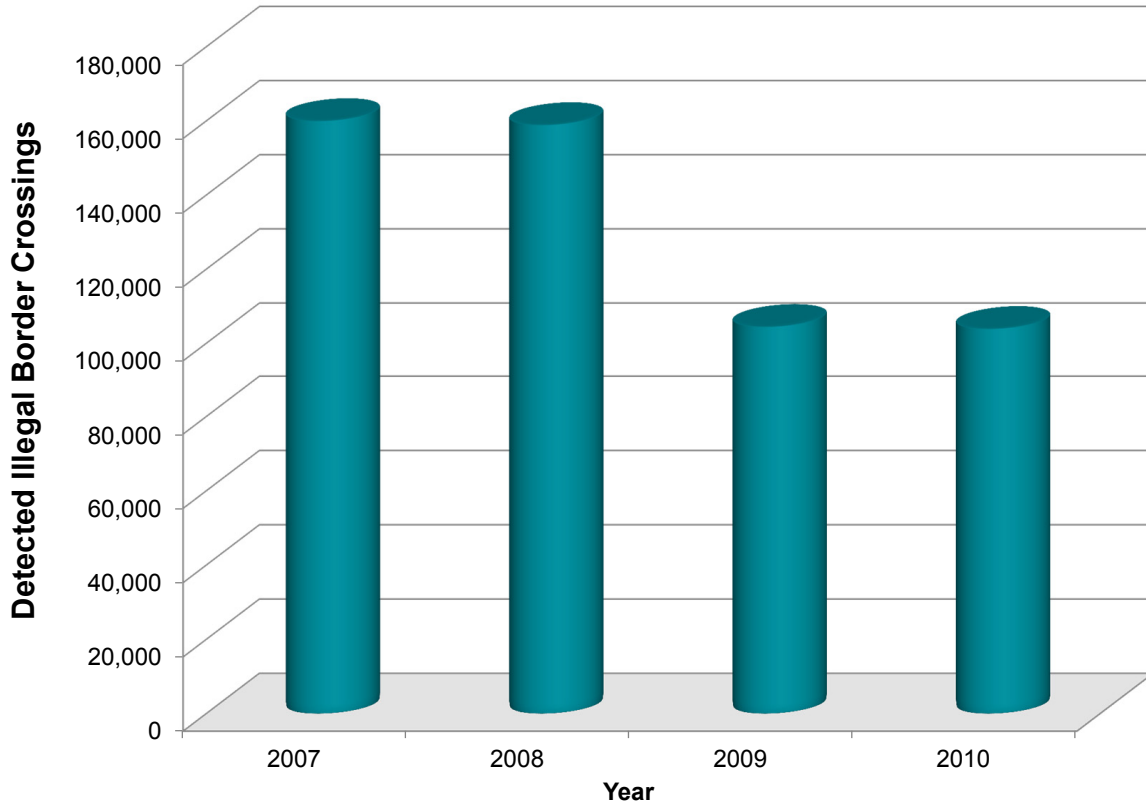
Irregular migration flows to the European Union seem to react strongly to border management operations. Thus, changes in flow do not apply evenly across the European external borders. There has been a significant decline in the number of detected illegal border crossings since 2007, when 163,903 persons were discovered trying to enter the European Union illegally between border crossing points (see Figure 1). However, this overall trend is only one part of a much more complicated narrative.

22 Clandestino Project, *Policy Brief: Size and Development of Irregular Migration to the EU*: 5.

23 The EU-wide biometric fingerprint database assists Member States in determining which country is responsible for an asylum claim and which claimants are — or have already been — deemed ineligible for asylum. EURODAC statistics are based on records of fingerprints from all individuals age 14 years or over who have made applications for asylum in the 27 Member States (plus Iceland, Norway, and Switzerland), who were apprehended when crossing a Member State's external border illegally, or who were found to be illegally present on the territory of a Member State.

24 The following countries joined the European Union in 2004: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Bulgaria and Romania joined the European Union on January 1, 2007.

Figure 1. Number of Detected Illegal Border Crossings at EU- and Schengen-Associated Countries' External Borders, 2007-10



Source: Frontex, Press Pack, May 2011. www.frontex.europa.eu/download/Z2Z4L2Zyb250ZXgvZW4vZGVmYXVsdF9vcGlzeS8xMzMvMS8x/presspack_2011-05_final.pdf.

Member States detected a total of 104,600 illegal border crossing attempts at the European Union's external borders in 2009, a 34 percent drop in illegal border crossings from 2008. This was comprised of decreases reported at both sea (a 44 percent decline) and land borders (a 23 percent reduction).²⁵ The total number of detected illegal border crossings remained stable from 2009 to 2010. However, the composition of illegal border crossings changed markedly. Detections of illegal crossings at the European Union's external land borders increased from 57,000 in 2009 to almost 90,000 in 2010 (a 56 percent increase). During the same period, detections of illegal crossings of the European Union's external borders by sea fell from 47,000 in 2009 to 14,000 in 2010 (a 70 percent decrease).²⁶ Some of the main countries of origin of unauthorized migrants to the European Union in recent years have been Afghanistan, Albania, Iraq, the Palestinian territories, and Somalia.²⁷

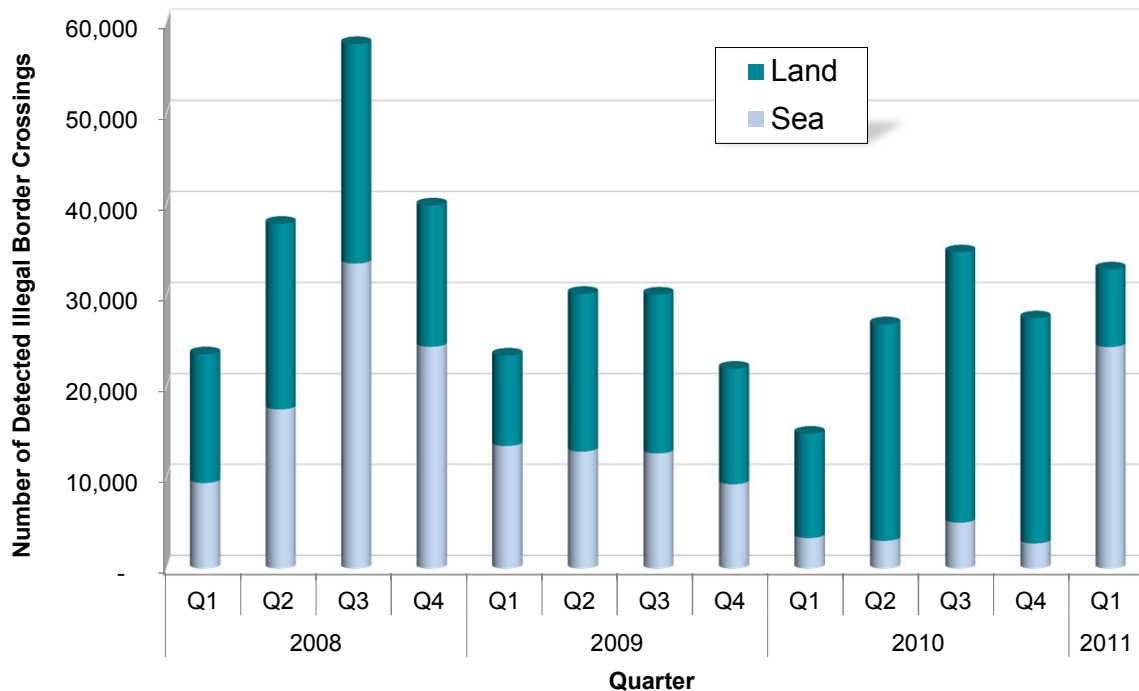
25 Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2011): 56, www.frontex.europa.eu/situation_at_the_external_border/art23.html.

26 Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011*: 56.

27 Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011*: 16.



Figure 2. Detections of Illegal Border Crossing at the Sea and Land Borders (Between Border Crossing Points) Along EU- and Schengen-Associated External Borders by Quarter, First Quarter 2008 to First Quarter 2011



Sources: Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 3, July 2010 to September 2010*; Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011*

To date, Frontex has identified seven main migratory routes used to cross into the European Union without authorization:²⁸

- Central Mediterranean route — from Tunisia and Libya to Italy and Malta
- Western Mediterranean route — from Morocco and Algeria to Spain
- Western African route — from the West African coast to the Canary Islands
- Eastern borders route — from the countries across the European Union's eastern external land borders in Eastern Europe into EU Member States
- Western Balkans route — from the non-EU countries in the Balkans into Member States
- Albania-Greece circular route — circular migration from Albania to Greece
- Eastern Mediterranean route (sometimes called South Eastern European route) — largely from Turkey to Greece by land or sea, and to include future Schengen participants Cyprus and Bulgaria.

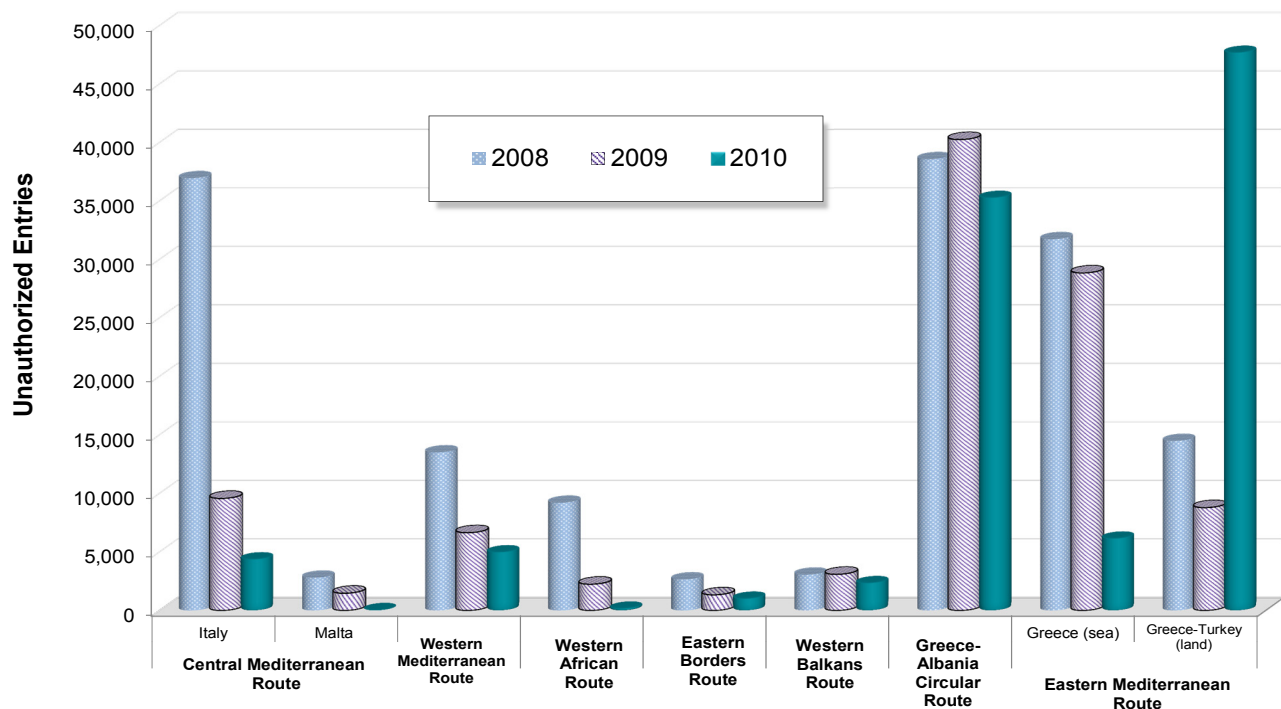
However, the pressure points for illegal entry into the European Union are in constant flux. For example, in 2008, the southern sea border was considered the most porous section of the European Union's external borders. This trend had been reversed by the second quarter of 2009, when external land

²⁸ The countries identified within each migration route are those predominantly used to cross into the European Union. They function as transit countries, but may also be countries of origin when their own citizens attempt to cross the European Union's borders. See Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2011): 15.

borders became the main target of illegal border crossing (see Figure 2). In the fourth quarter of 2010, 24,765 unauthorized migrants detected attempting to cross into the European Union by land, while only 2,766 persons were detected at maritime borders.²⁹ This shift from sea to land borders, however, is “due entirely to a shift in the Eastern Mediterranean route which has continued and intensified from 65 percent to 35 percent (land to sea) in the first quarter of 2010 to a ratio of 90 percent to 10 percent in the second quarter of 2010.”³⁰ The total number of detected illegal border crossings on the Eastern Mediterranean route increased from 40,000 in 2009 to 56,000 in 2010, and constituted 54 percent of all the detected illegal border crossings into the European Union.³¹

Overall, 86 percent of illegal border crossing in 2010 took place at the European Union’s external land borders, compared to 14 percent at its sea borders.³² The vast majority of these illegal crossings occurred at Greece’s land borders with Turkey and Albania. To date, the long eastern border of the European Union (excluding the Greece–Turkey border) has not been a particular target for irregular migration. During both 2009 and 2010, the eastern border accounted for just 1 percent of the total number of illegal border crossings detected (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Shifts in Illegal Border-Crossing Detections into the European Union, 2008-10



Sources: Frontex, *General Report 2008*; Frontex, *Press Pack, May 2011*; Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011*.

During 2009 and 2010, there was a strong decline in illegal border crossings on EU sea borders in Spain and Italy. The noticeable impact in flows away from the Western Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, and Western African routes has been attributed to increased border controls and bilateral agreements with third countries that address prevention and return. For example, the

²⁹ Frontex FRAN *Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011* (Warsaw: Frontex 2011): 29.

³⁰ Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 2, April to June 2010* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2010).

³¹ Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011*: 15.

³² Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011*: 56.



Canary Islands — once a key entry point — are no longer hotspots for illegal border crossing. Similarly, Italy and Malta experienced substantial reductions in irregular migration in 2009 and 2010 compared to previous years. While the recession and concomitant reduction in economic demand for migrants are a partial explanation, Frontex has focused joint operations in these regions, while Member States have formed bilateral agreements with key sending and transit countries (for example, between Italy and Libya, as well as between Spain and both Senegal and Mauritania).

*Greece has remained a targeted
entry point for irregular migration.*

In the first quarter of 2011, the number of illegal sea crossings increased significantly. This was concentrated on the Central Mediterranean route, and followed the civil unrest and economic disruptions in a number of North African during the “Arab Spring.” This surge led to Italy reporting the highest number of detected illegal border crossings, the first time a country surpassed Greece since Frontex began collecting data in 2008. The increase was largely confined to Tunisians attempting to cross the sea to Italy. The number of Tunisians detected making illegal crossings into the European Union rose from 323 in the fourth quarter of 2010 to 20,492 in the first quarter of 2011.³³ Following a bilateral agreement between the Italian and Tunisian governments, the volume of unauthorized migrants departing from Tunisia has begun to decline significantly.³⁴ However, subsequent to this period, increased flows of migrants from Libya have maintained pressure on Italy’s coastal borders, particularly at the island of Lampedusa.³⁵ In June 2011, the Italian government and the National Transition Council in Libya signed an accord to continue previous cross-country efforts to counter irregular migration.³⁶

Whereas other pressure points have shifted over the past three years, Greece has remained a targeted entry point for irregular migration, with its land border experiencing the largest increase in detected illegal border crossing in 2010. Greece was already the main gateway for unauthorized immigrants in 2008, and in 2009 the number of detections of illegal border crossings into Greece increased to 75 percent of the EU total, up from 50 percent the previous year.³⁷ In October 2010, Frontex declared that “Greece now accounts for 90 percent of all detections of illegal border crossings to the EU,”³⁸ referring to the second quarter of 2010. In total, 87 percent of detected illegal border crossings into the European Union during 2010 occurred at Greece’s borders on the Eastern Mediterranean or Albania-Greece irregular migration routes.³⁹ Greek authorities at the time estimated that up to 350 unauthorized migrants try to cross its land border with Turkey each day, near the Greek city of Orestiada. In October 2010, Greek Minister of Citizen Protection Christos Papoutsis requested the deployment of Frontex’s Rapid Border Intervention Teams⁴⁰ along its land border with Turkey, marking the first operation of the teams at the request of a Member State.

33 Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011*: 29.

34 Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011*: 10-11.

35 *Ibid.*

36 Reuters, “Italy signs migration accord with Libya rebels,” June 17, 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/libyaNews/idAFLDE75G1BH20110617>.

37 Frontex, *General Report 2009*: 5, www.frontex.europa.eu/gfx/frontex/files/general_report/2009/gen_rep_2009_en.pdf (accessed September 3, 2010).

38 Frontex, “Frontex deploys Rapid Border Intervention Teams to Greece” (news release, October 25, 2010), www.frontex.europa.eu/newsroom/news_releases/art79.html.

39 Frontex, *Annual Risk Analysis 2011*: 15.

40 Rapid Border Intervention Teams are specialized border guards made available by 27 EU countries to deal with emergency situations at EU external borders.



The first quarter of 2011 witnessed a significant fall in the number of illegal border crossings detected on the Greece-Turkey land border, with detections decreasing by 60 percent compared to the previous quarter. This was attributed by Frontex to the growth in operations along the border and poorer weather for attempting crossings. Nonetheless, Frontex cautioned that “pressure at this border section is still high and likely to resume in subsequent quarters.”⁴¹ The number of crossings into Greece from Albania (the Albania-Greece circular route) has followed a relatively consistent seasonal pattern in recent years. However, while the overall seasonal trend continued in 2010, the total number of detected illegal border crossings was lower than in previous years. The number of detected crossings fell to its lowest level in recent years during the first quarter of 2011, which followed the introduction of visa-free travel to the Schengen area for Albanian citizens with biometric passports in December 2010.⁴²

The shifting and intensifying of irregular migration pressure points are not a matter of pure displacement, which is often referred to as “squeezing the water balloon.” From 2007 to 2010, the total volume of irregular migratory flows declined; in effect, a deflation of the water balloon. There is, however, a correlation between targeted measures to combat irregular migration and the resulting change in flow. Frontex speculates that some of the flows may be continuing through the same routes, but are increasingly hard to detect. The number of detected facilitations (human smuggling) has remained fairly stable at between 1,700 and 2,500 detections per quarter, after peaking at an estimated 3,000 detections per quarter in the second half of 2008.⁴³ Should the general trend in irregular migration increase in the future, there may be a real risk of border control policies displacing, rather than preventing or deterring, irregular migration.

An analysis of the remaining Frontex indicators that describe trends in irregular migration and asylum applications would go beyond the scope of this paper. Figure 4, however, provides a rough overview of how these indicators have developed since 2008.

*The shifting and intensifying of irregular migration
pressure points are not a matter of pure displacement.*

These indicators highlight that, whereas detections of unauthorized migrants between border crossing points and illegal stay have risen since the first quarter of 2010 after following a declining trend since the end of 2008, detected facilitations have remained fairly constant and at a low level. In addition, the majority of irregular migration in Europe occurs after legal entry to a country, through visa overstay or unauthorized work.⁴⁴ According to Frontex’s second quarter report for 2010, “detections of illegal stay are concentrated among countries with more developed economies and those that border third countries of transit or origin.”⁴⁵ The number of detected overstayers in the European Union in the first quarter of 2011 was 82,257 persons.⁴⁶ In the United States, meanwhile, overstayers were estimated to account for 4 million to 5.5 million unauthorized immigrants in 2005, or more than one-third of the unauthorized population (though other estimates place the overstay rate at 30 percent to 40 percent of the overall unauthorized population).⁴⁷

A rise in the use of false travel documents was detected in the European Union during 2010, although there was a slight decline in the first quarter of 2011. Meanwhile, the number of asylum applications

41 Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011*: 10-11.

42 Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011*: 12.

43 Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011*: 9.

44 Clandestino Project, *Policy Brief: Size and Development of Irregular Migration to the EU*: 7.

45 Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 2, April 2010 to June 2010*.

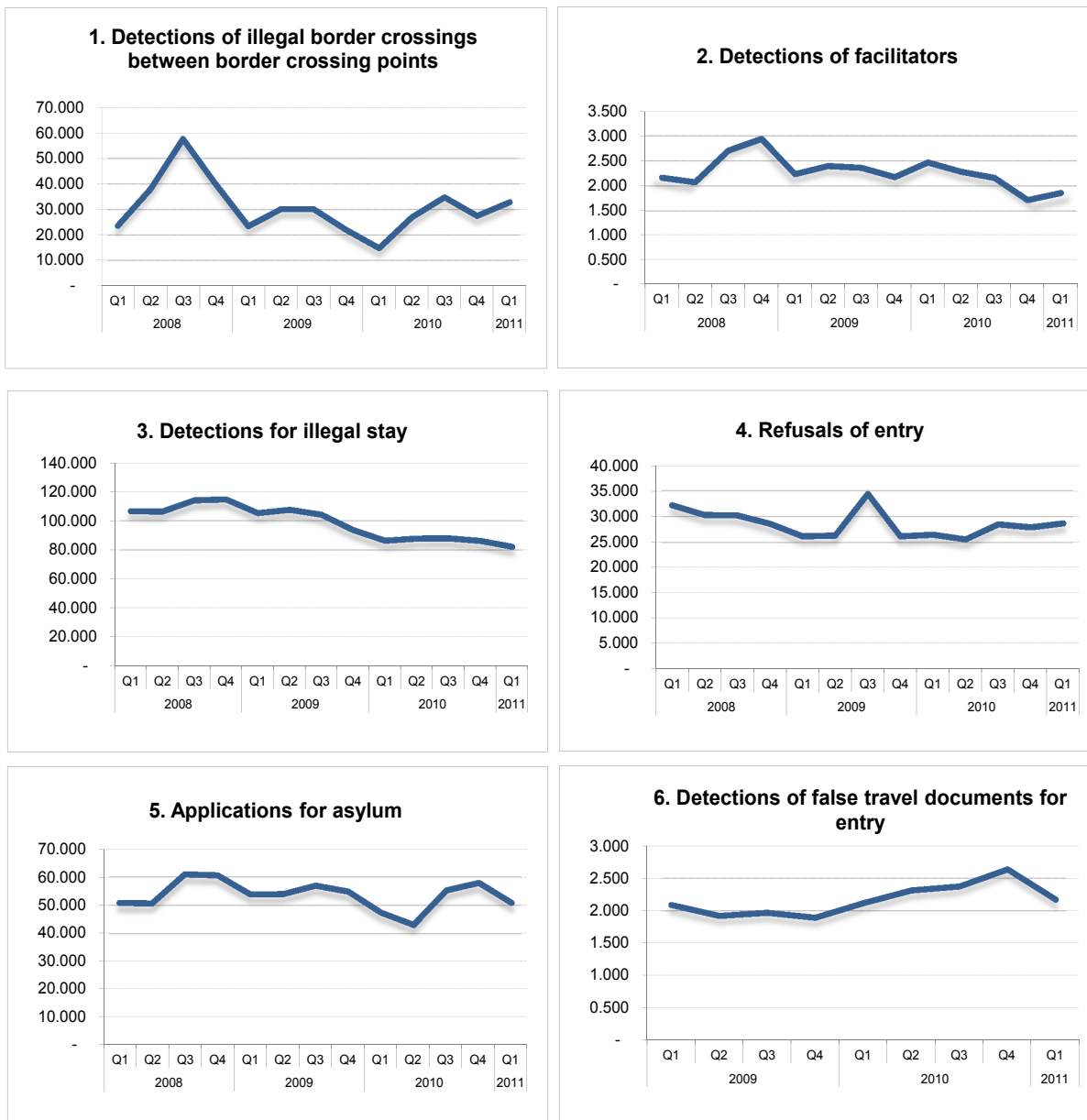
46 Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January 2011 to March 2011*: 31.

47 Pew Hispanic Center, *Fact Sheet: Modes of Entry for the Unauthorized Migrant Population* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2006), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/factsheets/19.pdf>.



showed a general downward trend from the third quarter of 2008 to the second quarter of 2010 across the European Union. However, since the number of applications rose in the third quarter of 2011, the quarterly total has remained close to the average during recent years. Despite a third quarter jump in refusals for entry in 2009, the trend since 2008 has been relatively stable with a very slight decline overall during this period.

Figure 4. FRAN Indicators as Reported by Member States to Frontex, First Quarter 2008 to First Quarter 2011



Sources: Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 2, April to June 2010*; Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 3, July to September 2010*; Frontex, *FRAN Quarterly Issue 1, January to March 2011*.



A second source of evidence, the EURODAC database, which includes all EU Member States, Switzerland, Iceland, and Norway, shows that the number of registered irregular entrants fell by 50 percent in 2009, even as use of the database increased.⁴⁸ These figures include those unauthorized migrants apprehended at the border and *within* the territory of Member States. The number of persons apprehended in connection with an illegal crossing of an EU external border rose by 62 percent between 2007 and 2008 (to 61,945 persons), but subsequently fell by about 50 percent in 2009 (to 31,071).⁴⁹ This data shows a slightly different trend than the refined Frontex data. It suggests that the most recent peak in irregular migration occurred in 2008. Yet both sources depict a decline in irregular migration in 2009. In common with Frontex reports, the EURODAC database shows large decreases in reported irregular border crossings into Italy and Spain from 2008 to 2009, and a smaller decline in Greece, with Greece accounting for a majority of irregular crossings of the European Union's external borders identified during 2009.

IV. Conclusion

The detected and estimated scope of irregular migration in the European Union declined between 2007 and 2010. Although there was an increase in the detected scope of irregular migration to Greece during 2010, the total number of detections across the European Union remains far below the peak levels in 2008. From an EU Home Affairs perspective, policy interventions have contributed to a much-desired decline in irregular migration, yet new hotspots of illegal entry continue to flare up along Europe's vast external borders. Media reports across Europe often focus on irregular migration, particularly when a new hotspot flares up. Recent press reports on the Greek-Turkish land border have generally noted neither the declining trend in irregular migration from mid-2008 to mid-2010, nor estimates suggesting that the stock of unauthorized migrants has been in decline since 2002. Indeed, based on media reports alone, one has the impression that Europe's borders are increasingly porous.

Policy interventions have contributed to a much-desired decline in irregular migration, yet new hotspots of illegal entry continue to flare up along Europe's vast external borders.

Combating irregular migration in the coming years is likely to remain challenging. As European economies recover from the recession and more jobs become available, flows may increase. Additionally, the shifting regional hotspots and the responses to these — such as the intensifying clandestine entry through Greece's land border with Turkey — may have a collateral effect on the calm but vast Eastern border. The spike in irregular migration from North Africa during the Arab Spring has also shown that developments beyond Europe's borders can quickly lead to changes in migration patterns. The reactive nature of irregular flows to border management operations and return policies suggest that continued and large-scale investments are likely to be needed for the foreseeable future, both on the European Union's external border and within each Member State.

48 European Commission, "EU's biometric database continues to ensure effective management of the Common European Asylum System," (press release, Brussels, August 3, 2010), <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/10/1023>.

49 EURODAC, *Annual Report to the European Parliament and the Council on the Activities of the EURODAC Central Unit in 2009* (Brussels: EURODAC, 2010): 5, http://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/intro/docs/com_2010_415_en.pdf.



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