

CRITICAL GLOSSARY

Extended version

A critical selection of words about migration and racialised people



Introduction to the Critical Glossary - Extended Version

This Critical Glossary - extended version brings together a selection of words, terms and expressions related to migration, racialised people and their experiences, both in European and specific national context. This Glossary is structured into **three sections** focusing on: terms taken from the legislation and legal theory, terms between definitions and self-definitions and terms to be questioned.

Each entry includes a definition and a critical note: words are not neutral, they shape our perception of reality. For this reason, it is important not only to understand the literal meaning of words, but also to be aware of how they are used, interpreted, and often misused, and the role they play in shaping our imagery. Rather than offering a list of “good” and “bad” words, this Glossary aims to provide a thoughtful - though necessarily partial - tool that encourages **critical reflection on language**.

Language is fluid, and the meaning of words is shaped by social and discursive contexts and some terms - despite their original meaning - can be stigmatising, and discriminatory or empowering and respectful. The critical approach adopted in this glossary seeks to foreground the contested nature of language by bringing attention back to the debates surrounding certain terms, encouraging reflection on discriminatory uses of these words and on alternatives that are more respectful of racialised people. **Non-discriminatory language** can be more effective: as one interviewee involved in the project observed, “We are inventing language at a pace that exceeds our ability to make it effective.” However its effectiveness can be built, challenged, and transformed by journalists, communicators and those who shape public discourse.

The Critical Glossary should, therefore, be seen as a **dialogical tool** and a starting point for questioning the words we use in everyday life and especially in media, encouraging the adoption of a language that contributes in providing **More correct Information and Less Discrimination**.

Terms taken from the legislation

This category includes words, terms, and expressions derived from laws, directives, international treaties, conventions and legal theory, accompanied by critical notes on **legal terms often used by the media and in public debate** to refer to migration, racialised people, and their experiences. The aim is to offer a clearer understanding both of the meaning of these terms and of the way in which they contribute to shaping specific narratives and imaginaries.

Definitions taken literally from legislation may include terminology that has been challenged by scientific research and by anti-racist movements. Readers are therefore invited to consult the critical notes that accompany each definition.

Asylum seeker:

A general term for any person who is seeking international protection. In some countries, it is used as a legal term referring to a person who has applied for refugee status or a complementary international protection status and has not yet received a final decision on their claim. It can also refer to a person who has not yet applied but may intend to do so or may be in need of international protection. (Source: [UNHCR](#))

Critical note: In journalistic usage, asylum seekers are sometimes generically referred to as migrants; however, this practice is inaccurate and risks obscuring the specific reasons that led the person to leave their country of origin, the specific legal status and the rights associated with it.

Citizenship:

n. This term refers to a legal status that formally defines the relationship between an individual and the state and entails specific rights, such as the right to vote, and duties (such as paying taxes). Citizenship can generally be acquired by birth, descent, or naturalization, in accordance with relevant national legislation. The Maastricht Treaty introduced European citizenship, which is automatically granted to citizens of Member States. Legal literature and movements engaged in the struggle for equality and social justice highlight the gap between formal citizenship and substantive citizenship, in which most fundamental human rights are formally recognized for citizens but remain unfulfilled. (Source: [European Commission](#))

Critical note: In international conventions and common parlance, the term nationality is often used as a synonym for citizenship, but in academic debate and activism, this overlap is questioned. In some countries, for example, the concept of nationality is related to the idea of a person's belonging to a group or community and linked to place of birth and family descent.

The nation, understood as a homogeneous entity based on presumed common roots that may be ethnic, linguistic, historical, cultural, or religious, is the foundation of the idea of nationality. The use of this term, overlapped with that of "citizenship", tends to emphasize, in the process of defining an individual's relationship with a given country, the importance of personal identity criteria linked to place of birth and/or "blood" ancestry. In public debate, this ambiguous overlap between citizenship and nationality lends itself to drawing insurmountable lines of demarcation between "national citizens" and foreigners or people of foreign origin.

Detention:

n. This term is defined at European level as the confinement of a third country citizen within a particular place, where the applicant is deprived of his or her freedom of movement. (Source: [Directive 2024/1346](#))

Critical note: According to the EU Directive 2008/115/CE detention should be an extraordinary measure, be as brief as possible and be maintained only for the time necessary to diligently carry out the repatriation procedures. But in many European countries, migrants and asylum seekers remain confined in detention centres for many months and suffer serious human rights violations. A wide civil society movement asks for the closure of detention centres both because of their inhumanity and their failure to ensure the effective execution of deportation decisions.

Detention Centre:

n. A facility where third-country nationals are confined due to administrative irregularities, such as lacking a valid residence permit, being subject to return procedures and repatriation cannot be immediately executed because the person has to be identified, or the needed carriers are not available. Applicants for international protection also can be confined in detention centres when, for example, there is a risk of escape or the suspect of instrumental protection applications to the only aim to avoid the execution of an order of repatriation.

Detention centres are typically secure, with movement in and out restricted by law, and therefore cannot be considered part of the reception system. (Source: [European Parliament](#))

Critical note: In media news and public debate, detention centres are often referred to as “reception centres”. This is incorrect, because the conditions of confinement in a detention centre are much more similar to those in a prison. Firstly, freedom of movement is suspended: detainees are not allowed to leave the facility. Secondly, detention centres are guarded by law enforcement agencies. Finally, detention centres have been conceived to ensure the enforcement of expulsion measures through forced repatriation operations. It is therefore a situation of confinement that cannot be equated with the concepts of hospitality and reception.

Reception centre:

n. A facility for receiving, processing, and attending to the immediate needs of refugees and asylum seekers upon their arrival in a country of asylum. It may provide accommodation, meals, and assistance (medical, legal, psychological, and linguistic), depending on the legal status of the person concerned and their specific needs. Reception centres are regulated by national reception policies in relation to the local asylum system. (Source: [European Parliament](#))

Critical note: The material reception of people should be only the first step of reception policies. According to a more holistic approach, applicants for international protection and refugees should be introduced to a more complex path of social and cultural relationship with the host society thanks to services of training, traineeship, job search, house hunting and cultural events. The big

dimensions of many reception centres hinder the correct relationship between operators and people hosted and cause in some cases serious human rights violations.

Refugee:

From a legal perspective, refugees are people who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of “race”, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group, have been forced to leave their country of origin and are unable or unwilling to return. Refugee status is a legal status recognised under both international law (the 1951 Geneva Convention) and European law. (Sources: [Oxford Dictionary](#); [Geneva Convention, 1951](#))

Critical note: In public debate and media coverage, this term is often used to refer to asylum seekers who have not yet been granted the right to asylum, or as a synonym for migrants in general. Conversely, in political discourse it is sometimes employed to distinguish refugees—who are seen as deserving protection—from migrants, who are portrayed as less entitled to rights. This can lead to a form of dehumanisation.

Residence permit:

It refers to any permit or authorisation issued by the authorities of a Member State, in the form provided for under that State's legislation, allowing a third country national or stateless person to reside on its territory. (Source: [Directive 2004-83-CE](#))

Critical note: In public debate, references to whether or not someone has a residence permit are often used to stigmatise or view migrant people without valid documents with suspicion. It is important to remember that it is the legislation of each country that defines the requirements and procedures for obtaining a residence permit and that in many cases migrants remain or return undocumented because of restrictive entry and residence permit policies in force in their countries of arrival. No one is born undocumented; one becomes undocumented when applying for and obtaining documents is a veritable obstacle course.

Person eligible for subsidiary protection:

It means a third country national or a stateless person who does not qualify as a refugee but in respect of whom substantial grounds have been shown for believing that the person concerned, if returned to his or her country of origin, or in the case of a stateless person, to his or her country of former habitual residence, would face a real risk of suffering serious harm and is unable, or, owing to such risk, unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country. (Source: [Council Directive 2004/83/EC](#))

Critical note: Subsidiary protection status entitles the holder to a renewable residence permit, access to employment, education, social assistance and healthcare, and the right to apply for a travel document allowing them to travel abroad. Within another EU country, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection may travel as tourists for up to 90 days in any six-month period.

Unaccompanied minor:

This term refers to a minor who arrives on the territory of the Member States unaccompanied by an adult responsible for him or her, whether by the law or practice of the Member State concerned, and for as long as that minor is not effectively taken into the care of such an adult. It includes a minor who is left unaccompanied after he or she has entered the territory of the Member States. (Source: [Directive 2024/1346](#))

Critical note: UNHCR prefers to refer to “unaccompanied child” and provides a different definition that seems to be more focused on the life conditions of the person concerned, referring to who has been separated from both parents and other relatives and is not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so. At the present, in many European countries, the expression “unaccompanied foreign minor” is used in a negative way to stigmatise children from non-EU countries as potential criminals.

Third-country national:

It means any person who is not a citizen of the European Union. (Source: [Directive 2003/109/EC](#))

Critical note: This term refers to the legal status of a person who is a citizen of a country in Asia, Africa, Oceania or the Americas, so it is correct in legal contexts and when addressing migration policies. However, it should be kept in mind that it reflects a Eurocentric perspective, implying a hierarchical ordering in which European countries are positioned as “first” or “second”, while other regions - particularly Asia and Africa - are framed as “third”. Secondly, the term “national” is used as a synonym for citizen: this use is questioned by the antiracist movements in some countries (Please see the voice “citizenship”).

Terms between definitions and self-definitions

This category includes words, terms, and expressions that recur in the representation and self-definition of racialised people. Most of the terms presented here are **used by groups to define themselves from a social and/or political point of view**. However, it is important to note that the selected words are **not universally shared** and that their meaning may vary over time and across context.

The definition of these entries is largely based on academic, journalistic, and activist sources, with particular attention to the point of view of people with a migrant background or who are racialised.

The critical notes that accompany them aim to concisely summarize the debate concerning their use.

The aim is to offer examples of a lexicon that makes it possible to avoid the use of dehumanising and stigmatising terms. However, considering that language and the meaning with which words are used can change over time, it would be good practice, where possible, to ask the people concerned how they wish to be defined.

Afrodescendant:

n./adj A person whose ancestors came from Africa, encompassing those from the historical African diaspora (forcibly taken during slavery), or with an African migrant background. The term recognises a common heritage shaped not only by the legacies of slavery and colonialism, but also by practices of care, resistance, and collective struggle against ongoing racism, which contribute to a shared political sense of belonging. (Source: [Roberto Rojas Dávila, “Afro-descendants as subjects of rights in International Human Rights law”, SUR 28 \(2018\), accessed December 4, 2025](#))

Critical note: Originally referring to the historical African diaspora, and in UN definitions mainly to descendants of the transatlantic slave trade, the term Afro-descendant is now also used from a critical social perspective - particularly under the influence of Pan-African theories - for people with African migration backgrounds. In both cases this term describes those who experience specific forms of systemic discrimination and marginalisation due to this shared history, though they live globally and identify with diverse cultures and nations. It refers to geographical and cultural origins in African countries, not skin colour, and can include non-black racialised people from Africa (e.g., Arab and Imazighen).

Desi:

n. Derived from the Sanskrit *deśa* (meaning “country” or “homeland”), it is a term of self identification of people from the South Asian Subcontinent, particularly India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The term is commonly used in diasporic contexts to express shared reference points, histories, and social experiences, without being defined by national borders drawn by colonialism or implying a single nationality, religion, or homogeneous identity. (Source: [Anouck Carsignol, 2014](#))

Critical note: Despite being widely used within the South Asian diaspora, the political implications of the term remain contested. Unlike the term “South Asian”, it does not initially carry a left-leaning or explicitly political positioning, nor does it directly reflect the Pan–South Asian movement. Today, the term is undergoing processes of politicisation, as it is increasingly used to articulate shared experiences of marginalisation, even as its meanings remain fluid and contested. It is nevertheless often considered a preferred term, as it can describe a sense of belonging without implying nationality, religion, skin colour (as in expressions such as “brown people”), or ethnicity.

Migrant person:

In the global context, a person who moves away from their place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, voluntarily or involuntarily, and for a variety of reasons. (Sources: [IOM Glossary](#))

Critical note: The term is commonly used as a noun (“migrant”) rather than as an adjective modifying “person”. It gained prominence in activist contexts as it foregrounds people’s perspective in the act of migrating, rather than the viewpoint of the receiving country implied by terms such as “immigrant”. However, when used as a noun, the term can reduce individuals to their migration status, contributing to processes of stigmatisation and dehumanisation. For this reason, the use of “migrant” as an adjective (e.g. *migrant person*) is encouraged, and more specific legal or policy terms should be preferred where greater precision is needed.

Person with a migrant background:

A person who has migrated to their current country of residence, who previously held a different citizenship from that country, or who was born in the country of residence to at least one parent who migrated there. The term is mainly used in statistical and policy contexts to describe individuals whose life trajectories or family histories are linked to migration. (Source: [European Migration Network Glossary](#))

Critical note: This term is used not only to describe people who have experienced migration in their own or their family history, but also to highlight how migration can be socially “inherited”, often in a stigmatising way. It questions the idea of “being a migrant” as an identity label for people who are already settled or born in a given context, by foregrounding the person and treating migration as a background rather than a defining characteristic. This contributes to shift attention from presumed foreignness to structural conditions shaping belonging and exclusion.

Racialised:

adj. It refers to a person, a group, or a population that is socially constructed as a “race”, meaning that characteristics, stereotypes, and positions of power or disadvantage are ascribed to them not because race exists biologically, but because society produces it as a category. (Source: F. Fanon, ‘Peau noire, masques blancs’, 1952)

Critical note: The term is gradually gaining ground in the media and is preferred to expressions such as “ethnic minority” or “person of colour” because it shifts the focus from identity to process, highlights relations of power and historical context, and avoids implying that “race” is an inherent or intrinsic characteristic.

Terms to be questioned

This category includes words, terms, and expressions whose meaning **may contribute to stigmatisation, reproduction of power dynamics, dehumanisation, or perpetuation of Eurocentric perspectives.** This terminology is often used in the media and in public discourse and presented as neutral or technical. However, the terms selected here are the subject of a debate that is developing critically from anti-racist and decolonial perspectives.

The definitions are based on academic sources and on reflections currently taking place within the anti-racist movement, and the critical notes that accompany them seek to take these into account and to suggest alternative terms, where appropriate.

This section is not intended to be prescriptive, but rather to raise awareness among those who work in the world of information and social communication about the importance of the language we use and the words we choose, offering points for reflection on the debate on non-discriminatory language, a debate in which the point of view of racialized people is central.

Illegal:

n. When used in relation to migration, it refers to a person whose condition or experience of entry, stay, or work in a country does not comply with the immigration regulations in force. It describes an administrative or legal condition, not a personal characteristic or identity. (Source: Oxford Dictionary)

Critical note: This term is commonly used as a noun rather than as an adjective, illustrating how the nominalisation of adjectives often contributes to processes of stigmatisation and dehumanisation. Defining a person as “illegal” creates a direct association between a presumed identity and criminality, particularly in the context of migration. The term, even when used as an adjective, frames migration as inherently criminal and reinforces discriminatory and racist narratives targeting people with a migrant background.

Inclusion:

n. Inclusion refers to the process and practice through which institutions, policymakers, and dominant social groups ensure that individuals and groups, particularly those historically marginalised or excluded, can fully participate in social, economic, political, and cultural life. (Source: [UN](#))

Critical note: Although this term is commonly considered more neutral than “integration” and is widely used in policies on accessibility and equal opportunity, it can still convey a power dynamic by assuming the perspective of the dominant group. For this reason, it is preferable to shift the focus away from the act of “including” people and towards the structural barriers that prevent certain groups from having equal opportunities, using concepts such as substantive equality and accessibility.

Integration:

Soc. *n.* (Etymology: Latin integrātiōn-em, in Latin only in sense “renewal, restoration to wholeness”) The process of bringing into equal membership of a common society those groups or persons previously discriminated against on racist or other grounds. (Source: [Oxford Dictionary](#))

Critical note: Despite its widespread use in reception policies, this term implies a power dynamic in which migrant groups are expected to make a unilateral effort to adapt to the host society, whose perspective remains dominant, even though processes of settlement, participation, and belonging primarily concern the migrants themselves.

Irregular:

n. In a similar way to “illegal”, this term in the field of migration refers to a person whose condition or experience of entry or stay in a country is not foreseen or regulated by migration policies, law or authorisation. It describes an administrative and often temporary legal situation that can change during the course of the person’s journey or period of stay in a country. (Source: IOM, [Lena Näre, Letizia Palumbo, Paula Merikoski, Sabrina Marchetti; I-Claim Comparative Report, 2024](#))

Critical note: The term is commonly used both as a noun and as an adjective referring to migration or migrants. Although it is often considered more neutral than “illegal”, its use—especially as a noun—may still contribute to stigmatising representations. It is frequently employed in narratives that associate migration with crime, thereby obscuring the administrative nature of the condition it describes and border hierarchy.

Middle East:

n. This term describes the region that includes the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, the Levant (Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine), and Turkey. It became commonly used by Western European nations in the early 20th century, replacing the term “Near East” (both in contrast to the “Far East”). Today it is primarily used in geopolitical contexts, and the term is sometimes also applied to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and parts of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan), as well as Azerbaijan, a Muslim-majority country in Transcaucasia. (Source: [Britannica](#))

Critical note: Although widely used in journalism and geopolitical discourse, this term has always been controversial due to its Eurocentric perspective. Arab and Muslim people and countries are often represented through a western gaze, which can reinforce stigmatisation and Islamophobic narratives. It is therefore important to use more neutral or precise terms - such as West Asia or North Africa - that avoid reproducing the purely Western perspective and narrative power dynamics implicit in the expression “Middle East”.

Minority:

n. A group that is characterised by its relative powerlessness compared to a dominant majority group, which often holds social, economic, and political power. Despite the term can refer to groups usually numerically smaller than the majority population of a State or region, in this context minority status does not necessarily correlate to demography, but more on power distribution. (Sources: [Britannica](#), Vickerman, Milton D.,2024, EMN)

Critical note: Despite its widespread use, the term contributes to confirming existing power dynamics rather than questioning them, as it assumes the viewpoint of the socially dominant group. At the same time, it tends to homogenise diverse groups, reinforcing processes of stigmatisation and victimisation. To give greater agency to those concerned, it is preferable to use terms that reflect how groups define themselves, such as “Roma people” or “Afrodescendant people”.

“Race”:

n. “Race” is a social construct historically shaped by oppression, slavery, and conquest. It divides people into hierarchical groups based on perceived physical differences, social factors, and cultural backgrounds. It has no biological basis: the genetic differences among these racialised groups are minimal and inconsistent, making such classifications invalid for scientific or medical purposes.

(Source: Duster, 2009; Cosmides, 2003; [NHGRI](#))

Critical note: This term has a controversial history. It was originally used within biological frameworks to categorise human beings into so-called “races”, but it is now widely recognised as a social construct with no scientific basis. Nevertheless, the history associated with the word “race” still carries the idea that certain human differences can be connected to identity, even when these differences are apparently used as grounds for discriminatory practices. It is important to remember that phenomena such as racism and discrimination are rooted in structural, systemic, and cultural factors, rather than in inherent human characteristics, and that such categorisations are always shaped by power dynamics. For this reason, the use of the term “racialisation” is encouraged in place of “race”.