

## THE EFFECTS OF ECONOMIC CRISES ON THE SIZE AND STRUCTURE OF MIGRATOR FLOWS

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### **Abstract**

*International migration is an integral part of the global economy. Growing disparities in development, the global jobs crisis, the segmentation of labor markets, revolutions in transport and communications and a burgeoning migration industry combine to explain why there are unprecedented numbers of migrants worldwide today. International migration is a widespread phenomenon in the European Union, characterized not only by large immigration flows from outside its borders, but also by migration from one member state to another. During economic recessions generated by either the 2008-2009 economic-financial crisis or the Covid-19 pandemic, immigrants are often the most vulnerable category of people, which can lead to changes in the volume, structure and direction of international migration flows. The last two major crises at the beginning of the 21st century have had significant implications for migrants, migration and migration policies. At the same time, the very different global/European context and circumstances of the financial crisis and the health crisis determine different consequences for migrants, differentiated changes in the structure and dimensions of migratory flows, but also different compartments of migrants. The paper presents a comparative analysis of the economic and social impact of the 2008-2009 recession and the health crisis on the size, structure of migratory flows and the behavior of migrants in the European Union.*

**Keywords:** migration, immigrants, the great recession, the health crisis.

**Classification JEL:** F22, K37, O15

### **1. Introduction**

In specialized literature, crises are generally considered "turning points" that trigger both social phenomena (such as migration) and public policy reforms. Regarding migration, traditionally, economic crises are considered as opportunities to implement more restrictive immigration policies. Thus, the Great Depression of the 1920s, the Great Economic Crisis of 1929-1937 and the oil crises of the 1970s, the Great Recession of 2008-2009 or the health crisis generated by the SARS-CoV-2 virus were occasions when states implemented stronger barriers in the immigration path. The analyzes carried out by various researchers highlighted the fact that each individual crisis, depending on the conjuncture in which it took place, triggered various immigration policies, which led to changes in the structure and size of migratory flows. For example, the financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009 triggered two important transformations: migration policies evolved at a rapid pace, and migration flows took new forms (Papademetriou and Terrazas, 2009; Papademetriou et al., 2009; Cerna, 2013) , while during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic more than 108,000 international travel restrictions related to COVID were put in place by countries, territories or areas, in addition to the continued implementation of internal movement restrictions within countries. According to United Nations statistics, the pandemic has slowed the growth of the stock of international migrants by about two million by mid-2020 (which is a 27% reduction from the projected increase).

The analysis of the interdependencies between the size and structure of migration flows and crises is even more complicated when migration flows are themselves considered crises. For example, the increasing influx of migrants and asylum seekers in the summer of 2015 in some Member States was clearly framed as an "immigration crisis" by policy makers and observers alike.

Migratory flows from the European Union changed during the 2008-2009 economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, their structure and size varying differently in the two negative events that societies faced.

## **2. International migration under the impact of economic crises**

The economic crisis began in advanced economies and spread across the globe, its impact and implications being unevenly distributed geographically. This is particularly visible in the European Union: while some countries, especially those in the North, have withstood the crisis relatively well and managed to recover from the initial financial recession, others, especially those in the South, have experienced instability long-term financial crisis, high unemployment rates and a worsening of living conditions among large segments of the population.

In this context, EU citizens have developed a wide variety of strategies to respond to the crisis, such as retraining to adapt to the changing needs of the labor market, reducing household spending and not infrequently taking to the streets to protest crisis management methods by their governments (Promberger et al., 2014).

Since the beginning of the financial crisis and economic recession of 2008, it has been clear that the economic and social effects of the crisis will have a significant impact on the future configuration of international migration. First, the economic crisis had a significant impact on immigration flows. According to Eurostat statistics, the number of immigrants arriving in the EU fell significantly in the first decade of the 21st century: 857,000 immigrants were registered in 2009 compared to 1.5 million in 2007 and over two million in 2006. The Member States that were particularly strongly affected by the crisis recorded the most reductions of immigrants (Figure 1). In 2010, Germany received 278,091 fewer people than in 2008, Spain received 238,370 immigrants in 2010 compared to 2008, and in Italy the number of immigrants decreased, in the same period, by 75,856 people. France is the only member state that recorded increases in the number of immigrants during the Great Recession and post-crisis.

In Romania, which is traditionally associated with emigration, during the economic-financial crisis the emigration rate decreased significantly, but the number of immigrants increased, reaching 64,399 people in 2010 (Figure 1).

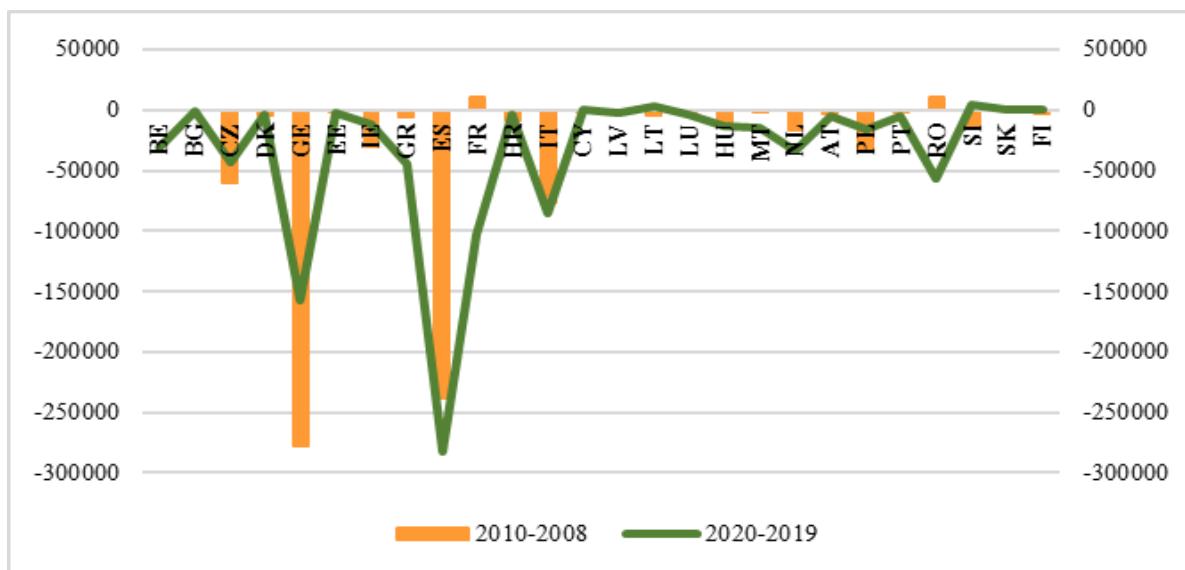
Characteristic of the 2008-2009 crisis is that the south-north migration of EU citizens increased significantly, while the east-west migration within the EU (actually a phenomenon that preceded the crisis) did not slow down significantly during the same period.

During the first year of the pandemic, more than 108,000 international travel restrictions related to Covid-19 were put in place by countries, territories or areas, in addition to the continued implementation of internal movement restrictions within countries. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a brake on international migration.

The Covid-19 crisis had a different impact on immigrants in the member states, but also a different geographical distribution compared to the Great Recession (Figure 1).

Migrants are more likely to suffer the devastating consequences of this pandemic, and the impact on them is the result of the interconnection of three crises: a health crisis whereby people on the move may not have the necessary tools to protect themselves against the virus; a socio-economic crisis that exacerbates the risks to their already precarious livelihoods; and a protection crisis that generates human rights issues and stigma.

**Figure 1** Reduction of the number of immigrants in the member states, in 2010 compared to 2008 and 2020 compared to 2019, (people)



Data source: Eurostat statistics, [MIGR\_IMM3CTB\_\_custom\_5198704]

And at the level of the regions of the world, there were changes in the structure and size of migratory flows. Thus, in the more developed regions, in 2019, international migrants represented 12.0% of their total population, while in the less developed regions, they represented 1.9% of the total population.

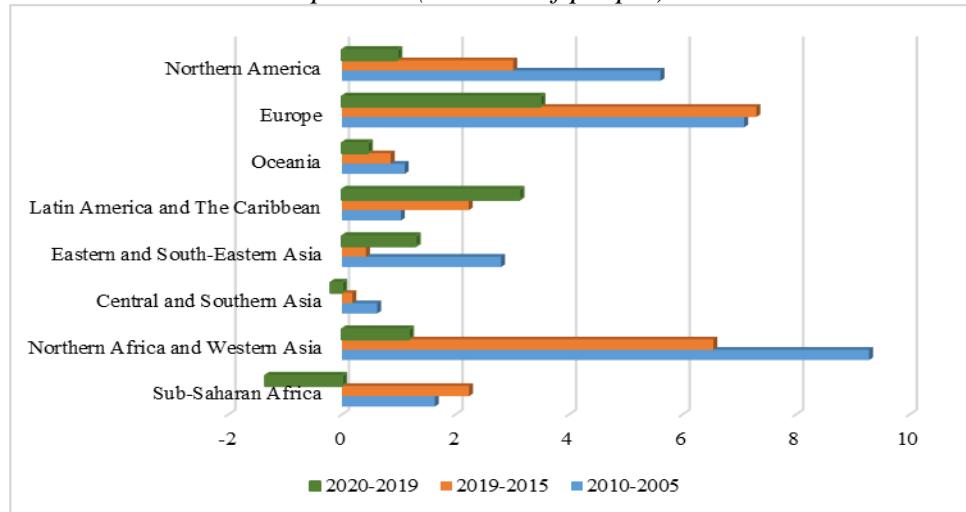
In 2019, 51.9% of the world's international migrants lived in Europe and North America (30.3% in Europe and 21.6% in North America). North Africa and West Asia hosted 49 million international migrants (17.9% of global migrants), followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (8.7%), Central and South Asia (7.23%) and East and Southeast Asia (6.74%). Latin America and the Caribbean (11.67 million) and Oceania (8.93 million) recorded the lowest number of international migrants.

The analysis of statistical data highlights the fact that between 1990 and 2020, the international stock of migrants increased worldwide by 127.6 million persons, in Europe by 33.2 million persons, in North America by 32 million migrants and by 32.2 million migrants in North Africa and West Asia. East and Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are regions that each added about 10 million international migrants, while Latin America and the Caribbean and Oceania added 7.6 and 4.6 million each. In contrast, the number of international migrants fell during the period considered by 6.7 million in Central and South Asia.

Over time, the average annual change in the number of international migrants varied by region. If in the first decade of the 21st century in Europe, North Africa and Western Asia and North America the migrant population increased by over 1 million per year, in the period 2010-2015 and as a result of the economic-financial crisis it decreased below 0.8 million/year. The exception was Sub-Saharan Africa, which in the period 2015-2010 doubled its migrant population from the period 2000-2010. By contrast, the international migrant stock decreased in Central and South Asia by 0.89 million between 2000 and 2010 and by 1.13 million between 2010 and 2015.

The period 2015-2019 is characterized by an increase in the size of migratory flows in all regions of the world, the highest values being recorded in Europe (7.3 million people) and in North Africa and West Asia (6.54 million people) (Figure 2).

**Figure 2** The absolute growth of the stock of migrants by destination region, in various time periods (millions of people)



Data source: Statistics Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

In 2020, under the conditions of the health crisis, over 124 million international migrants were registered in the five largest regional migration corridors, which represents 45.65% of the global migrant stock. The largest regional migration corridor in the world was Europe to Europe, with 44.25 million international migrants born in Europe and residing in another country in the same region (among them, a significant share was between the EU countries European). Both in the first decade and the second decade of the 21st century, the regional migration corridor between Europe and Europe increased by more than 5 million international migrants, an average annual increase of more than half a million (Table 1).

**Table 1** The number of international migrants by region of destination and origin, in 2020, (millions of people)

Destination	Origin							
	Sub-Saharan Africa	Northern Africa and Western Asia	Central and Southern Asia	Eastern and South-Eastern Asia	Latin America and the Caribbean	Oceania	Europe	Northern America
Sub- Saharan Africa	17.81	1.24	0.13	0.05	0.07	0.01	0.50	0.03
Northern Africa and Western Asia	2.26	19.15	19.09	4.38	0.68	0.12	2.60	0.17
Central and Southern Asia	0.06	0.33	11.45	1.93	0.02	0.01	4.51	0.08
Eastern and South- Eastern Asia	0.01	0.03	2.05	15.37	0.33	0.09	0.21	0.31
Latin America and the Caribbean	0.04	0.08	0.03	0.30	11.30	0.01	1.36	1.29
Oceania	0.51	0.44	1.25	2.44	0.21	1.11	2.98	0.25
Europe	5.13	13.88	11.54	3.68	5.40	0.40	44.25	1.10
Northern America	2.47	2.42	5.68	10.25	25.54	0.34	6.87	1.09

Data source: Statistics Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

The second largest migration corridor in 2020 was the corridor from Latin America and the Caribbean to North America, with a stock of 1.36 million international migrants. This regional migration corridor registered an increase of 0.9 million migrants per year between 1990 and 2000, but decreased in the first decades of the 21st century: the number of international migrants on this corridor increased by an average of 0.5 and, respectively, 0.3 million people per year.

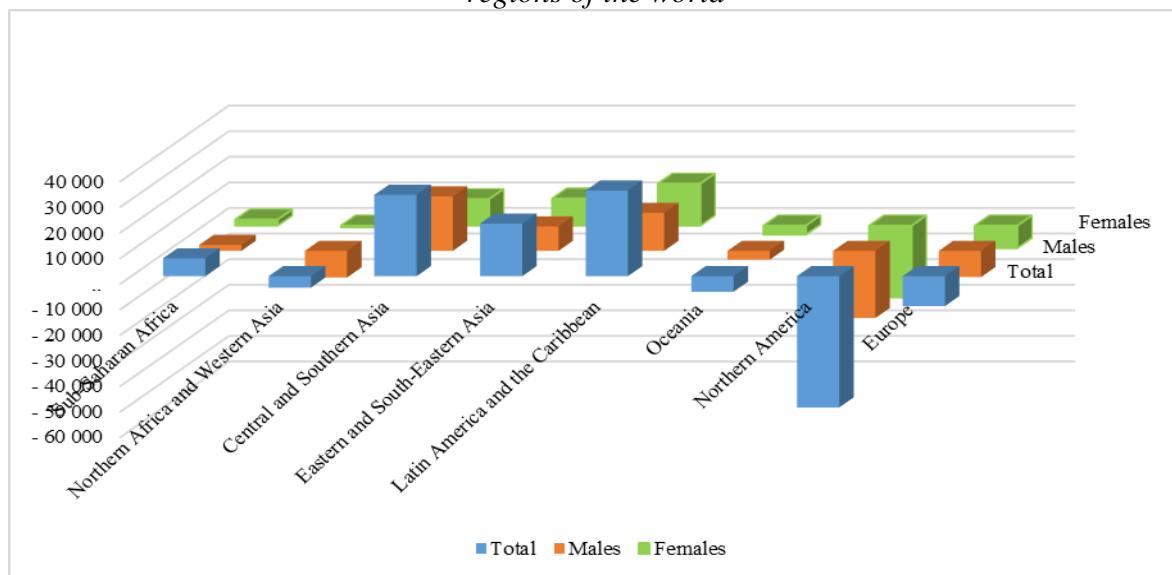
The third, fourth and fifth largest regional migration corridors were almost equal in size in 2020, with over 19 million international migrants for North Africa and West Asia to North Africa and West Asia and to Central and South Asia (Table no. 1), and with 117.81 million migrants for the corridor from Sub-Saharan Africa to Sub-Saharan Africa (Table no. 1). The number of international migrants in the North Africa and West Asia regional corridor increased by 7.5 million persons between 2010 and 2020, while the Central and South Asia corridor in North Africa and West Asia increased by 5.7 million of migrants. The number of migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to the same region then increased by 5.6 million between 2010 and 2020.

Among all regions, international migrants represented the largest share of the total population in the regions: Oceania (21.2%), North America (16%) and Europe (11%) and North Africa and West Asia (9, 4%). In the other regions, migrants represented between 0.8% and 2.2% of the total population.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the share of international migrants in the total population of the destination regions increased by 4.1 percentage points in Oceania, by 3.7 pp in North Africa and West Asia and by approximately three percentage points in Europe and North America. In the other regions, excluding Central and South Asia, the share of migrants in their total population increased by 0.2 to 0.5 percentage points. The share of international migrants in the total population fell by 0.4 percentage points in Central and South Asia, meaning that the general population grew faster than the migrant population in this region.

The Covid-19 pandemic influenced the evolution of the migration phenomenon in different ways in the regions of the world. This was due to the differences between the levels of infection of the population, the measures and restrictions adopted by the governments of the countries to reduce the spread of the virus, the national and cultural specifics, etc. The largest reductions in the number of migrants were recorded in North America and Europe (Figure 3)

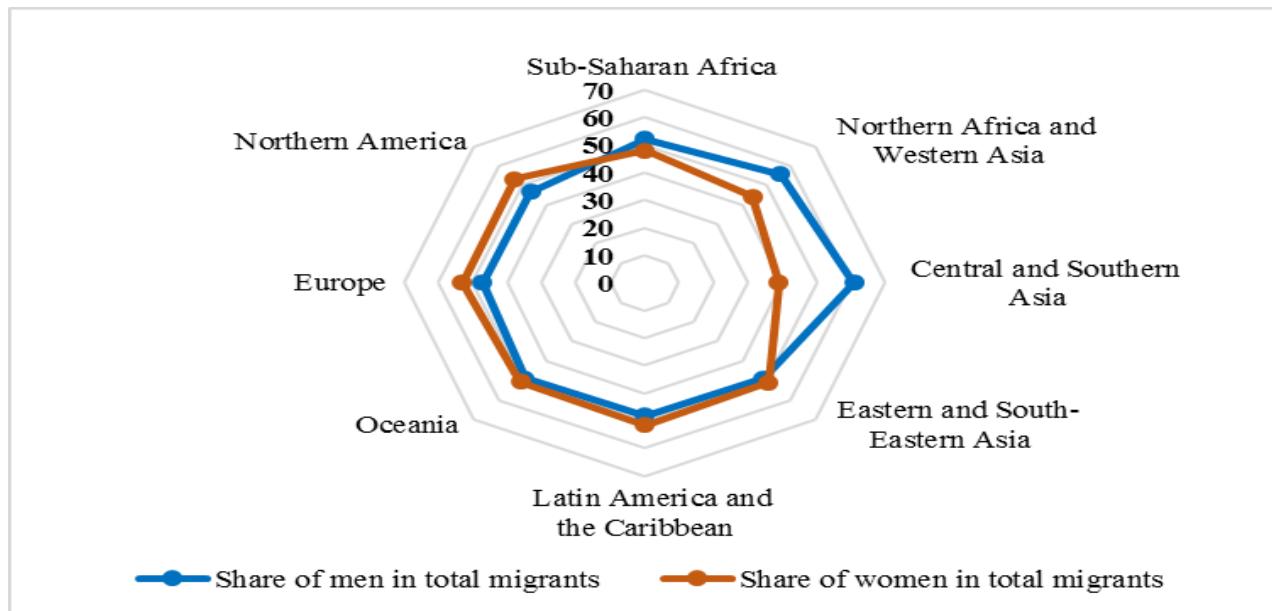
**Figure 3** The absolute increase in the number of migrants in 2020 compared to 2019, in the major regions of the world



Data source: Statistics Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

If in 2019, women represented 47.91% of all international migrants, in 2020, under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, their share increased to 48.09%. And at the level of the large regions of the world, they exceeded the number of male migrants in the more developed regions and represented less than half of the migrant population in the less developed regions (Figure 4).

**Figure 4 Share of female migrants in total international migrants, by region of destination, 2020**



Data source: Statistics Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

In the period 1990-2020, the share of women in total migrants from more developed regions varied insignificantly: from 49.3% in 1990 to 48.28% in 2019 and 48.08% in 2020. Greater variations in the share of migrant women in total migrants occurred recorded in less developed regions, where this percentage decreased from 46.99% in 1990 to 44% in 2020. This phenomenon was due to the rapid increase in the number of male migrants in North Africa and West Asia between 2000 and 2010 as a result of the high demand for migrant workers in several oil-producing countries.

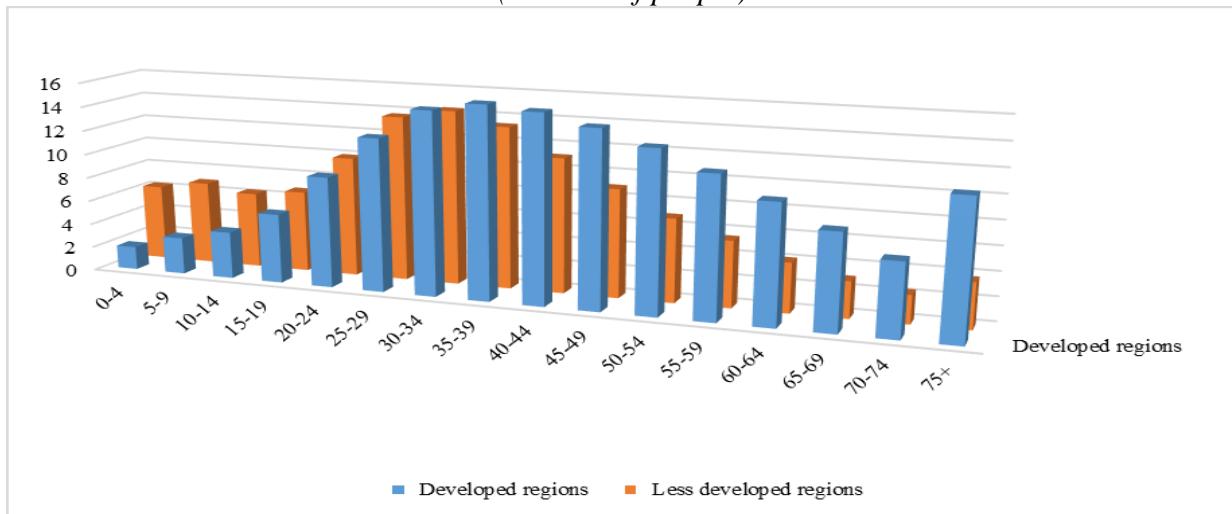
The regions where the share of women in total international migrants was higher than that of men in 2020 were Europe with 52.98% and North America with 53.29%.

In the same year, women and men provided an almost equal share of all international migrants from Oceania (50.9%), Latin America and the Caribbean (51.74%), Central and South Asia (51.03%), and East and South Asia - East (39.07%). In Sub-Saharan Africa the share of migrant women was 47.9%, and North Africa and West Asia only 44.25%.

As for the average age of migrants worldwide in 2020, it was 39.1 years, with significant variations between the developing regions of the world. Thus, in the more developed regions, the average age of migrants was 43.6 years, and in the less developed regions it was 28.5 years.

By age group, of the 246,304 million international migrants aged between 20-64, 58.7% were in more developed regions and 41.3% in less developed regions (Figure 5).

**Figure 5** Distribution of migrants by age groups, by development regions, 2020  
(millions of people)



Data source: Statistics Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

If in the period 1990-2010, the share of international migrants of working age among all migrants increased from 69% to 74%, in the period 2010-2019 this did not undergo significant variations.

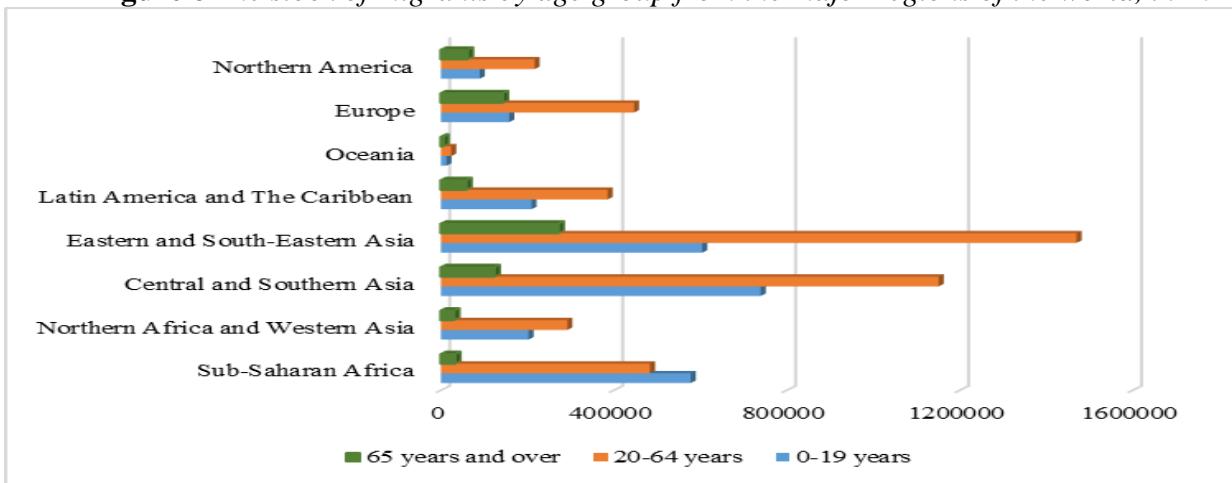
Migrants under the age of 20 represented, in 2020, 14.6% of the stock of migrants worldwide and the highest proportion of them lived in developed regions. The variation of this segment of migrants in the period 1990-2020 was only 4.6 pp (from 19% in 1990 to 14.6% in 2020).

The 24.56 million international migrants aged 65 or over represented 19% of all international migrants in more developed regions, compared to 7% in less developed regions, in 2020.

The analysis of the distribution of migrants by age group and by the major regions of the Earth, highlights the fact that in 2020, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and Central and Southern Asia had the highest share of migrants in the age categories 20-64 and 65 and over (Figure 6).

As a result of the increase in the number of international migrants in recent years, the estimates of international bodies in the field indicated that, in the more developed regions, the median age will increase from 39.1 years in 2020 to 46.8 years in 2070, and in the regions less developed the median age will increase from 29.0 years to 37.7 years.

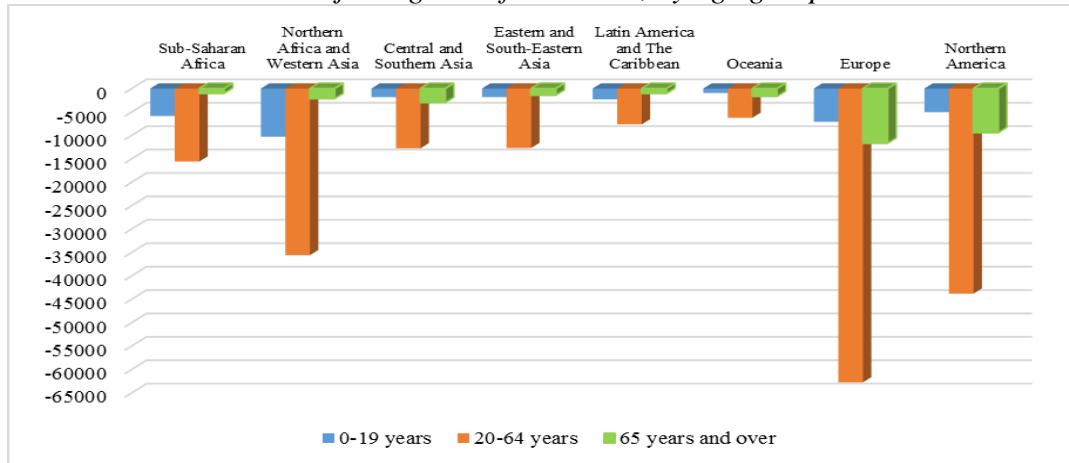
**Figure 6** The stock of migrants by age group from the major regions of the world, in 2020



Data source: Statistics Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations

As a result of the health crisis, Europe, North America and North Africa and West Asia recorded the largest reductions among migrants aged 20-64 (Figure 7). It is an age segment in which most migrants are international workers or students.

**Figure 7** The absolute increase in the stock of international migrants in 2020 compared to 2019, in the major regions of the world, by age groups



Data source: Statistics Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nat

The change in the share of the working-age population at the national and regional level is also affected by international migration. It is predicted that in 2070, four of the eight regions will be positively affected by migration by increasing the share of the working-age population (by 2.4 pp. in North America, 1.2 pp. in Oceania, 0.8 pp. in Europe and 0.5 pp. in North Africa and West Asia). The effect of net migration on the share of the working-age population will be small for the other four regions, less than 1 percentage point. But, depending on the world situation, as demonstrated by the crises at the beginning of the 21st century, the forecasts regarding the impact of regional migration on some socio-economic processes and phenomena must be reformulated.

### 3. Conclusions

Severe recessions have had a negative impact on net migration flows, although they have generally not affected long-term migration trends. Labor migration flows were more sensitive to economic changes than other forms of migration. The economic and financial crisis affected migratory flows from the member states, especially in those where the recession started earlier and where it was more extensive. In many countries, immigrants are often concentrated in industries that are more sensitive to business cycle fluctuations and have, on average, less secure contractual arrangements.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the interconnections between migration and mobility, with travel restrictions caused by the health crisis leading to unprecedented immobility around the world.

The global medical crisis had a disproportionate impact on migrants, depending on their degree of vulnerability. This is determined by several factors: the legal status in the host country, the sector of activity in which they work, the type of employment contract they managed to sign with the employer before the pandemic, the migrants' eligibility and the existing procedures for obtaining temporary support pandemic.

The Great Recession and the health crisis, due to their extent, duration, effects on economies and the policies adopted to reduce their negative impact, led to changes in the structure

and size of international migration, differentiated from one country to another and by the economic and social situation in which they take place.

And in the following decades, international migration remains a real process and may vary taking into account political and economic changes, innovative technological and social changes, the growing demographic imbalance, the effects of climate change and globalization trends.

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