

A red life vest lies on a sandy beach, with another one visible in the background. The ocean and a clear sky are in the distance. The text is overlaid on the image.

STOP THE INHUMANITY AT EUROPE'S BORDERS

MANIFESTO

THE CAMPAIGN

BRUTAL BORDERS

All around the frontiers of Europe, people escaping from war, persecution, food insecurity and climate shocks are confronted by violent pushbacks on land and at sea. People in desperate need of safety and security are being subjected to cruel and abusive treatment and denied basic humanitarian assistance.

They risk death, detention, summary deportation and exploitation, not only at the hands of states, but also by unscrupulous employers, smugglers and other criminals. People in acute distress are being denied the humanity and respect they have a right to expect. They have little or no opportunity to claim redress for the harmful and degrading abuses they suffer. This is tantamount to deterrence by death.

HOW HAS IT COME TO THIS?

People have always moved whether fleeing war, persecution, poverty or seeking a better life. This has been a constant throughout history. Such movements have usually been beneficial both for the migrants and the host communities. Migration is an integral part of what it means to be human. It is never a crime. Migrants are not illegal.

Unfortunately, this historical and humane understanding of migration is not shared by many political leaders in Europe and anti-immigration sentiment is on the rise. Contrary to all available evidence, an alarming number of Europeans are of the view that the continent is negatively impacted by migration.

They claim that many of those arriving at continental borders constitute a threat to European safety and an unbearable burden on the economies and public services. However, there is much evidence that shows that migrants contribute positively to their economies and communities when they are welcomed and allowed to integrate in an appropriate manner.

THESE ARE NOT ISOLATED INCIDENTS!

27 DECEMBER 2024

Three teenagers from Egypt — Ahmed Samra, Ahmed Elawdan, and Seifalla Elbeltagy, died from cold and exhaustion in a Bulgarian forest. Activists from solidarity groups were prevented by border guards from reaching them alive.

26 FEBRUARY 2023

At least 94 people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Iran, including 12 children died when their boat sank in rough seas off southern Italy. Dozens more are feared missing.

31 JULY 2022

Ajmal Khan, a 17-year-old Afghan teenager, drowned while trying to cross the Drina River near the city of Bijeljina in Bosnia-Herzegovina — a common but dangerous route for people on the move.

24 NOVEMBER 2021

An inflatable dinghy capsized near Dunkirk, moving from France to the UK. Twenty-seven people, including five women and two children, died.

In many countries, this ‘hostile environment’ has been consciously and maliciously stoked by politicians and media outlets eager to make headlines and court popularity. It is of concern that an “epidemic of indifference” has spread in relation to the deaths and serious harm experienced by so many refugees and migrants during their journeys.

CONFLICT TRENDS

In the past five years, the level of armed conflict around the world has almost doubled and is at its highest since World War II. In 2020, ACLED recorded 104,371 conflict events; in 2024, nearly 200,000. This is largely due to three very large conflicts beginning or restarting during the period — Ukraine, Gaza, and Myanmar — coupled with continued warfare in many other countries with high rates of conflict.

In countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar and Sudan, and especially Gaza and elsewhere in occupied Palestine, violence relentlessly targets specific segments of the population. Respect for international norms of behaviour is at an all-time low. Civilians bear the brunt of this world of violent normlessness. The vast majority of the people fleeing armed conflict remain within their own country or region. UNHCR estimates that some 75 per cent of the world’s refugees and displaced people are to be found in low and middle-income countries.

While many of the most vulnerable people on the move are the victims of wars and oppression, increasing numbers are being uprooted by the consequences of the climate crisis. Land that has provided livelihoods for centuries is becoming unusable and being abandoned. This puts immense pressure on food security and other services in cities. In some cases, this is accelerating international migration.

Europe has an opportunity to provide the victims of war, persecution and climate change with sanctuary, decent living and working conditions and a chance to rebuild their lives, while meeting the continent’s urgent needs for labour.

THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE

Europe is faced with significant demographic challenges, including a diminishing population, an ageing workforce and significant labour shortages for jobs that are widely rejected by host communities. Over the coming decades, the continent will need large numbers of newcomers to fill vacancies in vital industries such as health, social care and construction. At a time when thousands of Syrian and Ukrainian doctors and nurses are considering the option to return home, Europe is unprepared to fill growing gaps in its labour market.

It may be argued that Europe can meet its need for migrants by issuing visas to people who can apply for them while still in their home countries. However, when armed conflict and other life-threatening situations force people to move in chaotic circumstances, that option is rarely available. And yet in 2015, Europe welcomed close to a million people fleeing conflict in Afghanistan and Syria. And again in 2022, in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the mass exodus of ordinary people from that country, Europe showed its generosity. Many thousands of Ukrainians have been able to move to and within Europe with full access to public services and employment opportunities.

FLAWED APPROACH

Europe's response to the arrival of refugees and other migrants has been seriously flawed. Estimates suggest that, over the past decade, at least 30,000 people are known to have drowned in the Mediterranean while trying to reach Europe.

Many more such deaths go unreported while an unknown number have lost their lives on overland routes and at borders. Many of those who survived the journey are now living in European countries in a state of limbo, unable to integrate into those societies while awaiting the results of their asylum applications.

Families and communities in crisis-affected countries incur huge debts in their bid to send one of their members to Europe, often using the services of unscrupulous people smugglers. In the absence of legal alternatives, the current system enriches criminals, fails to ensure the safety of those undertaking dangerous journeys, and traumatizes those who complete them. Such inhumane and degrading treatment is morally reprehensible and violates fundamental norms to which all European states have subscribed.

European states are spending vast sums of money on detaining, policing and accommodating newcomers. These vulnerable people are prevented from working and cannot support themselves or contribute to the continent's economy. Enforced unemployment and the consequent loss of self-worth is a recipe for long-term mental health problems, requiring even more expenditure on healthcare and social services.



THIS MANIFESTO

On 31 January 2024, civil society organisations around Europe came together to launch the campaign to ‘Stop the inhumanity at Europe’s borders’. The number of organizations supporting the campaign has grown steadily; on 1 September 2025 it stood at over 150 from 23 countries. Expert volunteers supporting the campaign have worked on the analysis and detailed policy recommendations set out in this Manifesto.

These proposals offer a new and inspired vision for a Europe where respect for human life and dignity is key to the continent’s security and prosperity. Instead of today’s brutal treatment of people arriving at Europe’s borders, the campaign enables a Europe committed to dignity, humanity and respect for the rights of all.

The proposals set out in this Manifesto provide an opportunity for Europe to live up to its own stated values. They will bring improved opportunities for desperate people. They will lead to a more effective and equitable management of migratory movements, enabling Europe to meet the continent’s mounting demographic challenges.

This Manifesto identifies five interconnected issues that must be addressed in a concerted manner.

First and foremost, any actions designed to prevent people from entering Europe that involve violence and are likely to cause death or injury must stop. Reception arrangements must be humane. They must respect the dignity of each individual.

Europe must end its support to states outside the continent when such assistance is designed to obstruct or deter the arrival of refugees, and when it involves the systematic use of violence and denial of basic rights to safety and dignity while seeking refuge.

European countries must come together with countries of origin and transit as well as international organizations and civil society associations, to expand existing legal pathways and develop new regular entry channels for people to travel safely to Europe. This will eliminate the necessity of relying on people smugglers or embarking on life-threatening journeys. European countries also need to guarantee opportunities for those who have suffered abuse at Europe’s borders to claim justice and redress.

This Manifesto has been adopted by the associations endorsing the campaign. It sets out a new approach to the treatment of people seeking access to Europe from other continents. Campaign partners will use this Manifesto and its recommendations to support their advocacy with European and national parliaments as well as other forms of civil society mobilization and action.

THERE IS ANOTHER AND BETTER WAY.

LET US EMBRACE IT.

SAVING LIVES



1. SAVING LIVES

When they arrive at Europe's borders, refugees and other migrants are frequently met with the use of force and are pushed back to situations where their lives, safety and human rights are at risk. This Manifesto urges states and other actors to halt such expulsions and to protect the lives of these people who undertake dangerous journeys in their bid to reach the continent.

Frontex, the European Border Control and Coast Guard Agency, has expanded rapidly in recent years. But it lacks accountability and transparency, and its activities can endanger the lives and security of refugees and other migrants who are seeking admission to Europe. This Manifesto calls for its reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 European states should immediately desist from undertaking or supporting pushbacks at land or at sea, given that they often involve the use of violence, place refugees and other migrants at risk of death, prevent such people from exercising their right to submit a claim for asylum, and force them back to countries where they might be detained or otherwise abused.
- 2 European states and institutions must recognise the humanitarian role of search and Rescue (SAR) NGOs, avoid criminalization of humanitarian assistance and place the protection of life at sea at the centre of every decision concerning the Mediterranean.
- 3 There should be an early re-establishment of state-sponsored search and rescue missions in the Mediterranean, as well as the identification of appropriate disembarkation locations for refugees and other migrants who are rescued at sea.
- 4 Frontex should ensure that any surveillance activities that the agency undertakes do not lead to any action by Frontex itself or by EU and other states that endanger the lives of refugees and other migrants or prevent them from submitting asylum claims. Frontex should use its surveillance capabilities to support the rescue of people at sea, immediately alerting any search-and-rescue teams in the vicinity of any boat that is in distress.
- 5 In cooperation with UNHCR, European states and institutions should ensure that border guards and other security personnel, including those of Frontex, are provided with thorough training so as to ensure that they treat people on the move in a humane manner and in full accordance with relevant provisions of international law.

HUMANIZING RECEPTION



2. HUMANIZING RECEPTION ARRANGEMENTS

Many European states are attempting to obstruct and deter the irregular arrival of unwanted people from other parts of the world through the establishment of border controls that inflict suffering and trauma upon them. This brutality is senseless and unnecessary. Control of borders can be maintained while respecting the dignity of those seeking to enter the continent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1

European governments have a right to regulate the movement of people onto their territory, but border controls must be managed in ways that avoid the use of violence and demonstrate respect for the humanity and dignity of those seeking entry.

2

People arriving at European borders must be accorded the opportunity to submit a claim for asylum if they wish to do so and be provided with legal advice in a language that they understand. They should not be punished for arriving at a border in an irregular manner. Such practices are not only cruel and disrespectful; they are also in flagrant breach of state obligations under the international refugee law to which they are ostensibly committed.

3

European states should establish reception facilities that enable new arrivals to be registered, to submit an asylum claim if they wish to do so, and to be provided with adequate accommodation, health, language and information support and other basic needs while their application is being considered. Closed camps should not be established. The needs of women and unaccompanied minors should be given special consideration.

4

Frontex and European states, should focus on the protection of all new arrivals at the continent's borders, rescuing people who are in distress, safeguarding them from exploitative people smugglers and traffickers and ensuring access to asylum procedures in every European state.

5

In situations where asylum seekers are obliged to wait for long periods of time for their claims to be decided, states should consider giving them the right to undertake paid employment as well as full access to basic services such as health, education and language classes.

A photograph of a barbed wire fence in a rural landscape. The fence, made of wooden posts and multiple strands of barbed wire, runs diagonally across the frame. In the background, there are rolling hills with patches of green and yellow vegetation, suggesting an autumn setting. A single cow is visible grazing in the field on the right. The sky is overcast and grey.

ENDING CONTAINMENT

3. ENDING CONTAINMENT

Europe's migration and asylum policies have become increasingly dependent on arrangements whereby neighbouring and nearby states assume responsibility for controlling the movement of refugees and other migrants. Some of these agreements have resulted in appalling cases of cruelty and abuse. This Manifesto calls for such offshoring or externalization processes to be discontinued in order to protect the rights, dignity and humanity of people on the move.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 European states and the EU must discontinue any policies and practices that result in the containment or refoulement of refugees and other migrants in countries where their humanity, dignity and human rights are systematically denied.
- 2 In place of such policies, safe and regular routes should be established that allow refugees to relocate from such countries to Europe and other parts of the world that offer security and livelihood opportunities, with priority being given to those refugees with urgent protection, medical or family reunion needs.
- 3 European states and the EU should provide sustained funding and support to non-European countries, either directly or through UNHCR and its operational partners, so that they are able to establish the capacity required to register new arrivals, assess their asylum claims and provide them with protection and decent settlement opportunities in conditions of respect and dignity.
- 4 Any existing or new agreements relating to the movement of people entered into by the EU, its member states or other European states with countries outside of the continent should be conditional upon the adequacy of the arrangements available for the humane reception of those people and the respect of their fundamental rights.

ESTABLISHING SAFE ROUTES



4. ESTABLISHING SAFE ROUTES

This Manifesto demands the establishment of routes that enable refugees and other migrants to reach Europe without the necessity of undertaking difficult, dangerous and sometimes deadly journeys to the continent. Safe routes could reduce the scale of such movements and enable people with particular needs or skills to take up residence in Europe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 The EU, its member states and other European countries should urgently produce coherent and concrete plans for the establishment, expansion and implementation of safe routes.
- 2 This process should be undertaken in close consultation with international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM; countries of origin, first asylum and transit; local government bodies, as well as NGOs and civil society organizations, including diaspora organizations and those led by and representing refugees and other migrants.
- 3 All European governments should establish state-sponsored resettlement programmes, enabling the planned arrival of recognized refugees who are unable to find effective protection in their country of asylum. The scale of such resettlement programmes should be commensurate with the absorptive capacity of the states concerned.
- 4 European governments should support the creation of community-based resettlement programmes, whereby new refugee arrivals are welcomed and assisted by families, neighbourhood groups, faith-based organizations and other civil society associations.
- 5 In consultation with UNHCR, European states should explore the potential for the establishment and expansion of routes such as family reunion programmes, labour mobility initiatives, university scholarships and humanitarian visas and corridors.

ENABLING JUSTICE & REDRESS



5. ENABLING JUSTICE AND REDRESS

While refugees and other migrants seeking admission to Europe are often subjected to inhumane, undignified and illegal treatment by agents of the state, their opportunities to seek justice and redress for such abuses are extremely limited. This Manifesto calls on states and the European Union to correct this unacceptable situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 European governments should support the establishment of thorough, effective and independent investigations, with the participation of family members, into cases where refugees and other migrants have lost their lives or been the victims of abusive treatment as a result of actions taken - or not taken - by agents of the state and other actors. States must guarantee migrants access to legal information, assistance, and representation in a language that can be understood. They must ensure that special provisions are in place based on the needs of particular groups such as unaccompanied migrant children.
- 2 Specifically, Frontex should systematically investigate any reports from NGOs, civil society organizations and the media regarding pushbacks, pullbacks and the use of violence at Europe's borders.
- 3 NGOs, charities and human rights defenders providing direct support to refugees and other migrants at Europe's borders must not be criminalized or penalized for activities intended to safeguard the lives and rights of people seeking entry to Europe.
- 4 Legal proceedings should not be taken by states against refugees and other migrants who have entered Europe or assisted others to enter Europe in an irregular manner.
- 5 States should take urgent steps to effectively implement judgments of the European Court of Human Rights. Both the European Commission and Council of Europe should consider closely monitoring the implementation efforts of states with respect to the judgements of that court.

SIGNATORIES

Aasia On The Road, Acrie, Action Education, Actionaid International, Adra Germany, Africa Refugee-Led Network African Children And Youth Development Network (Acydn), Alarm Phone, Amara International, Are You Syrious? Asylum Justice, Asylum Welcome, Association D'étude Des Droits Fondamentaux De L'université Paris-Saclay, Association For Integration And Migration (Simi), Association Nationale Des Villes Et Territoires Accueillants (ANVITA), Birmingham City Of Sanctuary, Boat Refugee Foundation, Border Violence Monitoring Network (BVMN), Bristol Hospitality Network, Campaign To Shut Down The Folkston Ice Processing Center, Care4Calais, Caritas Internationalis, Caravana Migrante Abriendo Fronteras, Carovane Migranti, Casa Dei Diritti Sociali, Center Of Legal Aid "Voice In Bulgaria", Centre For Peace Studies, Centre Primo Levi, CIP, A Buon Diritto, Collective Aid, Comisión Española de Ayuda Al Refugiado (CEAR), Conflict Analysis Network, Danish Refugee Council, Domotwarty, Dutch Council For Refugees, Ecre, Emmaus Europe, Emmaüs International, Emergency, Equal Legal Aid, Europe Cares E.V. Paréa Lesvos, European Coalition Of Migrants And Refugees, European Network Against Racism (ENAR), Euromed Rights, Fondation Terre Des Hommes, Freedom From Torture, Fundacja Inicjatywa Dom Otwarty, Fundación Porcausa, German Doctors E.V., Global Detention Project, Greek Council For Refugees, Groupe D'études Et De Recherche En Migration, Espace Et Sociétés (Germes), Groupe Urd, Habitat-Cité, Haringey Welcome, Helen Bamber Foundation, Herts For Refugees, Hias, Human Rights League, Human Rights Legal Project, Humacoop-Amel France, Humans For Rights Network, ICS (Consorzio Italiano Di Solidarietà), Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (ILPA), Infokolpa, Institute Circle, Intersos, Intersos Hellas, International Organization For Migration (IOM), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Iridia, Iuventa-Crew, Joint Council For The Welfare Of Immigrants (JCWI), JRS Europe, Kinisi, Klikaktiv, Konsorcjum Migracyjne, L'auberge Des Migrants, La Chaîne De L'espoir, La Cimade, Last Rights, Ligue Des Droits De L'homme, Les Savoirs Du Réel, Lutheran Immigration And Refugee Service (LIRS), Médecins Du Monde (Doctors Of The World), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Mediterranea Saving Humans, Melitea, Methoria, Migrant Voice, Mixed Migration Centre, Movement For Education And Advocacy Network Salone, Moving Cities, Mouvement Contre Le Racisme Et Pour L'amitié Entre Les Peuples Mrap, No To Hassockfield, No Name Kitchen, Norwegian Refugee Council, Novact, Observatori Desca, Ocalenie Foundation, Ohaha Family Foundation, Ongi Etorri Errefuxiatuak (Oee), Open Arms, Oxfam, Pasaje Seguro Cantabria, Polish Humanitarian Action, Praxis, Protection International, Quaker Council For European Affairs, Queerston Media, R42-Sailandrescue, Ramfel, Re:Borders Kollektiv, Refugee Action, Refugee Education UK, Refugee Legal Support (RLS), Refugee Support Ballaghaderreen, Refugees In Libya, Refugees International, Refugees Welcome Haringey, Relief International, Resqship, Rigardu, Rights In Exile - Ex Amara, Samos Volunteers, Save The Children, Sea-Eye E.V., Sea-Watch, Seebrücke, Secours Islamique France, Shabaka, Smallboats.Org (operating under Expectation State), Solidaritee, Solidary Wheel, SOS Humanity, Starfish Foundation, Stowarzyszenie Interwencji Prawnej (Association For Legal Intervention Poland, Student Action For Refugees, Swiss Church Aid (Heks/Eper), Tax For Humanity, The Black Female Professors Forum, The Detention Forum, The UK Refugee Council, Tous Migrants, Tunisian Forum For Economic And Social Rights, United Nations Association, London And South East Region, United4rescue - Gemeinsam Retten E.V., United Against Inhumanity, Utopia 56, Vaša Prava, Vapaa Liikkuvuus - Free Movement, Wandsworth United Nations Association, Welcome Office Lesvos, West London Welcome, Westminster United Nations Association, Zavod.

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