



COUNTING THE DEAD

UPDATE 2020-2021



AUTHORS OF THE UPDATE

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The research required for this report was carried out by independent researchers who used the same methodology as used in the first report (use of verified direct sources and records), together with the neutral approach of the ICRC. The research for Greece was carried out by the Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) Organization; for Italy, research was conducted by researcher Filippo Furri; for Spain, the research was carried out by the Entremares Association for the Canary Islands, and by the anthropologist Nadya Jaziri Arjona for the Mediterranean region (Ceuta, Melilla, Balearic Islands, Alboràn sea). The anthropologist Daniela DeBono collected data from 2014 onwards and drew up the report for Malta.

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INTRODUCTION

The ICRC Counting the Dead report, published in 2022, covered data on deceased migrants from 2014 to 2019 for the northern coast of the Mediterranean ([Counting the Dead – 2014 – 2019](#)). The report also sought to provide an analysis of the work of the medicolegal systems of Spain, Greece and Italy in identifying the bodies of those who died while trying to reach Europe. The report also provided general recommendations to key actors (national and regional authorities and non-governmental actors) with a view to enhancing identification of deceased migrants and providing information to their families.

Counting the Dead 2020–2021 aims to provide an update on the number of bodies recovered and identifications made for the years 2020 and 2021, as well as gives :

- An overview of the medicolegal process and figures for identification of deceased migrants in additional regions and country (Malta);
- A description of the effect of COVID-19 responses on the care of the dead in different regions;
- A review of the evolution of routes to Europe, including the rise of ‘ghost shipwrecks’.

This report further addresses how factors of evolving EU and States’ migration policies, structural issues related to migration routes¹ and the Covid-19 crisis changed how authorities along the northern Mediterranean managed the remains of deceased migrants, factors which can be evaluated by comparing the number of missing persons reported versus the number of bodies recovered.

A key finding of the report is the ratio of bodies recovered versus the number of persons considered dead or missing by the IOM on the maritime routes: 1 body found for every 15 cases of death/disappearance reported (380 bodies recovered for 5514 reported cases of missing persons²/death all sea routes combined). This means there are shipwrecks and their victims who are not being accounted for, due to a lack of surviving witnesses or means of reporting. This points at the existence of ghost shipwrecks.

Finally, this report highlights the connection between the rise in such ghost shipwrecks and instances of missing or abandoned bodies at sea, and the obstacles faced by rescue/response NGOs in their operations.

1 Including the evolution of the type of vessels used, interceptions by coastguards, and recorded cases of shipwrecks.

2 A missing person is a person whose whereabouts are unknown to his/her relatives and/or who, on the basis of reliable information, has been reported missing in accordance with national legislation in connection with an international or non-international armed conflict, other situations of violence, disasters or any other situation that may require the intervention of a competent State authority (based on ICRC Guiding Principles / Model Law on the Missing: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/guiding-principles-model-law-missing-model-law>).

PURPOSE & LIMITS OF STUDY

Continuing with the methodology of the original reports³, the goal of this update is to aggregate data for the period 2020 and 2021 for Spain, Italy, Greece, and Malta. Researchers in each region sought to account for the burials of migrants (identified or unidentified) through their administrative registration, including death certification, burial licensing, or documents produced by other actors involved in the management of the dead (e.g., public prosecutors and forensic doctors).

These documents supply the basis for the research. However, as indicated in the 2014–2019 report, such documents may not be always accessible, as in some cases authorities did not or could not provide such data, the data had yet to be compiled into a report, or the data had simply not been recorded. The pandemic crisis further hindered the ability of researchers to obtain data, particularly in those regions most adversely affected by the crisis (i.e., Italy and Spain). The latter made it necessary to integrate more information collected from alternate sources, for example by other researchers, family associations and migrant communities, and the local and international press, into official data. This allowed the discovery of cases of deceased migrants not reported by authorities.

The field surveys were conducted between July and early December 2022. However, due to a variety of factors including difficulty of access to the field and availability of authorities among others, missing data from specific areas of Spain, Italy, and Greece, will be included in the next Counting the Dead report, alongside data from 2022, to be published in 2024.

³ [Counting the Dead, ICRC & Human Costs of Border Control](#), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

1. OVERALL FINDINGS

The gathering of the statistics on the dead found that medicolegal services responsible for care of deceased migrants (particularly from shipwrecks) still encountered considerable challenges at the administrative and operational level in Greece, Spain, Italy and Malta in 2020–2021. Data on the number of dead, identified and buried for Malta was included for the whole period 2014–2021 and thus a general view of all the countries⁴ studied in the original Amsterdam project, covering 1993–2013, is now available.

Table 1. Presentation of 2020-2021 statistics of number of bodies recovered, number of bodies identified, and number of bodies repatriated per country (The annex provides more details on each country).

Country/Region	Total Number of bodies 2020 - 2021	Identifications	Repatriated	% Identifications
Spain	293	120	22	41%
Italy	37	3	unknown	8%
Greece	174	122	unknown	70%
Malta	8	2	unknown	25%
Overall figure	512	247	22	48%

Table 2. Presentation of additional 2014-2019 statistics of number of bodies recovered and number of bodies identified per country.

Country/Region	Number of bodies recovered 2014-2019 (original report)	Number of bodies recovered 2014-2019 (additional figures)	Source of Additional Data	Total Number	Total Number Identified	% Identifications
Spain	237	0	N/A	237	119	50%
Italy	964	44 528 (from April 2015 shipwreck)	New research & addition of figures from the Catania shipwreck from April 2015 ⁵	1536	300	20%
Greece	608	21	Evros & Islands	629	418	67%
Malta	N/A	75	New research	75	9	12%

SPAIN

Compiling the Western Mediterranean and Canary Islands routes for 2020–2021, there are a total of 293 recovered bodies. Of these, 120 persons were identified, 22 repatriated with the remaining either unidentified or in the process of being identified. Details per region of Spain are detailed in the Annex p.19.

Despite the challenges posed by costs and delays resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, a considerable number of repatriation of dead bodies were still carried out for nationals from countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. Repatriations are facilitated either through the involvement of families or through consular authorities acting as intermediaries, such as the Algerian consulate,

⁴ Except Gibraltar.

⁵ On 18 April 2015, a fishing vessel sank off the Libyan coast, causing the death of an estimated 900 to 1100 migrants with only 28 survivors. One year later, the Italian authorities retrieved the wreckage to recover the mortal remains, so that they could be identified and given a dignified burial. The Italian authorities via the Forense dell'Università degli Studi di Milano were involved in the operation to retrieve and later examine the remains to identify them, together with participation of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Italian Red Cross to aid outreach to families in countries of origin. To date, only 32 individuals have been identified.

for instance, who also assist with repatriation expenses. Repatriation operations to sub-Saharan countries present greater difficulties when compared to countries in the Maghreb. These challenges arise due to factors like costs, practical obstacles faced by families, and a lack of services. In the case of the latter, private agencies in Europe that specialize in repatriating long-term immigrants residing in the EU are occasionally involved, and this system is also active for individuals who perish at sea whenever feasible.

No additional figures were collected for the period of 2014–2019 for the regions studied.

ITALY

For the Central Mediterranean route for 2020–2021, there are a total of 37 cases reported from Italy. Lampedusa cases are still being collected and will be added in the next Counting the Dead report.

In 2020, two cases are linked to the Covid-19 quarantine boats set up by the Italian government; 6 cases are linked to a Search and Rescue (Open Arms) operation in international waters, while in general, the other cases are linked to accidents near the Italian coast, or to bodies found at sea or on beaches, often not directly associated with shipwrecks and in any case dissociated from Search and rescue (SAR) operations.

In 2021, we are still faced with bodies found near the Italian coast, except for a case of disembarkation of a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) SAR mission, Geo Barents, in Messina with 10 bodies: in this case, although according to the MSF team and other witnesses, the survivors would have communicated information on the possible victims' identities, no identification has been formalized since.

For Italy, we also look back at cases dating from 2019 that had not been registered in the previous database: there are a total of 44 cases with 8 identifications, the majority of which are associated with the two shipwrecks of October and November 2019 near Lampedusa. For the first shipwreck off Lampedusa, there are two cases of identification and repatriation. Seven of the eight identified bodies were of Tunisian nationals. We also note a particularly high rate of identification for people from the Maghreb (due to different search capacities and mobilization of families in particular).

In addition, an event which was addressed in the first Counting the Dead report, but not fully analysed, was the shipwreck of April 18, 2015, off the coast of Sicily and Libya, here referred to as the 'Catania' shipwreck. While not all the bodies presumed to be on the boat were recovered, listed are those that could be recovered (528)⁶ and were examined in Italy. Of the 528 bodies, 32 have been identified at the time of the report (see Table 2).

GREECE

The total number of recovered bodies recorded for Greece in 2020–2021 is 174, of which 122 have been identified.

The research for Greece was carried out by the Refugee Support Aegean (RSA) Organization, which counted death certificates registered in different cities in the north/east and on several islands. It is worth noting the increase in the number of dead bodies found at the border or in the north/east region. Indeed, for Evros region in 2014–2019, 99 bodies had been registered, versus 126 in 2020 and 2021 for the same region.

MALTA

As Malta wasn't covered in the original Counting the Dead report, the data and analysis of the medicolegal structure here covers the period 2014–2021. For Malta, there is a total of 75 cases of

6 See Cattaneo, C., De Angelis, D., Mazzarelli, D. et al. The rights of migrants to the identification of their dead: an attempt at an identification strategy from Italy. *Int J Legal Med* 137, 145–156 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00414-022-02778-1>.

recovered bodies with 9 identifications for the period 2014–2019; for the period 2020–2021, there are an additional 8 recovered bodies and 2 identifications. It should be noted that within the 2014–2019 period, 24 of the cases⁷ are related to a single incident, the Catania shipwreck of 18 April, 2015.

The Maltese islands are geographically located between Libya, Tunisia and Sicily; which places Malta in the middle of the busy Central Mediterranean Migration Route from North Africa to southern Europe.

Malta has a centralised medicolegal system which is governed by a legal framework within the Criminal Code⁸. Upon the recovery of bodies (of presumed migrants) by the Coast Guard or others in Maltese territorial waters or at the shoreline, the case is registered by the Police who then collect general information and notify the on-call magistrate. The magistrate is responsible for determining cause and circumstances of death and where possible, identification. All information that has been collected by the police about the recovery and any personal effects found associated with a body is requested. The body itself is transported to the Mater Dei Hospital Mortuary, where it is documented and examined by a pathologist and other specialists to aid in determining cause and circumstances of death and identification. For those bodies which remain unidentified, the magistrate's case can be closed only when DNA has been extracted (DNA testing is ordered via the Magistrate from an independent laboratory) from the remains and successfully profiled.

Upon closure of the inquest, the body can be buried. A body does not need to be identified to be buried. The magistrate's report is shared with the Environmental Health Directorate – Death Registry, the mortuary of the Mater Dei Hospital and the Burials Regulatory Unit at the Addolorata Cemetery. The death is registered in the National Death Registry by the Environmental Health Directorate and a death certificate is issued, including known information such as the cause of death. The hospital mortuary launches the process for interment of the body, while the Burials Regulatory Unit allocates a grave in the Common Area of the cemetery and registers the details of the death certificate. The death certificate is completed with the grave number and returned to the Public Registry office. The funeral is arranged and conducted by an external funeral agency. For those who are presumed to be Muslim, their body is interred in the Muslim Cemetery.

Although family members are not actively sought to provide DNA, in circumstances where there is a presumed identification due to other materials found with the body or an eye-witness account, then a biological reference sample (BRS) may be sought from close family members by the police. Should the DNA from family match that of DNA from a body, the body can be exhumed (if so wished by family) by Magistrate's order and repatriated.

⁷ At the time of the 18 April, 2015 shipwreck near Catania, the survivors and 24 victims of the shipwreck were transported to Malta. The bodies of the decedents were taken into the custody of the Maltese authorities and their remains examined and later interred as per local procedure. At the time of writing, no decedents from the shipwreck have been formally identified.

⁸ Death investigation in Malta is largely covered by Chapter 9 (Covering the conduct of inquests) and Chapter 17 (Burials Ordinance) of the [Criminal Code](#).

2. ANALYSIS

2.1 NUMBERS OF BODIES RECOVERED VERSUS NUMBERS DECLARED MISSING

Comparing data from 2014–2019 to 2020–2021 allows us to see how the rate of identification is or is not changing in different regions (Table 3) and more generally, how the situation is changing in terms of number of bodies recovered for the multiple routes to Europe in comparison with data (estimates) from IOM’s Missing Migrants Project (Tables 4 and 5)⁹. For this comparison, we chose to refer to the total number of dead/missing cases recorded by IOM per region. Unfortunately, some IOM data from 2020 is missing for the Türkiye – Europe land border, therefore the analysis will only focus on sea-routes.

Table 3. General comparison of percentage of identified human remains per region.

Country/Region	% Identified 2014-2019 (modified results)	% Identified 2020-2021
Spain	50	41
Italy	20	8
Greece	67	70
Malta	12	25

The IOM’s Missing Migrants Project recorded 2553 cases in **the Central Mediterranean** for the period 2020–2021¹⁰. Conversely a total of 45 bodies were recovered between Malta and Italy during that period (8 in Malta and 37 in Italy with additional cases in Calabria which concern the Central/Eastern route, from Türkiye or Egypt).

For **the Eastern Mediterranean**, the IOM records 217 cases against 42 bodies registered. The ratio of people reported as missing/dead, and bodies recovered is thus 19%. Even without having figures from Türkiye or Lebanon, through testimonies and reports from civil society actors (RSA) and international organizations (IOM, UNHCR¹¹), it is possible to estimate a considerable number of bodies missing at sea. As partial information collected in Komotini, Greece, suggests, some bodies linked to deaths in western Greece, or the southern Aegean, were buried in north-eastern Greece.

For **the Western Mediterranean**, the IOM cases are 727 against 144 recovered bodies, including the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. For the Canary Islands route, there is a double “source” for IOM, with a distinction between West Africa and North Africa: for the two years 2020 and 2021, there are 427 cases for West Africa, and 1576 cases for North Africa, for a total of 2003 cases compared to 149 bodies recorded.

If we focus on all sea routes to Europe (thus excluding the Evros route), **the total number of victims according to IOM is 5500, compared to a total of 380 bodies reported recovered.**

⁹ <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.

¹⁰ See IOM’s Missing Migrants data section for 2020 and 2021 for the Central Mediterranean [Mediterranean | Missing Migrants Project \(iom.int\)](#).

¹¹ There are numerous cases of shipwrecks where an unspecified number of people are reported missing <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2021/12/61cabf664/unhcr-regrets-loss-life-aegean-sea-31-dead-missing.html>.

Table 4. Comparison between IOM Missing migrants missing/deceased data and recovered bodies 2020-2021¹²

Maritime ROUTE	IOM Missing Migrants 2020-2021	Counting the Dead 2020-2021	% Found Dead vs Presumed Missing or Dead
Eastern Mediterranean	217	42	19%
Central Mediterranean (Italy + Malta)	2553	45	2%
Western Mediterranean	727	144	20%
Canary Islands	2003	149	7%
Total Maritime Route	5500	380	7%

Table 5. Comparison between IOM Missing migrants missing/deceased data and recovered bodies 2014 and 2019 - Updated figures

Maritime ROUTE	IOM Missing Migrants 2014-2019	Counting the Dead 2014-2019	% Found Dead vs Presumed Missing or Dead
Eastern Mediterranean	1649	515	31%
Central Mediterranean (Italy + Malta)	16 278	1611	10%
Western Mediterranean	1 914	227	12%
Canary Islands	526	10	2%
Total Maritime Route	20 367	2 363	12%

Comparison between 2014-19 and 2020-2021

The most sensitive figure arises from the **Central Mediterranean** with a ratio between IOM estimates and recorded cases of 2% as compared to 10% for the same route in 2014-2019. The number of missing (dead) at sea is extremely high due to multiple variables (changing travel patterns with smaller and more dangerous boats) and a shift towards more shipwrecks occurring near the Libyan and Tunisian coasts where we have limited data on bodies found. While there is an absence of reliable data for Libya, an exponential increase in the number of bodies (presumably migrants) recovered and buried in Tunisia, especially in the south between Sfax and Zarzis, has been recorded¹³. The victims include Tunisian nationals and members of sub-Saharan communities. While the number of bodies (according to international organizations and civil society actors¹⁴) recovered and landed in Tunisia and Libya is significant, the number of bodies remaining at sea is much higher, according to information received from survivors¹⁵.

12 It is important to remember that this comparison is approximate because of the lack of specific delineation between the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes. The criteria by which IOM categorizes death or disappearance events are not related to the places where the bodies were found, transferred or received. For example, IOM may associate an event recorded in Greece with the Central Mediterranean route although the boat left from a neighbouring region. In general, however, there is a match between the cases reported by IOM and the cases reviewed by this research; with reported cases by both IOM and the ICRC not reflected in the data of the other institution. According to information collected in Komotini and Schistos Nikaia, some victims of events associated with the Eastern Med or Central Med routes may have been buried in north-eastern Greece or close to Athens. The purpose of this comparison, beyond these inconsistencies, is to show the large gap between total reported cases and registered bodies in Spain, Italy, Malta, and Greece.

13 For Tunisia, information on the recovery of bodies and their burials comes from international organizations (IOM, UNHCR), associations, or local actors such as the municipalities of Sfax and Zarzis. A report from the Sfax forensic service provides more precise data : <https://applications.emro.who.int/EMHJ/V28/12/1020-3397-2022-2812-879-887-fre.pdf?ua=1>.

14 Information on the discovery of bodies on Libyan shores comes from international organizations such as UNHCR, IOM or Libyan Red crescent, or from activists who for security reasons prefer to remain anonymous. It is very difficult to find information on burials but the United Nations has been investigating the presence of mass graves : <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/regularsession/session50/2022-07-20/A-HRC-50-CRP-Tarhuna-E.pdf>.

15 <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/29307/tunisie--20-corps-de-migrants-repeches-apres-un-nauffrage>

For the **Western Mediterranean**, the ratio for 2020–21 is 20% and constitutes an increase in the number of bodies found to those reported missing compared to 2014–2019 (12%). The number of bodies recovered annually has also increased, due to an increase in volume of departures from Morocco and Algeria overall, particularly in 2021. More details on the evolution of this route below p.11.

Perhaps the most underestimated figures are those of missing/dead along the **Canary Islands route**. IOM reports 2003 missing/dead for the period 2020–2021, compared to a total of 149 bodies recorded at a recovery rate of 7%. When comparing these with 2014–2019 figures – with 526 reported missing/dead from IOM and 10 recovered bodies – the number of probable missing increases, even if the relative number of bodies found improves. The Canary Islands Route presents challenges in documenting departures; however, other sources point out much higher estimates. According to Caminando Fronteras¹⁶, there could be a total of 5771 victims between 2020 and 2021. This would change the ratio of found to missing dramatically from 7% to 3%. Additionally, data on burials on the Moroccan shoreline have yet to be collected, but the emerging picture is that the number of bodies missing at sea remains high.

2.2 EVOLUTION OF MIGRATION ROUTES

Eastern Mediterranean and north-eastern Greece routes

The intensification of controls on the Eastern Mediterranean maritime route to Greece (linked to the EU/Türkiye agreements) progressively opened (or reopened) two complementary routes: the land route via Evros (with a subsequent increase of fatalities in the border region), and the maritime route to Italy (towards Puglia and Calabria). Departures were usually from Türkiye but with a shift towards Lebanon. In parallel, policy measures taken on the Central Mediterranean route has meant that the route from Egypt to Italy and Greece (Crete) is used more frequently.

Due to the policy restrictions applied along the Balkan Route from Greece, migrants increasingly use the Adriatic route, with departures (via lorries and ferries) from Greece (Igoumenitsa, Patras) and Albania.

Central Mediterranean route

Malta and Italy share common routes and patterns. Between 2014 and 2016, there is a high number of cases (and a low identification rate) mostly related to singular events. On the other hand, between 2017 and 2018 (also corresponding to the Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding of cooperation), an increase in isolated cases is seen. Finally, a significant reduction of the bodies retrieved by Italy and Malta is clear between 2019 and 2021. This data should be compared to data on departures from Libya and Tunisia, the evolution of the type of boats, interceptions by the coastguards of the two countries and recorded cases of shipwrecks. There are no in-depth studies to date, but there is an evolution in the type of boats becoming smaller and less traceable (discrete and thus unrecorded landings or losses).

The evolution of the central Mediterranean route has been conditioned by the reinforcement of border controls linked to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, more restrictive migration policies at EU and national levels, including the strengthening of the external dimension of EU migration policies.

In the face of a relative decrease in departures from Libya, there has been a gradual increase in departures from southern Tunisia, with a significant increase in cases of shipwrecks or disappearances of vessels near the Tunisian coast. Due to the precarious conditions of the journey (autonomous departures by small groups with less sea-worthy boats at smaller, more variable departure points), the knowledge of these events often rely on the help of families or migrant communities reporting that a person has gone missing. Those departing include sub-Saharan populations (especially from Western Africa, Ivory Coast or Guinea)¹⁷, settled or in transit in the Maghreb, and

16 Caminando Fronteras Report 2022 p.43: <https://caminandofronteras.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Report-Victims-of-the-necrofrontier-2018-2022.-For-memory-and-justice-Right-to-life-ENG.pdf>.

17 https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/l-europe-ou-la-mort-des-migrants-d-afrique-de-l-ouest-decides-a-quitte-la-tunisie-03-05-2021-2424750_24.php#11.

increasingly Tunisians (including family units)¹⁸. At the same time, there is an increase in departures from northern Tunisia and eastern Algeria to Sardinia.

We also note the (re)opening of the eastern route (with boats from Egypt or Türkiye arriving in Calabria or Puglia) and a case of death at the Adriatic border (which would invite further investigation into the cases of unidentified bodies found and abandoned along roads on the mainland near the coasts, which could be associated with deaths on Greece-Italy ferries¹⁹).

Western Mediterranean and Canary Islands routes

The evolution of routes in the Western Mediterranean from North Africa is connected to: an increase in cases of departures from Algeria linked to internal mobility, to the evolution of southern routes via the Sahara, and to cross-border mobility between Morocco and Tunisia²⁰. This shift then translates into an increase in movements towards Spain (Western Mediterranean), towards the Balearic Islands, the southern coasts of the peninsula (Alboran Sea), and towards the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In the specific case of Ceuta and Melilla (land border), the decrease in the number of migrants going missing and the increase in the number of identifications can be explained by the nature of land-borders themselves. For example, the rate of identification of the dead is indeed higher at land borders, because it is easier to find information on victims from migrant communities stranded 'before' the border; or because there are fewer overall missing persons as land borders are much smaller than coastal borders²¹.

Map source : [Caminando fronteras](#)



Strait of Gibraltar route



Canary Islands route



Algerian route



Albroan Sea route

¹⁸ Migration statistics of the Forum tunisien pour les droits économiques et sociaux (FTDES) are available at <https://ftdes.net/rapports/en.migration2021.pdf>. Further information available through FTDES, EuromedRights and Avocats Sans Frontières.

¹⁹ <https://www.lagazzettadelmezzogiorno.it/news/puglia/1397126/l-esercito-dei-morti-dimenticati-in-puglia-sono-61-i-cadaveri-senza-nome.html>.

²⁰ https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/societe-africaine/immigration-clandestine-les-algeriens-de-plus-en-plus-nombreux-a-tenter-l-aventure_4791207.html - <https://www.acaps.org/country/algeria/crisis/western-mediterranean-route> - <https://ecre.org/atlantic-route-and-spain-canary-route-among-deadliest-eu-plans-to-strengthen-cooperation-with-morocco-resumption-of-deportation-flights-double-standards-in-approach-to-arrivals/>.

²¹ As a side note, it is reported that in a similar project at the French-Italian southern land border (Furri, Lestage CNRS MECMI 2021), there are about 40 cases between 2015 and 2022, with a significant identification rate.



Overland route

The management of migration in Morocco (in relation with the EU and in particular Spain) appears to have influenced a change in departure locations in different regions of the country. While the increase in departures via the Alboran Sea concerns Eastern Morocco/Western Algeria in particular, on the Canary Islands route, there has been an intensification in the number of departures from Southern Morocco and Western Sahara by migrants coming from both the south (Mauritania, Senegal, etc.) and the north of the country where they had been previously settled in cities. Departures are also reported directly from Mauritania and Senegal, with the more perilous journey leading to more challenges in recording cases of migrants that have gone missing or have died.

2.3 RISE IN GHOST SHIPWRECKS AND IMPACT OF COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

An increase of ghost shipwrecks – particularly of small boats²² whose sinking are often reported by relatives to civil society organizations, but of which there is no official trace – increased during the period covered by this report²³. This issue is also linked to the increasing number of cases of bodies missing or abandoned at sea. The activities of NGOs at sea, specifically in the central Mediterranean region, experienced a decrease in their ability to intervene; including their ability to both recover and disembark the dead, and prevent those vulnerable from dying in the first place. In the past, NGOs played a significant role in the recovery of a substantial number of bodies in Italy between 2014 and 2019. With a reduction of their capacity and thus actions, there are fewer people being rescued and/or recovered²⁴.

The COVID-19 health crisis between 2020 and 2021 had inevitable effects on both human mobility and the management of the dead (see Last Rights 2021 Every Body Counts report²⁵). Conditions in transit countries (Maghreb, Türkiye) contributed to irregular, self-organized, and difficult-to-trace movements, with an increase in arrivals by sea in smaller and more fragile boats, as well as the resumption of land-based routes.

22 In recent years, the type of boats and means to make the crossing has significantly varied: poor quality metal boats arrive from Tunisia (30–40 people), but there are also arrivals of people in jet skis in Spain (1–2 people).

23 Cases of ghost shipwrecks are generally reported by non-governmental organizations in contact with the boats or families (AlarmPhone, Caminando Fronteras), and later taken up by international organizations (IOM) or civil society actors : <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2141506/another-migrant-%e2%80%98ghost-boat%e2%80%99-mediterranean>.

24 [Search and rescue in the Mediterranean](#), European Parliament briefing, January 2021.

25 [Last Rights Report is available](#)

3. MANAGEMENT OF DECEASED MIGRANTS

3.1 EFFECT OF COVID-19

EU Member States (Spain, Italy, Malta, Greece) managed the remains of deceased migrants with varying approaches that depended on the different COVID-19 health measures in place at the time of the discovery. Under normal circumstances, the handling of deceased migrants was relatively swift, especially when there were no family members available to undertake the identification process or handle burials or repatriations. Unfortunately, the health crisis had a profound effect on this process. Migrants whose identification was deemed feasible by authorities were kept in morgues or Medical Legal Institutes (MLI). Conversely, the rise of deaths in the general population, coupled with the absence of an effective identification system for deceased migrants, led to “accelerated” burials carried out by judicial authorities, prefectures, and municipalities. In some cases, identification occurred after burial, often relying on DNA collection, but also through testimonies and visual recognition of photographs by distant relatives or families in the subsequent weeks and months.

In addition to changes of overall procedure in managing the dead, the Covid-19 crisis contributed to certain incidents and delays, with lack of coordination between different parts of the medical-legal and administrative systems managing the dead. For example, the removal in September 2021 of some bodies of the victims of October 3, 2013 shipwreck from a cemetery, with neither the Municipality nor the families of the victims being informed of the procedure²⁶. Another example is the abandonment of 7 coffins containing the dead from the Lampedusa November 2019 shipwreck in a cemetery storehouse. In both cases, there were repercussions on the traceability of bodies between their place of recovery and the burial.

Various delays were seen in the different countries studied, between opening the death investigations and completing administrative documents concerning identification (or not) and burial (often completed in 2022 for cases from 2020 and 2021). Documentation was often very basic or partial (e.g., the case of MSF disembarkation in Messina mentioned earlier with documents concerning only 5 of the 10 bodies transferred by MSF in November 2021). There were also delays in the identification and repatriation processes (with several pending cases), and a lack of precision (saw by direct observation and remote research)²⁷ on the exact location of the burials.

3.2 DEATH INVESTIGATION - IDENTIFICATION

The general identification rate stays rather low into 2020-2021 (see Table 3 p.8 for general observations and the Annex for specific regions), with significant variations according to the country and whether it is a land or sea border. Using **Spain** as an example, identification rates at land-border of Ceuta (83%) and Melilla (68%) are much higher than in the Canary Islands (35%). Factors influencing higher identification rates at land borders are 1) bodies are recovered quickly and in a better state of preservation than those recovered at sea, 2) the more likely use of documents, objects, and telephones to facilitate with the identification process, 3) and the use of testimonies from survivors and relatives in border regions. For deaths at sea, identifications are easier if deaths occur on board a rescued ship (versus a body recovered at sea following a shipwreck) for similar reasons to recoveries at land borders.

Another specific observation is the fact that most of the bodies identified and repatriated are Moroccan citizens. For Moroccan and Tunisian nationals, identification operations are facilitated by the rapid mobilization of families (who have more precise and more recent information on the departures and conditions of the journey) and by the mediation of cross-border organizations which make it possible to establish a direct link between international organizations and the authorities of the two countries (e.g., Alarmphone, Caminando Fronteras, RSA, MeMMed). Remains of sub-Saharan

26 <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/35644/lampedusa-shipwreck-victims-reburied-in-mass-grave> : bodies were actually transferred to an ossuary, but it is necessary to point out the lack of communication between various actors involved in the transfer, and the absence of information for families.

27 Overall observations from reports of Italy, Greece, Spain and Malta conducted by consultant researchers.



Graves of unidentified migrants, cemetery in Rhodes, Greece © Dimitris Chatoglou, ICRC.

Africans are more difficult to identify due to multiple factors, including but not limited to the state of preservation/decomposition (severity of the sea-route), the lack of diaspora networks and lack of contextual evidence pointing at an area/country of origin.

Identifications across all four countries are rare if the authorities do not proactively search for the identities of people, and often consider only the evidence produced by family members, who are rarely present at the scene or can rarely travel to the scene in a short time, if at all (lack of visas, resources). In **Italy**, for example, an external examination or an autopsy (requested by the prosecutor judge in charge of the investigation) was sometimes conducted quickly, using generic causes of death (e.g., drowning, asphyxiation), as well as using generic physical descriptors of the deceased. One consequence is that the necessary and sufficient elements for identification often reach the authorities only after the body has been buried under X: this delay, and the difficulty of “ratifying” and correcting the identification at the administrative level through the courts, produces additional difficulties in drawing up or correcting the documents concerning the deceased (death certificate) and in the possible procedures for exhumation and repatriation. It is possible that in several cases (with similarities in all the fields of investigation), bodies are identified by the authorities but are considered unidentified by the municipalities where they are buried.

In general, there is limited data on the method of identification used in the different cases, whether it be by the use of DNA, fingerprints or visual identification via consular channels. The method of identification and its “validity” remain at the discretion of the investigators, without a common approach for deceased migrant caseloads across the region. Although guidelines and standardized procedures are suggested by international organizations (including the ICRC), there is still no standardized approach for identification and exchange of information specific to deceased and missing migrants across the countries covered in this report. Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity in the identification processes used, and in some regions, identification itself remains a low priority.

3.3 BURIAL & TRACEABILITY

The system of burials and traceability is highlighted for two of the countries here as there were notable differences in practice.

Spain

Spain does not have a consistent system to keep track of municipal-led burials for deceased migrants and at the time of writing, it was not clear where the identified and non-repatriated bodies are buried. As this report highlights, registration practices, local procedures, and timeframes are quite different, and in several cases, the information on the person’s identity was registered as “X”, and only in some cases was the administration informed of an a posteriori identification.

Italy

The management of the dead is generally fast, with burials being conducted as quickly as possible

for health reasons and to avoid bodies remaining too long in the morgue. This depends, however, on the way each territory is organized (Prefecture, Medico-Legal Institutes, municipality), on the storage available in forensic institutes or in the cemeteries, and on whether there is a need to conduct burials in neighbouring municipalities (dispersal of burials). However, during the COVID crisis, the burial of the bodies of migrants in some regions could remain “on hold” for a long time. In one incident, the bodies of deceased migrants were stored at a cemetery, unburied for over two years. Sometimes, the length of the wait was justified by the Judicial Authority’s need to finalize an identification. Most often than not, bodies were quickly buried, and the identification was completed afterward (causing problems for future exhumations for repatriation).

Burials are often extremely “pragmatic” and linked to the space available in cemeteries (all the more so during the COVID crisis). It often happens that bodies linked to the same event were buried in different places, with burial codes specific to the municipality that received them (dissociated from the alphanumeric code issued by the judicial authority and/or by forensic doctors), making it more difficult to trace the bodies²⁸. It also happens that those graves, considered in a certain way precarious, were changed, and moved without the information being passed on to the authorities and the families, if an identification took place. In general, the graves were either separated or mixed with others (depending on the size and structure of the cemeteries). This in turn means that there is little visual evidence to associate specific graves with events.

3.4 DATA AND ADMINISTRATION

Access to complete, purposeful, well-organised data for those investigating deaths or providing a service related to the death (informing families, burials, registration, repatriation, etc.) is a key element to care of deceased migrants. For this study, access to information, data, and original documents was dependent on: the country of death, jurisdiction, institution (e.g. Court/Prosecutor, Prefecture, Medico-legal Institute), functioning of the different local offices and their coordination, and availability of the different offices and officials to make data available. In several cases, the willingness to collaborate on the part of the municipal administrations does not correspond to a real provision of raw data or official documents. Sometimes, the documents simply do not exist, sometimes the officials have difficulty finding them, and sometimes the formal transmission takes time because of internal validations and a lack of formal means to transmit documents internally.

Death Certificates

A death certificate which contains general descriptive information on the individual (or body) including (probable) date of death, circumstances and cause of death, is crucially a legal document that grants specific rights to the deceased and, upon their identification, certain rights to their surviving family. When endeavoring to trace and identify missing migrants, especially long after an event, having comprehensive administrative documents such as a death certificate significantly enhances the likelihood of locating a possible body and proceeding with the identification process. The precision of the details found in administrative documents utilized in this study, which also included data regarding body examinations, varied significantly. The reason behind the limited information shared remained unclear. It was uncertain whether certain offices (such as the Court/Prosecutor, Prefecture, MLI, Municipality) were hesitant to disclose sensitive data, hence providing access only to basic summaries, or if the data itself was incomplete. If incomplete, it would imply a differential treatment of deceased migrants and more generally, a gap in how information is collated. Restrictions on sharing personal data is an additional argument that limits the transmission of files and hinders a clear overview of the functioning of the system.

The data required to facilitate identification of the dead is considered sensitive and so is generally difficult to access. This was seen during the study as well, and even if the data was accessible, it was not always informative and access was dependent on the goodwill of the authority providing it.

²⁸ For Lampedusa, Italy, for example, due to the practice of moving the bodies to Sicily and distributing them in the Province of Agrigento via the Police Prefecture, it is very difficult to obtain precise information on the burial sites. A request to the Prefecture is still pending and we are waiting for additional information from the funeral agency that handles the transfers from Lampedusa to Porto Empedocle.

Additional data on the dead was collected through indirect sources linked to the researchers' field-work or contacts with civil society actors that were directly involved in the follow-up of certain cases. Such contacts were able to access information either directly from the victims' families involved in the identification process, or through their explicit involvement (e.g., as lawyers who receive a power of attorney from the families at a distance to follow the case).

The variable availability and accessibility of information from authorities and other actors contribute to a decreased transparency about the general functioning of the recovery and post-recovery management of human remains. In general, there are fewer bodies recovered at sea, and less visibility on their disembarkation (particularly in isolated recoveries not directly connected to a shipwreck) or their discovery on the coast (these cases are often reported by the local press, and by civil society actors). However, the disembarkations conducted by national authorities (coastguard, navy) or by commercial vessels are increasingly discreet and rapid, making it difficult for third parties to verify those cases. The management of the bodies, especially in cases of recoveries of a single person without relatives present to facilitate the identification process, is rendered even more difficult with the deficient administrative management mentioned earlier.

Impact of administrative process on identification

Documents concerning unidentified persons are generally drawn up expeditiously with summary information and serve primarily to ensure administrative follow-up before the burial. Similarly, documents on the burial are summarized and drawn up to manage burial plots. Few of these documents are prepared with a social function in mind specific to deceased migrants, and in consideration of family members who may eventually claim the remains of their loved one. Sometimes, the documents have not yet been drawn up because of a delay on the part of the investigators in closing the case and issuing permits for the burial, or because of a delay linked – as during the COVID crisis – to an administrative block.

The issuance of administrative documents and their completeness also depends on what data municipal offices receive from the judicial authority, which has itself received data by the police officers and forensic doctors. This creates a chain of documents, where the use of existing information depends on the function of each office. Ultimately, information that is vital to identification is minimized, fragmented and dispersed amongst multiple agencies and documents. Such constraints limit the use of this data to aid the victims' identification and information to the families, enabling repatriation.

4. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The number of victims continues to rise, despite a period of apparent inactivity resulting from the health crisis in 2020 and 2021. The ratio between the number of people reported missing or dead and the bodies recovered on Europe's Southern borders has roughly decreased by half compared to the previous period reported (2014–2019), indicating not the reduction of harm, but the reduction of recovery of the dead

Consistent good practice remains the core recommendation to aid in identification of the dead and accounting of the missing migrants across the Northern Mediterranean. The Counting the Dead 2020–2021 update confirms the results of the original report, while analysing changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains clear that to increase the rate of identification of recovered bodies and the understanding of who may remain missing, the following is required:

- 1. States and EU Institutions should improve their understanding of the issue of missing and deceased migrants**
 - i. Standardize the collection of disaggregated data on missing and dead migrants both nationally and at a European level to ensure comparability of data across countries;
 - ii. Use this data to develop evidence-based analyses of the phenomenon and adapt relevant policies accordingly, taking into account humanitarian considerations and moving beyond an overwhelming focus on management of migration;
 - iii. The need to conduct a similar census of burials for the southern side of the Mediterranean and in Türkiye.
- 2. States and EU Institutions should implement effective preventive measures**
 - i. Ensure that migrants' rights are respected and protected in line with international, European, and national laws all along migratory routes;
 - ii. Ensure that respect for the principle of non-refoulement is integrated in all migration and asylum practices and that state officials encountering migrants at borders and elsewhere are properly trained in this regard;
 - iii. Carry out evidence-based reviews of existing migration and asylum policies and practices, including those pertaining to inter-continental cooperation, to determine whether they create or exacerbate the risk of migrants going missing or dying;
 - iv. Use the risk of migrants going missing or dying as a criterion to assess any new migration and asylum policy;

- v. Cooperate in establishing, enabling and supporting search and rescue operations at sea and ensure that search and rescue capacities at land borders are also adequate, particularly in zones known to be prone to accidents;
 - vi. Facilitate (including by providing financial support) the provision of humanitarian services and information along migratory routes, including in border areas, notably through Humanitarian Service Points²⁹;
 - vii. Facilitate, in accordance with internationally accepted data-protection standards, migrants' access to means of communication along migratory routes and in any official structures where migrants may be placed, including places of detention, so that they can maintain or restore contact with their families if they wish to do so. This can notably be done by facilitating migrants' access to the services of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement aimed at restoring family links.
- 3. States should put in place mechanisms to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants at national and trans-regional levels**
- i. The promotion of consistent collaboration between and among actors concerned with determining the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants (authorities at national and regional levels, non-governmental organizations operating at sea in SAR operations, other organizations such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and communities of migrants in countries of transit, destination and origin). These organizations should be equipped with the necessary tools and practical knowledge to gather information on victims and missing persons while at sea. By doing so, they can leverage their capabilities to enhance data collection efforts and improve the identification process.
 - ii. Improved means and prioritization of including migrant communities in the countries of departure, transit and arrival in the identification process. Migrant communities are often the custodians of key information about individuals who leave their communities and can provide valuable information for collecting data on missing persons and carrying out identification activities. Additionally, survivors who may not be direct family members but had close contact and exchanges with the victims possess information that is essential for the identification process and determining the fate of the missing. Often, this information is shared with civil society actors more often than authorities.
 - iii. The application of a route-based approach with centralised data for each specific route (a methodology is recommended in Counting the Dead 2014-2019 report) which can be collected and shared by neutral actors, within internationally accepted data-protection and privacy standards. Within this approach, apply event-based analysis using available data, not only based on human remains found, but equally, including losses of vessels and passengers, both known and assumed (ghost shipwrecks) to reconstruct passenger lists to aid in identification of recovered human remains and in informing families.
 - iv. Ask that national authorities allow and coordinate with non-governmental sea rescue organizations (also with the merchant navy), first of all to reduce the number of shipwrecks, to intervene more rapidly with SAR operations and to organize a more effective system for recovering bodies when they are found at the scene of the shipwreck.

²⁹ Throughout the world, the IFRC and National Societies operate [Humanitarian Service Points](#), which are neutral and strategically located spaces where migrants can access a wide range of humanitarian support and services, regardless of their migration status and wherever they are in their journeys.

ANNEX

Detailed cases per country

Spain

Country/Region	Number of bodies recovered 2020-2021	Identifications	Repatriations
Spain	293	120	52
Canary Islands	149	52	29
Gran Canaria	79	37	22
Fuertaventura	10	4	x
Lanzarote	16	11	7
Tenerife	37	0	x
El Hierro	7	0	x
Peninsula, Balearic Islands, Ceuta and Melilla	144		
Ceuta	24	20	2
Melilla	19	13	2
Cadiz	18	15	13
Malaga	5	4	3
Granada	9	1	1
Almeria	33	4	1
Alicante	5	2	2
Murcia	9	4	x
Valencia	3	1	x
Balearic Islands	19	4	x

Italy

Country/Region	Number of bodies recovered 2020-2021	Identifications	Repatriations
Italy	37	3	
By region			
Sicily / Agrigento	2	1	
Sicily / Palermo	1	1	
Sicily / Messina	10	0	
Sicily / Trapani	5	0	
Sicily / Bodies recovered in Lampedusa	12	1	
Sardinia	1	0	
Calabria / Reggio Calabria	1	0	
Calabria / Crotone	4	0	
Marche / Ancona	1	0	
2019 additional cases	44	8	4

Greece

Country/Region	Number of bodies recovered 01/2020 - 12/2021	Identifications
Greece	174	122
Agean Islands	42	22
Lesbos	5	2
Chios	15	12
Samos	13	8
Southern Agean islands - Rhodes	9	0
SNorth-East	126	100
Evros	44	21
Xanthi	12	12
Komotini	70	67
Kavala	X	X
Schisto cemetery	6	0

The ICRC helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. The organization also seeks to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

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