EUROPE MUST ACT.

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(IN)VISIBILITY OF FORCED MIGRATION IN EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION

Visibility and invisibility are words we tend to treat as opposites; something is either seen or hidden, present or absent. Yet in the context of migration and asylum, these concepts rarely work as a clean binary.

This month's topic explores (In)Visibility through the lens of forced migration to Europe. We examine Anna Finiguerra's concept of "making migration present" as an alternative to the visibility/invisibility binary altogether; we look at Cyprus's UN Buffer Zone, a militarised no-man's-land that is highly visible on the ground yet also a de facto EU border that officially does not exist; we turn to unaccompanied minors, whose protected status as children gives way, often overnight at 18, to a legal adulthood that quietly withdraws the services and representation that once made their vulnerability visible; we trace how labour exploitation in Italy's agricultural sector remains largely unseen until tragedy forces it into headlines and how Italy's own policy architecture helps produce the irregularity it later punishes.

Combined, these sections show how visibility can mean recognition and protection, but it can also mean exposure to surveillance and control; invisibility can mean neglect and abandonment, but it can also be a means of evading the tension of hyper-visibility and systems designed to exclude.

We end by highlighting a different kind of invisibility: the informal networks of mutual aid built by people for themselves, support systems that rarely register in institutional accounts but that are often the first, and most trusted, source of help for people rebuilding their lives.

Together, these accounts suggest that visibility and invisibility in migration is rarely accidental. It is produced, maintained, and sometimes strategically deployed, and recognising this is the first step to challenging it.

MAKING MIGRATION PRESENT BEYOND (IN)VISIBILITY

In June 2008, the art installation "The gateway to Europe" was inaugurated by civil society at the shores of Lampedusa. The five-metre-tall and three metres wide doorway was created to commemorate the violence and countless deaths in the Mediterranean. The creators described the monument as "a memorial for future generations of the inhuman tragedy of so many migrants deceased and dispersed in the Mediterranean, often without witnesses", to serve as a symbol inviting us to reflect on and remember a tragedy "still unfolding everyday under our eyes"[1].

Reading this statement, there are two contractions that stand out. On the one hand, these deaths are being presented as unwitnessed, but at the same time they are happening right in front of our eyes. This example illustrates the limitations of understanding migration through the binary concepts of (in)visibility and, building on this tension, this section aims to propose alternative modes of understanding human mobility through the concept of "making migration present".

Migration has often been discussed in terms of visibility or invisibility in both political discourse and scholarship. However, rather than constituting two opposite conditions, the two concepts are usually interconnected and, depending on the situation, may have different political outcomes for those involved. As such, visibility can provide access to protection or recognition, but also expose individuals to further violence through surveillance and control[2]. At the same time, invisibility may lead to the negligence of political and social rights, but may equally allow people to evade systems of control and detention[3]. What is important to highlight here is that (in)visibility is never absolute or neutral, but it is always situated depending on different standpoints and the many actors invested in making dynamics (in)visible[4].



Image: Porta d'Europa, Vito Manzari (Wikimedia Commons)

[1] Amani, "La porta di Lampedusa," accessed August 3, 2026, https://www.amaniforafrica.it/cosa-facciamo/la-porta-di-lampedusa/
[2] Martina Tazzioli and William Walters, "The Sight of Migration: Governmentality, Visibility and Europe's Contested Borders," Global Society 30, no.
[3] Anna Finiguerra, "Re-imagining Mobility: From (In)visibility to Multiple Processes of Making Present," Millennium: Journal of International Studies (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298221131358.
[5] Global Society 30, no. 3 (2016): 445-464, https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2016.1173018.



Image: Nikita Belokhonov via Pexels

Returning to the example from above, the tragedy of border deaths is highly visible through extensive media and political coverage of shipwrecks, or recovered bodies at sea. Simultaneously, the practices through which border control is exercised often remain beyond public view. The people affected by these practices may therefore become strategically invisible, as the processes and spaces in which migration is controlled are physically and politically distanced from public scrutiny.

Applying this perspective to contemporary migration management, practices such as externalisation policies, return hubs, or agreements with third countries demonstrate how migration control is increasingly relocated beyond European territory. At the same time, the topic remains highly present in media and political discourse describing mobile people as a security threat, converting them into unwanted "invaders"[5]. Such framings risk obscuring personal trajectories, experiences, and the human cost of such policies and practices.

Rather than relying on the binary of visibility and invisibility, Anna Finiguerra invites us to rethink human mobility through the concept of "making present". This perspective shifts attention from whether migration is visible to how different actors, practices, and representations bring particular understandings of migration into public view while leaving others in the background. It recognises that migration is experienced and represented in multiple ways and that no single perspective can capture its complexity[6].

As such, "The Gateway to Europe" is one example of making migration present. Produced from a predominantly European perspective at one of Europe's external borders, it commemorates the human tragedy of border deaths, foregrounding one particular understanding of migration. At the same time, it obscures mobile people's own voices and experiences. As a result, the site has become a symbolic place for self-narration, where people were able to tell their own stories through different artistic means, and thus showcasing how different and sometimes even contrasting modes of making migration present can coexist[7]. In this sense, Anna Finiguerra´s concept allows for a more nuanced framework for understanding contemporary migration and its political and personal realities, as it takes into consideration the multiple, situated, and often unresolved practices related to it.

[5] Nicholas De Genova, "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion," Ethnic and Racial Studies 36, no. 7 (2013): 1181, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783710 ; Didier Fassin, "Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries: The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times," Annual Review of Anthropology 40 (2011): 214, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-081309-145847

[6] Anna Finiguerra, "Re-imagining Mobility: From (In)visibility to Multiple Processes of Making Present," Millennium: Journal of International Studies (2022), https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298221131358

[7] Archivio delle Memorie Migranti (AMM), "Archivio delle Memorie Migranti," accessed August 11, 2026, https://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/

STUCK IN LIMBO IN THE 'GREEN LINE': THE UN BUFFER ZONE IN CYPRUS

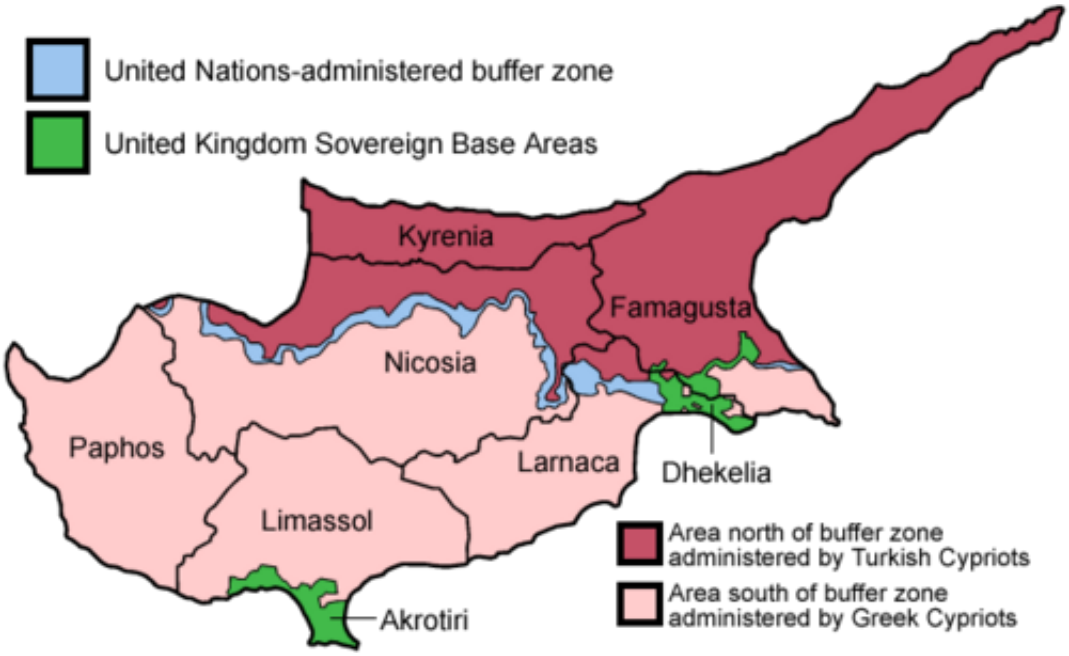


Image: Wikipedia

The situation in Cyprus's UN Buffer Zone illustrates how borders can function not only as sites of exclusion but also as spaces of deliberate invisibility.

For many years, asylum seekers have been in limbo in Cyprus's U.N.-controlled buffer zone between the internationally recognised south and the Turkish-occupied north. Returning to the north, which does not have an asylum system in place, puts people at risk of deportation. According to reports, almost all people journeying from mainland Türkiye to self-declared Northern Cyprus have been stopped by authorities while attempting to enter the internationally recognised south[8].

The 'Green Line' is a buffer zone overseen by the UN that has divided Turkish and Greek Cypriots since the 1974 partition[9]. However, it has lost political weight after Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, but it remains a paradox: highly visible as a militarised no-man's-land, yet legally invisible, separating an EU country from a territory the international community doesn't recognise. In effect, it's a de facto EU border that officially does not exist.

Refugees have repeatedly become stranded in the buffer zone, and similar incidents continue to occur.

[8] Giulia Brivio. (2024, October 27). Cyprus' migration dilemma: Hardline measures, regional conflict and rising pressures. Mixed Migration Centre. https://mixedmigration.org/articles/cyprus-migration-dilemma-hardline-measures-regional-conflict-and-rising-pressures/
[9] Dağtaş, S., & Ilcan, S. (2025). Nested borders: Migration, sovereignty and liminality along the green line in Cyprus. Geopolitics, 31(1), 426-452. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2025.2511201

One notable example involved three Cameroonian asylum seekers who remained trapped between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot checkpoints at Ledra Palace from May until December 2021. Their situation was only resolved following Pope Francis's visit to Cyprus who was able to relocate them to Italy[10].

As part of his research on the buffer zone, Nicos Trimikliniotis interviewed an asylum seeker who had arrived in Cyprus by sea with his heavily pregnant wife and their young child. While his wife was allowed to remain in Cyprus to give birth, he and his one-year-old son were forcibly returned to Lebanon. He later re-entered Cyprus with his son via the north, crossing once again through the buffer zone[11].



Image: Nicosia Green Line, Julian Nyča (Wikimedia Commons)

A further series of incidents involved up to seventy asylum seekers stranded in two separate areas of the buffer zone: one in Aglantzia and another near the village of Akaki. Among them were several unaccompanied minors, some of whom disappeared and remain unaccounted for. From May until mid-November 2024, many of these individuals were forced to survive in harsh conditions, including swampy terrain[12]. UNHCR urged Cyprus to process asylum requests. After the Council of Europe called for their admission immediately, they were eventually allowed to lodge their asylum applications[13].

On 6 January 2025, Shoaib Khan, a 24-year-old former asylum seeker from Pakistan, was found dead in Nicosia. It was revealed that he had been shot by police while attempting, with a group, to cross the buffer zone in Potamia, a village adjacent to the buffer zone. His body was then moved to an empty plot in the south (in the Akropolis area of Nicosia)[14]. This incident is a prime example of how violence in a 'non-border' area spreads, resulting in increased state violence and repression.

[10] Golden, L. (2021, December 3). Pope to relocate two asylum seekers trapped in Cyprus buffer zone. Barrons. https://www.barrons.com/news/pope-to-relocate-two-asylum-seekers-trapped-in-cyprus-buffer-zone-01638554407
[11] Trimikliniotis, N. (2026). The green line as a state of exception: Politics of enmity and the production of (NON) border regime in Cyprus. Citizenship Studies, 1-25. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2026.2671881
[12] Ibid
[13] Van Brunnersum, S.-J. (2024, October 31). Europe's rights watchdog calls on Cyprus to admit migrants trapped in UN buffer zone. Infomigrants. Infomigrants.Net. https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/60916/europes-rights-watchdog-calls-on-cyprus-to-admit-migrants-trapped-in-un-buffer-zone
[14] Cyprus Inform Team. (2026, January 27). Inquest into death of Shoaib Khan to begin at Nicosia district court. Cyprus Inform. https://www.kiprinform.com/en/cyprus_news/inquest-into-death-of-shoaib-khan-to-begin-at-nicosia-district-court/



Image:Halide Nur K. from Pexels

Humanitarian support in the buffer zone is limited by the island's political status. Although UNHCR provides some assistance, its operations are constrained because the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) is not internationally recognised and is not a party to international refugee or human rights conventions. To ensure no connection is implied, UNHCR operates through a proxy organisation rather than directly in the north. As a result, even asylum seekers recognised by UNHCR as being at risk of persecution are not granted refugee status in the TRNC and remain without legal protection, instead receiving the informal designation of a 'Person of Concern'. While Cyprus provides humanitarian aid, it has refused to admit those stranded in the buffer zone to the south, with President Nikos Christodoulides arguing that doing so would risk 'the creation of a new route for illegal migration.'[15]

The buffer zone in Cyprus highlights that invisibility does not necessarily end once migrants reach a host country. Instead, it can persist through legal precarity, restricted access to asylum procedures, and prolonged uncertainty over status. The Green Line exemplifies how migrants may be physically present within the sphere of European governance yet remain outside its legal protections.

[15] Hadjigeorgiou, N., & Klem, B. (2025). Contested citizenship in the liminal spaces of a divided Cyprus. Citizenship Studies, 29(6), 533–554. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2025.2589196

OUTGROWING VISIBILITY: UNACCOMPANIED MINORS AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD IN EUROPE



Image: wayhomestudios via Magnific

Unaccompanied minors often face severe risks along migration and displacement routes. This recognised vulnerability makes them highly visible figures in the European asylum system. While children are registered, assessed, and formally recognised as vulnerable, this visibility within protection frameworks can change over time. For many unaccompanied minors, the transition to adulthood can be highly stressful and overwhelming. At 18, many young people become independent overnight. For some, this shift can collide with asylum procedures still in progress. For others, it can mean the loss of residence status, leaving them undocumented.

A 2021 study by Oxfam and partner organisations found that, in Ireland, children could be removed from foster care and placed in an institutional setting alongside adults they have never met. In Greece, some could be returned to poorly maintained camps or left without accommodation altogether. These examples show how unaccompanied minors can be faced with circumstances that expose them further to risks of exploitation and abuse. These are risks that they were already vulnerable to as minors and which do not disappear once they turn 18.

As minors, unaccompanied children are entitled to special protections, including access to essential services, safe accommodation and a representative who provides support and acts on their behalf. At 18, these conditions can change, as they start being treated as adults within the international protection system. While the impact of this shift can vary across Europe, for many, reaching adulthood can mean losing access to services such as housing, education and healthcare, along with the representative who previously advocated for them. Across Europe, many young people seeking sanctuary have been falling through the cracks of the varying national protection systems as they transition to adulthood.

There is awareness across Europe of the issues faced by unaccompanied minors, which has led to policy improvements in some states. The Netherlands is an example where good practices were implemented to help with this transition. Since an announcement from the Dutch government in 2022, minors who have received international protection can benefit from housing and guidance up to the age of 21. Despite these efforts, concerns still remain across Europe, including issues with housing support, providing consistent care after 18 and a lack of clear policies.

Turning 18 does not automatically bring maturity or resilience. For most young people, the transition to adulthood is softened by family and friends, and by a support system that still continues. This is not the case for many unaccompanied minors. As one young man described, *"The transition into adulthood didn't feel like a transition for us. It felt like our whole support system fell away"* (A. aged 20, from Eritrea in the Netherlands, quoted in Oxfam's 2021 study). Many unaccompanied minors are left to navigate an asylum system that is already complex, and often without guidance. This is where invisibility can begin, not suddenly at 18, but gradually as special protections are withdrawn. Reaching adulthood does not remove vulnerability, but it can reduce the visibility that shielded them in the system.



Image: freepic.diller via Magnific

MIGRANT LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN ITALY: VISIBILITY, POLICY AND THE LIMITS OF REGULAR PATHWAYS



Image: Mark Stebnicki via Pexels

In June 2026, four migrant farmworkers – three Afghans and one Pakistani – were burned alive in a minivan in Amendolara, Calabria, allegedly after demanding unpaid wages from the caporali controlling their work. Thousands took to the streets in protest, and the case dominated headlines for weeks. Yet as sociologist Davide Donatiello observed shortly afterwards, incidents like this are not aberrations: exploitation remains largely invisible, resurfacing in public attention only when tragedy strikes, even though it reproduces itself daily, far from the spotlight. Rather than representing an exception, Amendolara can be read as one instance in which a persistent, largely unseen dynamic became momentarily visible.

This dynamic is better understood not as the product of individual caporali or criminal networks, but as what Palumbo and Marchetti term an "infrastructure of irregularity" – the accumulated legal and policy devices through which irregular status is produced and reproduced at the intersection of migration, labour, and welfare regimes. Recent comparative research on employer behaviour supports this reading: across five European countries, the use of irregular migrant labour was found to increase not simply where enforcement is weak, but specifically where labour and welfare institutions generate strong demand for migrant labour while immigration policy offers no adequate legal route to meet it.

In Italy, this tension has intensified over the past two decades, as successive governments have progressively narrowed both protection and labour-migration pathways – from the 2018-2019 Security Decrees[16], which, among other things, abolished humanitarian protection, to the 2023 Cutro Decree[17], which further restricted "special protection" and reduced services within the reception system. Even where a formal legal channel for labour migration exists, it functions poorly: Italy's annual decreto flussi, which sets quotas for migrant workers, illustrates this well. Of 146,850 places allocated for 2024, only 24,858 residence permits were ultimately requested – a 16.9% success rate; for 2025, this fell to just 7.9%. Of those who did arrive under the 2025 quota, nearly half remained at concrete risk of falling into irregularity the following year.



Image: Tony Sebastian via Pexels

Asylum seekers face a related but distinct version of this same infrastructure. They wait, sometimes for years, on repeatedly renewed six-month permits, increasingly likely to end in rejection. Reception centres, meant to support them, frequently become recruitment pools instead, with employers and intermediaries drawing on residents for low-cost work in agriculture and textiles. Compounding this, anyone housed in reception cannot earn more than roughly €5,984 a year without losing their place in the system altogether – a rule that pushes people needing to support themselves, or send remittances home, straight into undeclared work. The 2023 Cutro Decree deepened this vulnerability further, stripping psychological and legal assistance from first-reception centres and narrowing access to better-resourced accommodation.

Amendolara can thus be read as symptomatic of a broader system in which migration, labour, and welfare policies jointly contribute to the production of the precarity they subsequently address only through punitive or reactive measures. Absent a more structural response to this production of irregularity, similar incidents are likely to recur, attracting public attention briefly before receding from view.

[16] Law Decree 13/2018 was converted into Law No. 132 of 1st December 2018; Law Decree 53/2019 was converted into Law No. 77 of 8th August 2019.
[17] Law Decree 20/2023 was converted into Law No. 50 of 5th May 2023.

INVISIBLE MUTUAL AID BETWEEN MIGRANT PEOPLE

Because European state organisations and NGOs hold most of the means of publication and circulation of discourse, and because of old traditions that assume a distinction between helper and helped (historically in the Christian institutions of charity and more recently in the disciplinary practice of social work), it might look as if immigrants are mostly passive requesters and recipients of help provided by European organisations. It only takes a good look around and in the right places to realise how illusory this view is.

In 1999 Beatriz Díaz published "La ayuda invisible" (Invisible help), an extensive review and colourful picture of the ways in which residents in an immigrant neighbourhood in a European urban environment supported one another, mostly through informal networks. This book showed the wide organic repertoire of forms of individual and collective mutual aid without which making ends meet, staying in touch or keeping dignity might be impossible for people landing in a new, different, often hostile environment.

A later study published in the British Journal of Social Work, while still confined to the discipline's focus on what European institutions can do for migrants positioned as beneficiaries, did recognise that people's first and main recourse for solving problems is horizontal social networks.

Social networks provide material aid, especially important for newly arrived people, including basic goods (food, clothes, loans) and provisional housing in situations of extreme need. They also provide opportunities for social participation, allowing newcomers to discuss common problems and experiences, and to express mutual affection, understanding and trust. Interpersonal contacts are an essential source of information about the receiving society, regarding employment opportunities, legal requirements to get and maintain residence, relationships with natives, or available social, education and health services, among other relevant matters.

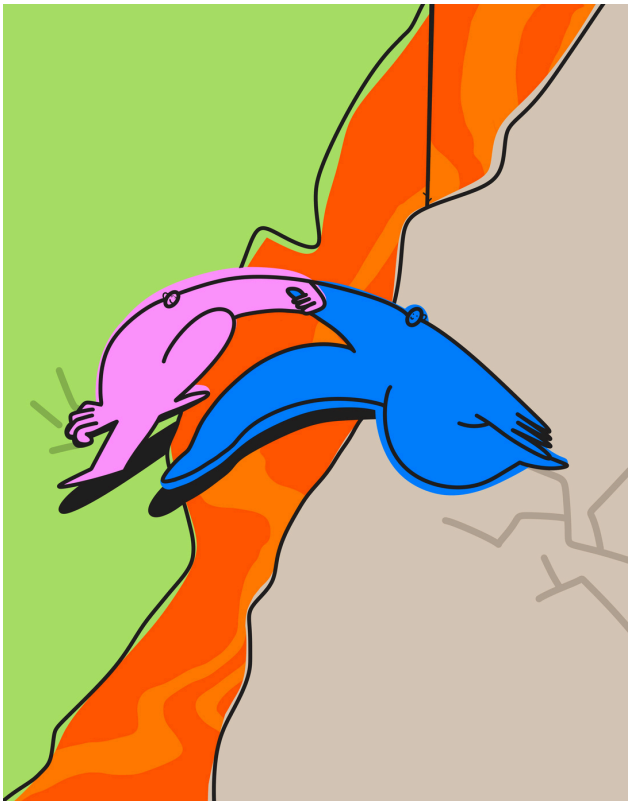


Image: @yatsenkoveta @fineacts

When we need support, we usually turn to accessible and trustworthy sources – someone who can understand our personal situation, whose help has a minimum cost and will involve no risk of stigmatisation. These characteristics define social support provided by family, friends and other members of informal social networks. The authors of this piece propose that social support 'interventions' (by social services) may consist of mediating between newcomers and the host society or reinforcing social networks and mutual aid groups – thus tacitly recognising the existence of an organic social tissue composed of that sort of relations.

Grassroots refugee support organisations (indeed, the kind that some six years ago built the foundations of Europe Must Act) are characteristically designed as networks for mutual aid which often subvert the traditional distinction between helper and helped, especially when refugee volunteers take up roles side by side with European volunteers. Characteristic examples are community centres and kitchens in Greece, solidarity responses to deportation attempts in Britain, or projects to document, report and research the border problematic which are led by refugees, or built with their equal co-participation.

An example of such initiatives is the In Loco AMIF project[18]., which includes the qualitative analysis of a large sample of interviews with newcomers across the EU, to address different dimensions of strategies for their rural inclusion. Among other issues, the analysis addresses the notion of 'trust' in the process of reception and integration of newcomers. Trust is sustained by specific, often small, acts of kindness by individuals — acts remembered in vivid detail that frequently mark turning points. While institutions are described in the aggregate, individuals are described by name: a neighbour, Lisa, who helped settle "about seven people… not as refugees, as people who have opinions" (reported by a Syrian woman, 26, Germany); a stranger at a bus stop whose two sentences helped lift a year-long depression (reported by a Bangladeshi man, 44, Portugal). These individuals become the human face of an otherwise impersonal social environment, and the trust they promote is generalised from the person to the community.

[18] Interviews collected and analysed as part of the In Loco AMIF project "Integration in Local Communities: Institutional Engagement, Rural Inclusion and Refugee-led Action Research" (1011126—AMIF-2023-TF2-AG41).

CONCLUSION

In this report, we examined how visibility and invisibility operate not as fixed opposites but as shifting, situated conditions that shape the experience of forced migration across Europe. What emerges is a pattern: invisibility is rarely incidental. It is built into legal architecture, policy design, media and institutional practice, and it tends to serve those systems more than the people caught within them.

Our findings show this clearly, yet the report also shows that invisibility is also the informal networks of mutual aid operating largely outside institutional view. This is invisibility as resilience rather than neglect, and it deserves recognition rather than mere acknowledgement.

Ultimately, addressing invisibility in migration policy is not simply a matter of better data or more monitoring; it is a matter of justice.

Europe Must Act to close the legal gaps that leave people like those in the Cyprus buffer zone without recourse, to protect young people through the transition to adulthood rather than abandoning them at its threshold, and to confront the policy structures that manufacture labour exploitation rather than only punishing it after the fact.

It is time to build migration systems that **do not require a tragedy to become visible,** because the truth at the heart of this report is that what remains unseen does not stop happening; it simply stops being addressed.



Image: Mason McCall via Pexels

About Europe Must Act

Europe Must Act (EMA) is a growing grassroots movement, bringing together volunteers and NGOs to campaign for the humane and dignified reception of refugees in Europe.

**We're volunteers and asylum and migration is a complex topic. This means we try to include a variety of opinions and approaches to a topic. We do our best to research and use our expertise accurately however, we also believe it's vital to encourage healthy discussion and stop misinformation. Therefore we encourage any feedback or constructive criticism of our work.*

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By bringing together thoughts, cases, and ideas from across Europe, breaking down complex topics and sharing evidence-based insights, we connect the dots to promote a better understanding of the challenges people on the move face, and what can be done to support them.

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