

‘These wretched foreigners: When the death of a 7-year-old is sad, but not that sad’.

Dr Lily Hamourtzidou

‘English Channel: Girl, 7, dies after boat capsizes near Dunkirk in France’, reads the headline on March 4 (BBC 2024). A seven-year-old girl died when a small boat attempting to reach the English Channel capsized. The boat was carrying 16 migrants when it sank off the coast of Dunkirk. The girl’s parents and her three siblings survived and were taken to a hospital in Dunkirk. According to local authority Préfet du Nord, the vessel was ‘probably stolen’ and was too small to support the amount of people on board. Already this year 9 people have drowned attempting the journey, compared with 12 for the whole of 2023.

The total number of migrants who have crossed the Channel so far this year is 2,255, that is, an average 35 people every day are risking their lives in the harsh winter conditions of northern Europe.

The Home Office said the loss of life was ‘devastating’.

The majority of people crossing the Channel -illegally- in small boats are fleeing war-torn or oppressive countries. According to the Refugee Council, 8,692 children crossed the Channel in 2022, and 75% of people who made the crossing that year (an estimated 34,461 people) came from just seven countries: Albania, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Eritrea and Sudan (Refugee Council, 2024). In 2022, there were 45,746 people who crossed the Channel in a small boat. Over 25,000 men, women and children – 6 out of 10 of all those who made the crossing – would be recognised as refugees, if the UK government processed their asylum applications. As a significant number of people are ultimately recognised as refugees, the ultimate number is likely to be even higher.

4 in 10 who crossed the channel came from just five countries – Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Eritrea and Sudan. All of those nationalities currently have asylum grant rates of 82% or higher. In particular, people from Afghanistan, Syria and Eritrea had an asylum grant rate of 98%, and those from Sudan and Iran had a grant rate of 86% and 82% respectively.

Nationality	Estimated arrivals via small boat in 2022	Asylum grant rate
Albania	15,569	16%
Afghanistan	6,622	98%
Iran	4,978	82%
Iraq	4,258	53%
Syria	3,035	98%
Eritrea	2,090	98%

Sudan	1,677	86%
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Two of those countries (Afghanistan and Iraq) were invaded and occupied by the UK in the 21st century, while a third (Syria) has been fighting a war in which the UK has also been involved.

The asylum grant rate figures are so encouraging -it looks like the UK is something like a hearth for the unfortunates of this world, a safe place for those fleeing war and all its horrors: death, injury, poverty, inequality, oppression and persecution. The UK sounds like a state that tries its hardest to right wrongs, to protect and shelter even citizens of other states, to provide security and freedom to all that cross its borders. A true liberal democracy! The case of the Ukraine, in the last 2 years, has made this clear.

'If you do not have family in the UK, you can apply for the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme', declared the UK government. The scheme enabled people and organisations in the UK (sponsors) to bring Ukrainians and their family members to the UK under the Homes for Ukraine Scheme, following the Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022.

If you had a sponsor, you could:

- come to the UK for up to 3 years,
- work in the UK,
- access public services and claim benefits.

The Ukrainians were described as 'guests' (UK visa support for Ukrainian nationals).

Government statistics on applications and visa issuances for the family and sponsorship schemes show that within a year the Ukraine Family Scheme had received 95,400 applications, with 68,200 visas issued. The Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) had received 193,900 applications, with 160,100 visas issued. This means that a total of 289,300 applications had been submitted across both schemes, with 228,300 visas issued (The Migration Observatory, 2023).

Why don't they come in small boats?

'Gruesome tales of migrant deaths abound at the gates of the West,' wrote Ruben Andersson in 2014:

"illegal immigrants" crammed into unseaworthy boats, squeezed into rusty trucks trundling across the Sahara, walking through the distant deserts of Arizona, or clinging onto Mexican cargo trains. Thousands have perished on these grueling treks, with one incomplete tally listing almost twenty thousand deaths at the gates of "Fortress Europe" since 1988. Yet the misery does not end there for today's migrant outcasts. The media, populist politicians, and zealous bureaucrats have seized upon the illegal immigrant as a bogeyman, a perennial outsider who in waves and floods invades Western countries. In their accounts, a global pariah is emerging: alternately an object of deep fascination and utter indifference, of horror and pity, he stalks the borders of the rich world, sowing panic, wrecking election campaigns, and generating headlines as he goes (Andersson,

2014: 2-3).

Unlike the Ukrainians, these travellers, whether they succeed or fall short of their goals, end up collaborating in their own making as illegal immigrants on the infernal production line of the illegality industry.

'The conceptual link between immigration and social vices such as crime, disease, and moral contamination has gripped the public mind long before the present era and continually shapes immigration policies and border control measures. Mobility is perceived as a suspicious activity especially when it relates to those without property' (Shamir, 2005: 201). The concept of 'crimmigration' refers to the connection of crime control and immigration control. It represents the distinct laws and legal processes that states employ as a means of exerting control over a sector of our global society. As Juliet Stumpf (2013: 59) explains, the integration of immigration and criminal spheres 'tends to generate more severe outcomes, limit procedural protections, and encourage enforcement and adjudication processes that segregate non-citizens'. Crimmigration law lays the foundations for the system. It is an umbrella term for the interweaving of administrative immigration law and criminal law, 'under conditions of interchangeability and mutual reinforcement' (Aas, 2014: 525). This convergence produces an instrumental panoply of laws, geared towards the exclusion of undesirable non-citizens, from which immigration officials may 'cherry-pick' at their wish, depending on their objectives and resources (Bowling, 2015: 11).

Since the start of the 21st century, terrorism has become a priority for governments around the world, including the UK. This priority has involved a rhetoric of exclusion and fear of foreigners, and has been combined with a political demand for intensifying control of cross-border movement of people. In the UK, the securitisation of migration that led to Brexit has cultivated an image of the migrant, the foreigner, as a threat to the nation -physical, economic, cultural, political.

Following the 2001 attacks in the US, immigration, particularly asylum, featured significantly in the political framing of the problem of terrorism. Abuse of the asylum system and removal of people from the national territory soon became key elements in the framing of the fight against Terror. Terrorism was framed as being a problem of controlling foreigners entering British territory and those already living in the UK. In a debate on 4 October, Prime Minister Blair outlined the key elements of the legislation that would be introduced in the House of Commons:

In the next few weeks, the Home Secretary intends to introduce a package of legislation to supplement existing legal powers in a number of areas. (...) It will cover the funding of terrorism. It will increase our ability to exclude and remove those whom we suspect of terrorism and who are seeking to abuse our asylum procedures. It will widen the law on incitement to include religious hatred. We will bring forward a Bill to modernise our extradition law (House of Commons, 2001).

The link between immigration, otherness and terrorism was reinforced in discussions on the planned anti-terrorism measures. Immigration and asylum were two of the main issues around which the political debate on the nature of insecurity and the legitimacy of exceptional policies was taking place, leading up to the 2016 referendum on Brexit.

Connections between counter-terrorism and immigration and/or asylum were rooted in the assumption that the 'danger' comes from foreigners.

The assumption that one is dealing with international terrorism strongly frames the security question in terms of cross-border movements and the presence of foreigners in the national territory. Because terrorism is international, the terrorists ‘must be foreign’ – the threat is something which comes from migration and in order to secure the country, migration has to become an issue in the context of national security policy (Huysmans and Buonfino, 2008: 15).

The border remains an essential instrument in security and migration policy. This idea of the border as a shield from foreign threats informed the opt outs of the Europeanisation of border control and policing, as well as aspects of migration and asylum policy, especially when the foreigner-migrants came from the Middle East and Africa. Slowly but surely, in the space of 15 years (2001-2016) insecurity (physical, economic, cultural and political) was established as being synonymous with the presence of foreigners in the national territory. Exceptions, of course, were made for the super-rich, who were able to buy ‘golden visas’: foreign nationals who invested £2m could be granted a visa, with more benefits the higher the investment and a path to achieving UK citizenship.

While the government of a liberal democracy is keen to share high asylum-granting rates, those unfortunates still have to risk their lives in small boats, moving illegally from country to country, in poverty and in homelessness, vulnerable to diseases, physical and sexual assaults, and exploitation. Unlike the Ukrainian ‘guests’.

And while the death of the little girl who drowned crossing the Channel on March 4 is sad - devastating even- it is not sad enough to try to enable the safe travel of certain foreigners.

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