

Booklet on combating hate speech

Asylum Seekers
and Refugees

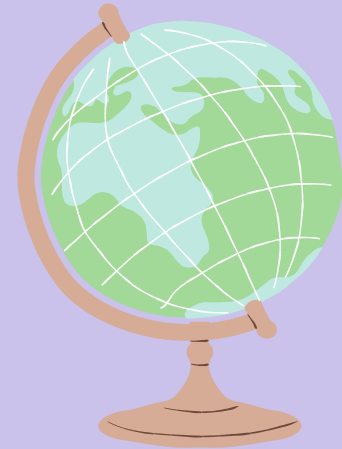
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Context

Globally, more than 80 million people have been forced to leave their countries of origin to seek refuge in safer places, of which more than 26 million are registered as refugees – half of them are children. Specifically, although children represent 30% of the planet's population, 42% of registered refugees globally are children. That means that 1 in 3 children living outside their country of origin is a refugee; that is 1 in 200 children worldwide.[1]

At the European level, the refugee crisis was brought to the general public's attention during the Arab Spring[2] and the discussion intensified starting with 2015. At that time, a large number of people came to Europe and sought asylum, fleeing from countries in conflict, where their lives and integrity were at risk, and the authorities could no longer grant them the necessary protection.



For example, the conflict in Syria forced more than half of the country's population to leave their homes (including more than 6 million internally displaced people[3]), and 5.5 million Syrians took refuge in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan.[4] More than 1 million Syrian refugees have arrived in Europe.[5] Violent conflicts in Syria, as well as other countries such as Afghanistan, Venezuela and, most recently, Ukraine, have led millions of people to seek international protection in Europe over the past 10 years.



In recent years, a very large number of asylum seekers were registered in some countries which, geographically, represent entry points to Europe, such as Greece or Italy. In order to support them, in 2015, the European Commission introduced the concept of "hotspots", which are first reception facilities that aim to better coordinate the efforts of European Union (EU) agencies and national authorities at the EU's external borders, in the initial reception, identification, registration and fingerprinting of asylum seekers and migrants.[6]



These facilities host asylum seekers and sometimes refugees in extremely large numbers; they are often overcrowded, house more people than their capacity allows and have deplorable conditions.[7]

Romania has remained a transit country and although the number of asylum seekers has increased significantly in the last 2 years, most of them want to continue their journey to destinations in Western Europe, where they are more likely to benefit from the support of strong ethnic or religious communities, but also of a national system that is better prepared for integration in those countries. Although in 2020-2021, more than 15,000 people requested protection from the Romanian state and only approximately 10% obtained it, the number of refugees remains relatively constant, Romania offering protection to approximately 4,000 people[8].



Although Romania is not yet a country of destination, the issue of migration and forced displacement is highly relevant worldwide, and the number of people forced to leave their country of origin is increasing every year. People are forced to flee and leave everything behind because of wars and conflicts, systemic violence, persecution based on political affiliation, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation, institutionalised discrimination, and other forms of persecution that put their life or integrity at risk, while the states they are in are unable or unwilling to protect them.



The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees is the legal basis for the rights of displaced persons, supplemented by the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. The Protocol expanded the scope and removed geographical and temporal restrictions, making the Convention a universal instrument.

146 states in the world are part of the Convention and 147 of the Protocol, including Romania, which ratified the provisions of both documents in 1991. At the European level, in 1999, the European Union developed the "Common European Asylum System" (Common European Asylum System) which sets common standards and establishes a cooperation system to ensure that asylum seekers are treated equally in an open and fair system in the Union.[9] This system has continued to be amended and updated to adapt to existing needs, but civil society criticism shows that, overall, the legislation that regulates the asylum system in the EU continues to focus on protecting the borders of member states prioritising policies regarding the return of migrants, at the expense of the protection of vulnerable people forced to flee their countries of origin to save their lives and at the expense of the inclusion of those who have gone through difficult journeys and risked their lives to build a new life in Europe.

Some of the main topics of discussion in European societies revolve around who the refugees are, why they come here and what their presence implies for the future of Europe, but in the absence of objective information, these discussions generate most of the stereotypes and prejudices around displaced people. Unfortunately, the European discourse remains focused on protecting borders, economic resources; in some cases asylum seekers and refugees, as well as immigrants are used to polarise the discourse in society in the case of upcoming elections or to influence decisions at the European level (see the case of the accusations made by the European Commission against Belarus in 2021[10]). Such situations involve a violation of the fundamental rights of the individuals involved and put their lives at risk.



In this material, we will discuss the main definitions, prejudices, and myths to try to understand more accurately the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in Europe and to help prevent and eliminate hate speech against them.



Definitions

Before explaining the differences between what it means to be an asylum seeker and a refugee, we should cover the definition of the migrant (a term that has already been mentioned in this material), often used incorrectly when talking about refugees. All these are distinct categories of persons, with different legal status.



Migrant

is an umbrella term that brings together all people who leave, permanently or temporarily, for a variety of reasons, to a country other than their country of residence[11].

Migrant with unregulated residence

(undocumented/irregular migrant)[12] is a person who is on the territory of a country without having a regulated status and a corresponding document. Among other things, organisations that support irregular migrants campaign for the use of language that offers dignity to all and leads to the elimination of prejudice.



"And let me also be clear about my vocabulary: illegal migrants do not exist. People may come to the EU and they might be required to use irregular ways... but no human being is illegal." - Cecilia Malmström, (then) European Commissioner for Home Affairs, European Commission, 29 November 2010[13]

Asylum seekers

are people who believe that their life is in danger in their country of origin or in the country where they are at a given moment and who request protection from another state for which they have to go through a complex process. This term is used to refer to them as long as they are going through the process of analysing the grounds for their persecution and the need for protection[14]. Once this protection is granted to them, they become **beneficiaries of international protection or, in popular language, refugees.**



Refugees

are people who, because of a justified fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social or political group have left their country of origin and are unable or unwilling to return[15].



Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees often face many obstacles on their journey to Europe. Beyond the trauma of forced uprooting, the journey to Europe can be a difficult one – images of people stranded on boats and turned away at certain states' borders have gone viral, while organisations such as Amnesty International have denounced human rights abuses[16]. There have been cases of adults as well as children who have lost their lives on their way to a better life[17]. Such dramatic situations, together with negative attitudes towards migration in general, and significant investments in border control have earned the European continent the name "Fortress Europe"[18].



The journey of those seeking protection does not necessarily stop once they obtain refugee status, as barriers continue to appear in the way of their inclusion in the societies in which they have settled, such as difficulties in accessing and integrating into the labour market[19].



Deconstructing myths

Since, in common language, asylum seekers are lumped together with the refugees, for the fluidity of the text, we have chosen to refer to both categories using the term **refugee**.

Myth: Most refugees flee to developed countries because their main problems are economic, not political.

Fact: The reality shows that about 80% of the people who had to leave their countries took refuge in neighbouring countries. According to statistics, 86% of the world's displaced people are hosted by developing countries and only 14% by economically developed countries.

In 2021, the main countries in the world hosting refugees are: Turkey (3.7 million), Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda and Germany[20], and the main countries of origin of refugees are: Syria (6.7 million), Venezuela, Afghanistan, Sudan South and Myanmar. Most of the Syrians who have left their country are in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Germany. Most of those who fled South Sudan are in Sudan and Uganda, and most of the Burmese who fled Myanmar are in Bangladesh. *(more information on the same myth ->)*

Fact: Statistics show that 1 in 95 people in the world have been forced to leave their place of origin due to conflict or persecution. In total, more than 80 million people are in this situation, of which more than 26 million are registered as refugees (almost half of them are children). Europe hosts around 7 million refugees[21].

It is, of course, important that refugees have access to jobs that allow them to earn a decent living and integrate into their host societies, but this is a human right and not the reason they left their countries of origin.



Myth: It is not our obligation to help refugees, just because we live in a European country.

Fact: Romania ratified the provisions of the Convention of 1951 relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as those of the Protocol of 1967 relating to the Status of Refugees, these being transposed into national legislation. Also, as a member of the EU, Romania is obliged to adhere to the procedures established at the European level for granting international protection. Thus, the Romanian state has undertaken the obligation to offer protection to people who have left their country of origin due to a justified fear of being persecuted on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a social or political group and who are unable or no longer wish to go back. In order to officially seek protection, refugees must be on the territory of the countries whose protection they seek, often crossing numerous borders and facing countless dangers to get there.

Once in the host countries, refugees must be supported by the state and society to overcome cultural and language barriers, to continue their studies and/or to integrate into the labour market.

Myth: Refugees have come to take our jobs. We are a poor country and we already have enough problems, we cannot accept people who would only weaken the country's economy even further.

Fact: Refugees can represent a valuable resource for a country's economy; many of those who receive this status have significant work experience and can contribute to the labour market, especially in countries facing a shortage of skilled jobs in certain sectors of the economy, as is the case of Romania. In order for those with refugee status to have the chance to access the labour market, they need support to learn the language of the host country and to access basic needs such as shelter and food, support in finding housing, jobs and professional training.



For European governments struggling financially, the initial stages of integrating refugees into the workforce can be a challenge, but the European Commission has made available various European funds that can be accessed to support integration and inclusion programs for those with refugee status[22].

(more information on the same myth ->)

Fact: From a legislative, social and human point of view, refugees must be given rights similar to those of nationals and the support necessary to access them. Refugees are not here to be a burden on the state or to weigh down the welfare system. They are here to save their lives, to develop in a stable environment, to lead a decent life and to contribute to the development of the host society, but in order to do all this, they need to have their human potential recognized and to be valued as people, as equals. Refugees have varying levels of education, have had a profession in their country of origin, have a desire to learn and want to have a peaceful life.



Myth: Refugees are terrorists and contribute to the creation and amplification of attacks in the countries that host them.

Fact: Many of the refugees have fled from countries in conflict, which may include state-sponsored terrorist attacks or the existence of various other radical groups/factions. Refugees are not terrorists, but collateral victims of terrorist attacks, wars and violence in their countries. *"We ran away from bombs, we didn't come here to plant bombs. It's really a shame that you see here what we saw there, every day"* a refugee told me years ago[23]. (more information on the same myth ->)



Fact: Statistically speaking, most of the attacks classified as terrorist attacks and which took place in recent years in Europe were committed by citizens of the respective states. A variation of this myth is that terrorists disguise themselves as refugees to reach Europe. The unlikelihood of such a phenomenon is emphasised in multiple studies, including the report "The refugee crisis in Europe and the threat of terrorism". An extraordinary threat?" conducted by the Danish Institute for International Studies in 2017[24]. One of the main conclusions of this report is that the majority of people involved in committing terrorist attacks in Europe in the last decade have been EU citizens.



Many were foreign fighters[25], and most were already known to European authorities. Also, the process of verifying applications for international protection is a very rigorous one that involves document checks and interviews, sometimes extending for longer than 6 months.

Fact: Due to a fear instilled in society, as well as the distorted data often presented in the media, this information is overlooked by the general public. Refugees are often traumatised by dramatic experiences in their country of origin, as well as by the tragedy of refuge itself, and their association with terrorists only makes them more vulnerable, making them targets of xenophobic attacks and contributing to their marginalisation in societies that should protect them. Such associations are not only untrue, but also grossly unfair, inhumane and dangerous.



Myth: Refugees are a danger to European values.

Fact: Europe is a continent where secularism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism have been present for hundreds of years. Fundamental European values, such as respect for human dignity, democracy, equality, respect for human rights and freedom, have been won by the people, often through struggle with political elites - the same ones who now use them to propagate fear and policies of segregation. Many of the refugees arriving in Europe are people who embrace these values and who supported similar principles in the countries they were forced to leave.

On the other hand, a historically balanced approach should take into account the European colonial rule in Africa and the Middle East, the colonial legacy, as well as the involvement of various European states or even the European Union in the recent policies of the refugees' countries of origin or in the conflicts that have decimated them. Refugees are a reflection of realities we must accept: racism and colonial supremacy did not disappear with the withdrawal of Europeans from those countries, but continue to manifest themselves in different forms, disguised in actions and concepts, in alleged values and apparent dangers through which Europeans separate themselves from non-Europeans.

(more information on the same myth ->)

Fact: In reality, these divisions are fluid and do not take into account security systems, walled borders, electric fences, the idea of the European fortress. Europe cannot close itself like a cocoon in the face of this reality, it cannot continue to invest in border security more than in protecting refugees, it cannot promote racist and xenophobic discourses. The world is constantly changing, and such policies and rationales are out of touch with reality and lead to the development of crises in which people's rights are violated. The concept of European values is the result of centuries of political, economic and cultural transformations, described by the motto of the EU - "Unity in Diversity" which must be translated into practice and applied to all those who seek to start a new life in Europe.

"We are here because you have been there" says Suketa Mehta, explaining that centuries of colonial exploitation in Asia and Africa have led to migration[26].

Myth: Refugees have money if they pay thousands of euros to guides and if they have mobile phones.

Fact: When people leave their countries in search of shelter and safety, they are leaving everything behind. Even so, they are aware they will need resources and are taking everything they can with them, including clothes, mobile phones and money. In the absence of alternatives available to them from EU states, respectively access to humanitarian corridors or humanitarian visas, the only chance for refugees to save their lives is to call on guides to take them out of conflict zones and/or accompany them to European countries (or other parts of the world). *(more information on the same myth ->)*



Fact: Most states in the world have ratified the provisions of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, but have failed to clarify/support their journey to the countries where they are entitled to seek protection - they have to find their own way across borders, often putting their lives at risk and having to pay for guides. The human and material costs of these journeys are colossal, with many refugees perishing, being exploited or trafficked along the way. Often, refugees have sold all their possessions and properties to get the money they need to try

to save their lives by fleeing to the countries that are supposed to protect them. The mobile phone is an essential item, being the only communication channel they have with their families back home, as well as the only map they have on the route. For most, the journey to the destination takes from several months to several years, while others never arrive.



Myth: I can't do anything for the refugees. History repeats itself and people learn nothing.

Fact: Every person can make a difference and fight for the rights of the marginalised and oppressed. We can start by educating ourselves, by knowing the history and geography of the countries in question, to understand who those seeking refuge in Europe are and where they come from. It is also important to learn about the societies people come from, cultures and religion – and for that it is crucial to have discussions with people directly. We can volunteer and work on projects with refugees - such work is very much appreciated.

(more information on the same myth ->)



Fact: We can help raise awareness about the refugees with those around us by talking to them and writing about it. It is very important to remind the authorities at national level that they have a huge responsibility to support those who have gone through traumatic experiences and fled conflict zones to save their lives and the lives of their families. We can make donations or support refugees to learn the language and find a job. We can spend time with them and thus discover many things that bring us together rather than separate us. A good place to start is the website of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), where there is a list of NGOs that ensure the implementation of UNHCR programs in Romania[27].



Footnotes:

[1] UNICEF, *Child Displacement Data*, 2021, data.unicef.org

[2] Washington Post, *The unfinished business of the Arab Spring*, 2021, [washingtonpost.com](https://www.washingtonpost.com)

[3] Internally displaced person (IDP). More information at [unhcr.org](https://www.unhcr.org) and *Forced displacement at record 68.5 million*, [unhcr.org](https://www.unhcr.org)

[4] ReliefWeb, *10 years later: 10 facts that explain Syria's conflict*, 2021, reliefweb.int

[5] UNHCR, *Syrian Refugee Crisis – Globally, Europe and Cyprus*, 2021, [unhcr.org](https://www.unhcr.org)

[6] European Court of Auditors, Special Report, *EU Response to the Refugee Crisis: The Hotspot Approach*, 2017, op.europa.eu and European Parliament, Report *Hotspots at EU external borders. State of Play*, 2018, europarl.europa.eu

[7] Bernd Riegert, *Commentary: a shame for Europe*, DW, 2016, [dw.com](https://www.dw.com)

[8] General Inspectorate for Immigration, igi.mai.gov.ro

[9] European Commission, *Common European Asylum System*, ec.europa.eu

[10] Reality Check, *Belarus Border Crisis: How Do Migrants Get There?*, 2021, [bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com)

[11] International Organization for Migration, *About migration*, iom.int

[12] PICUM - Platform for International Cooperation on Irregular Migrants, *Fact Sheet*, 2017, picum.org

- [13] PICUM - Platform for International Cooperation on Irregular Migrants, *Why Words Matter*, picum.org
- [14] European Commission, *On asylum seekers*, ec.europa.eu
- [15] European Commission, *Refugee. Definition*, ec.europa.eu
- [16] Amnesty International, *The Human Cost of Fortress Europe. Human Rights Violations against Migrants and Refugees at Europe's Borders*, 2014, reliefweb.int
- [17] BBC, *The migrant crisis*, 2015, bbc.com
- [18] Kaamil Ahmed and Lorenzo Tondo, *Fortress Europe: the millions spent on military technology to deter refugees*, The Guardian, 2021, theguardian.com
- [19] For more details see the European Parliament. *Briefing. Labour market integration of asylum-seekers and refugees*, 2021 europarl.europa.eu
- [20] UNHCR, *Figures at a Glance*, unhcr.org
- [21] UNHCR, *Refugees, internally displaced persons, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern to UNHCR in Europe*, data2.unhcr.org
- [22] Funds such as Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, European Social Fund (ESF) and Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD)
- [23] Personal field notes, Simina Guga.
- [24] Danish Institute for International Studies, Report *Europe's Refugee Crisis and the Threat of Terrorism*, 2017, pure.diiis.dk

[25] The notion of a foreign fighter refers to a person who has travelled or migrated to another country to fight.

[26] Ambreen Agha, "We are here because you have been there." In Defense of Immigration from Historical, Economic and Security Perspectives, Himal Southasian, 2020, himalmag.com

[27] UNHCR, Non-Governmental Partners | Organisations that support the work of UNHCR, unhcr.org





Additional resources

Glossary of terms

UNHCR - Master Glossary of Terms

[European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs](#)

[Glossary](#) - ec.europa.eu

[PICUM Campaign #wordsmatter](#), picum.org



Statistics

UNHCR - [Refugee Data Finder](#)

UNHCR - [Figures at a Glance](#)

Amnesty International - [The World Refugees in Numbers](#)

Age-appropriate information about refugees

British Red Cross – Refugees and Migration
Amnesty International – Online and Interactive Resources

UNICEF – In search for safety. Teaching about Europe's Refugee Crisis

Refugee Council of Australia – Resources for Teachers and Educators



News and reviews

[InfoMigrants](#) – News and information portal (available in Dari, Pashto, Arabic, English and French)

[RefWorld](#) – UN positions, recommendations, news and legislation

[Al Jazeera](#) – News portal with refugee section

[UN News portal](#)

[Border Violence Monitoring Network](#) – Information on the treatment of refugees at borders

Policies and legislation

European Parliament, [Asylum Policy | Fact Sheets on the European Union](#),
europarl.europa.eu

European Commission, [Action plan on the integration and inclusion](#), ec.europa.eu

European Council, [EU asylum reform - Consilium](#), consilium.europa.eu

Organisations

[PICUM](#) - The Platform for International Cooperation on
Undocumented Migrants - picum.org/

[European Council on Refugees and Exiles](#) - ecre.org/





About the author: **Simina Guga** is a sociologist and has been working for over 15 years supporting vulnerable people, especially refugees. She believes in humanity and hopes that one day people will understand that their differences complement each other and that borders don't matter.

Contributor: **Simona Barbu** is a human rights activist. She started her work in 2008 with the Roma foundation Romani CRISS. Subsequent collaborations have given her the opportunity to learn about migration, the rights of homeless European citizens in countries such as Denmark and Belgium (many of whom are of Roma origin). Simona uses these experiences in her work to contribute to an inclusive, equitable and anti-racist society.



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