25 YEARS

For undocumented people,
for social justice

PICUM



The origins (1996-2000)

From a desk to a European network (2000-2010)

Cities, Europe, the world (2011-2019)

Everything, everywhere, all at once (2020-2026)

Looking ahead



25 Years of PICUM

Today, PICUM is a network of more than 150 organisations across 34 countries in Europe and beyond. It is a recognised centre of expertise on irregular migration and the human rights of undocumented people, with its analysis and recommendations informing discussions in Brussels, European capitals, at the United Nations and other international institutions. Its perspectives regularly feature in international press agencies and leading European and national media outlets.

But PICUM's journey began on a much smaller scale.



As long as nation-states use border enforcement as a political tool, an independent, fearless collective voice will be required to bring humanity to our societies, political arenas and conscience. PICUM's mission isn't just for the present; it is a long-term fight for the future of human dignity.

- Magda Faltova, Association for Integration and Migration (Czechia)

The origins

1996 – 2000

Civil society had long been supporting undocumented people. There were churches and religious organisations, small charities and grassroots groups who helped people navigate bureaucracies and access health care and other basic social rights. But there was no exchange of experience, no centre for developing expertise, no systematic contact with European institutions and decision-makers who were dealing with migration issues.

In the meantime, the EU was setting the foundations of its own migration policies. In 1997, for the first time, the Amsterdam Treaty gave the EU competence to develop common EU policies on migration and asylum. Shortly after, during the 1999 European Council meeting in Tampere, Finland, EU leaders established an Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, where the "fight against irregular migration" became one of the key pillars of the new common immigration and asylum policy.

In this context, in the mid 1990s, two small Flemish charities – Medisch Steunpunt (later Medimmigrant) and Steunpunt Mensen Zonder Papieren (Support Centre for Undocumented People) – started meeting with similar organisations in The Netherlands and in Germany to exchange experiences and discuss how they could build a European grassroots initiative focused on the rights of undocumented migrants.

At the time, undocumented people were often described as "fake asylum seekers." In reality, as today, many were fleeing wars, while others were seeking work - often, they were doing both. In the late 1990s, many undocumented people came from countries in Central and Eastern Europe (which were not yet part of the EU), the conflict-ridden Balkans, and countries which had been European colonies in past or recent history.

By 1998, a small group of people representing six civil society organisations came together from Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany in a loose network to focus specifically on people being left out of protection and basic social rights. The PICUM initiative was born.

↓ PICUM's inaugural board members and coordinator, 2001



Pieter Muller
Chair



Didier Vanderslycke
Treasurer



Hildegard Grosse
Board member



Dominique Van Huijstee
Board member



Ralf Rothenbusch
Board member



Nele Verbruggen
Coordinator

From a desk to a European network

2000 – 2010

In 2000, several Dutch and Belgian foundations provide this fledgling initiative with the necessary funds to employ a full-time coordinator and rent a small office near Brussels North Station. The official registration as a Belgian non-profit organisation takes place at the end of 2001. By the end of its first year, PICUM already counts 15 members from Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK, including several international NGOs.

From the outset, PICUM's work is rooted in the international human rights framework and in the moral belief that everyone is entitled to a dignified life, regardless of their residence status. This vision immediately shapes the organisation's first activities.

In its first international activity in Brussels, PICUM organises a seminar bringing together civil society organisations and medical experts from Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and the UK to discuss barriers to health care and develop recommendations for policy makers, medical professionals and NGOs. From this moment, health professionals become key allies in PICUM's efforts to expand access to essential services for undocumented people.

By contrast, EU migration law soon pivots decisively towards enforcement. In 2002, the Council adopts the "**Facilitation Directive**" establishing measures to criminalise the facilitation of unauthorised entry, transit and residence – and putting the solidarity work of countless civil society groups at risk.

It's in this context that PICUM decides to map initiatives providing assistance to undocumented migrants across the EU, to show the extent of solidarity across European societies - and how dangerous and morally wrong criminalisation would be. The findings are published in the three-part series "**Books of Solidarity**". Carried out in ten EU member states from 2001 to 2004, this project enabled PICUM to expand its network towards Northern, Southern and Central Europe.

In the meantime, PICUM starts publishing the first and only European newsletter exclusively dedicated to undocumented people and the policies that affect them. In 2003, the newsletter was sent to around 700 subscribers. Today, PICUM's monthly newsletter *The Migration Papers* counts over 24,000 readers.

In these first years, PICUM also expands its work to rights and working conditions of **undocumented migrant workers**. In 2003, its first European conference on undocumented migrant workers at the European Parliament brings together nearly 200 representatives of civil society, trade unions, research institutes and policy makers from 20 countries. Following that event, PICUM publishes a toolkit of strategies to challenge exploitation and abuse, which will be used by undocumented workers, migrant organisations and trade unions across the world.



2002 General Assembly
15 member organisations

2026 General Assembly
155 member organisations



When the European Commission proposes the "**Employers' Sanctions Directive**" in 2007, foreseeing minimum sanctions against those who employ undocumented workers, PICUM establishes its first working group on fair working conditions to promote approaches to irregular work that are based on rights instead of punishment.

PICUM quickly broadens its programme of research and advocacy to housing, access to justice, undocumented children, and the gender dimension of migration policies and trends. Publications and events on all these areas multiply. Between 2007 and 2009, PICUM develops dedicated work on the situation of undocumented children, highlighting their particular vulnerability as children, migrants and people without secure residence status, while building connections among local actors supporting them and their families. At the same time, PICUM begins integrating a gender perspective across its work, recognising how migration policies and practices affect women and men differently.



Being part of PICUM means knowing that we are not alone in the struggle for dignity, justice, and human rights for undocumented migrants.

– Virginia Wangare Greiner, Maisha (Germany)

This growing body of research increasingly informs policy change: PICUM's analysis of undocumented migrants' legal entitlements to healthcare in 11 EU member states becomes a key resource for health professionals and civil society organisations in Sweden, contributing to the adoption of a new law in 2013 expanding access to care for undocumented people. As PICUM expands its work, the EU institutional landscape is also changing in ways that profoundly shape migration governance and the debate around migrants' rights – sometimes in opposite directions. On the one hand, in 2004, the EU creates **Frontex**, an agency tasked with the surveillance of EU borders. Over the years, Frontex will become the richest and most powerful (with the biggest budget) of all EU agencies, while facing multiple accusations of complicity in human rights violations at borders. This growing emphasis on border control is reinforced in 2008 with the adoption of the "Returns Directive", the first EU instrument establishing common rules on the detention and deportation of undocumented people.

On the other hand, the EU sets up the **Fundamental Rights Agency** (FRA) in 2007 with the aim of providing independent, evidence-based advice on fundamental rights. FRA will soon start looking into the rights of undocumented people: its first dedicated report, which PICUM contributes to with consultations and research, will be published in 2011.

The 2000s are also the decade in which **PICUM's work goes global**.

In 2006, the United Nations' General Assembly holds the first ever high-level event devoted exclusively to the issue of international migration and its linkages with development. In parallel, world governments establish the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) as an intergovernmental forum to bring forward these discussions every year.

International civil society also starts to meet at the margins of the Forum to raise attention to human rights and developmental issues. PICUM hosts the 2007 "**People's Global Action on Migration, Development, and Human Rights**" in Brussels, which is organised by Migrants Rights International, the International Catholic Migration Commission and December 18, and attended by nearly 200 participants from Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America, Africa and the Middle East.

In 2008, PICUM joins an international consortium of leading universities and research institutes to embark in an almost impossible task: estimating how many undocumented people live in the EU. The **Clandestino project**, which puts this number between 1.8 and 3 million, will become the leading study of its kind for academia, civil society, newsrooms, and public institutions across Europe.

By the end of its first decade, PICUM has grown from a small network of frontline organisations working initially on health care and criminalisation, into a European and international network of over 100 members, challenging harmful migration policies, labour exploitation, gender inequalities and violations of child rights through research, advocacy and frontline expertise.

Cities, Europe, the world

2011 – 2019

The second decade of PICUM's existence marks a new phase in the organisation's development: from a growing European network of frontline organisations into an established actor shaping migration and human rights debates at European and global level. In 2011, PICUM receives its first three-year operating grant from the European Commission's PROGRESS programme, providing important stability and enabling the organisation to substantially strengthen its network. Its Annual General Assembly and International Workshop bring together around 100 member organisations, while thematic working groups create new spaces for members to exchange expertise, coordinate advocacy and develop joint strategies.

In 2012, PICUM's strategic advocacy and members' engagement contribute to an important achievement in the negotiations on the EU Victims' Rights Directive. The final text explicitly recognises undocumented people among those protected under the Directive, and creates new obligations for EU member states to address legal and practical barriers preventing undocumented victims of crime from accessing protection, support and justice.

Alongside its policy advocacy, PICUM increasingly recognises the importance of shaping public narratives around undocumented migration. In 2012, it launches ***Undocumentary***, an interactive web documentary exploring the daily realities of undocumented migrants living in Europe. Developed through research and filming across seven cities in seven European countries - Almería (Spain), Nicosia (Cyprus), Milan (Italy), Paris (France), Amsterdam (the Netherlands), Brussels (Belgium) and Gothenburg (Sweden) - the project combines the personal stories of undocumented migrants with the perspectives of doctors, teachers, social workers, local authorities and civil society organisations supporting them. Through videos and testimonies, ***Undocumentary*** complements PICUM's policy work with a human-centred approach to changing perceptions and challenging stereotypes.

PICUM's work on narratives continues to develop in the following years. In 2014, it launches the ***Words Matter*** campaign, highlighting how language shapes perceptions, policies and practices towards migrants. The campaign calls on institutions, media and public authorities to move away from dehumanising terms such as "illegal migrant" and instead adopt language that reflects their rights and dignity. Through advocacy, guidance materials and engagement with journalists, policy makers and civil society organisations, *Words Matter* becomes an important tool in PICUM's efforts to promote more accurate and rights-based discussions on undocumented migration. The campaign receives support from prominent human rights and academic figures, including Morten Kjaerum, Director of the EU


WORDS! MATTER!
IRREGULARES
NO ILEGALES!


WORDS! MATTER!


WHY NOT 'ILLEGAL'?


WORDS! MATTER!




WORDS! MATTER!
IRREGULARES
NO ILEGALES!


WORDS! MATTER!


MENSEN
zonder wettig
VERBLIJF,
NIET ILLEGAAL


tanpa izin
tinggal
BUKAN
ILLEGAL

> PICUM is a direct bridge between grassroots work [...] and the places where European and global migration policies are designed.
>
> – Vladimir Paspuel Revelo, Asociación Rumiñahui (Spain)

Agency for Fundamental Rights; Anne Brasseur, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; and Aviva Chomsky, Professor of History and author of *Undocumented, How Immigration Became Illegal*.

During this period, PICUM also develops one of its most influential advocacy concepts: the establishment of "**firewalls**" between public services and immigration enforcement. Building on years of work on access to healthcare, education, justice and labour rights, PICUM argues that undocumented people must be able to access essential services, report exploitation and seek protection without fear that their personal data will be shared for immigration control purposes. The firewall approach demonstrates that protecting undocumented people's fundamental rights is not only a legal obligation but also essential for effective public health systems, safe workplaces and access to justice. Through research, advocacy and coalition-building, the concept gains increasing recognition among European institutions, United Nations bodies and civil society organisations.

The political context in Europe becomes increasingly challenging in the middle of the decade, as the arrival of large numbers of people fleeing war, persecution and poverty in 2015 brings migration to the centre of public and political debate. Despite initial moments of solidarity and welcome - most famously captured in German Chancellor Angela Merkel's statement "Wir schaffen das" ("We can do it") - European responses increasingly shift towards border control, externalisation and deterrence, including through the **2016 EU-Turkey deal**. In this context, PICUM continues to highlight the human rights consequences of restrictive migration policies, drawing on the experiences of its members to advocate for access to rights, alternatives to detention and protection for people regardless of their residence status.

At the same time, PICUM expands its efforts to ensure that undocumented migrants themselves are involved in shaping advocacy and public debate. In 2017, it organises its **first youth exchange** meeting in Paris, bringing together 23 young migrant activists aged between 16 and 24 from diverse backgrounds and countries of origin, alongside support workers. The exchange provides a space for young migrants - including undocumented youth - to share experiences of activism and advocacy, build connections and strengthen their participation in movements defending migrant rights. The exchange marks the beginning of a more consistent effort by PICUM to involve undocumented and migrant youth in its advocacy. In the years that follow, PICUM will organise further youth-focused activities, consultations and capacity-building opportunities, creating spaces where young migrants can exchange experiences, develop advocacy strategies and contribute directly to debates on the rights of undocumented children and young people.

In this decade, PICUM also strengthens and expands its work and connections at both the local and global levels.



Migrant Youth Exchange, September 2017 →

On the local level, PICUM increasingly recognises that **cities** are often at the forefront of responding to the realities of undocumented migration, regardless of national immigration policies. Through research, dialogue and peer learning, PICUM documents how municipalities across Europe develop practical approaches to uphold residents' fundamental rights while promoting social inclusion and public health. This work culminates in the launch of the *Cities of Rights* initiative in 2017, bringing together local authorities, civil society organisations and researchers to exchange practices on ensuring access to services regardless of migration status. By highlighting innovative local approaches - from access to healthcare and education to firewalls separating public services from immigration enforcement - PICUM helps position cities as key actors in protecting the rights of undocumented people.

On the global level, PICUM plays an active role in the negotiations leading to the adoption of the United Nations **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration** in 2018. Throughout the six rounds of negotiations, PICUM holds more than 50 bilateral and multilateral meetings with government representatives and works alongside civil society partners to ensure that the rights and realities of undocumented migrants are reflected in the final text. The organisation contributes to securing recognition of the importance of access to basic services, labour rights and protection from exploitation for migrants regardless of status.

By the end of its second decade, PICUM has established itself as a key voice in European and global debates on migration and human rights, and developed new ways of advancing rights, by changing narratives, building alliances with cities and international actors, and ensuring that undocumented people themselves participate in shaping advocacy. These foundations will prove essential as the organisation enters the challenges and multiple crises of the 2020s.

PICUM Director Michele LeVoy speaking with former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and delivering key recommendations to over 900 governments and civil society representatives, May 2014
©Milka Isinta (left) and ©ICMC (centre)

↓





PICUM and Migrants Rights International met with the UN Committee on Migrant Workers in 2012 to assist with General Comment No. 2 on undocumented migrant workers.

↓





For us, PICUM represents a beacon of participation, democracy, and social and political commitment to the human rights of migrants. It is a bulwark against racism, hatred, and barbarism.

- Antonia Avalos, Mujeres Supervivientes (Spain)

PICUM is much more than a network – it is a space for solidarity, mutual support and collective action.

- Right to Protection (Ukraine)



Everything, everywhere, all at once

2020–2026

The first half of the 2020s unfolds against a backdrop of overlapping crises and profound political change. The COVID-19 pandemic, the killing of George Floyd and Europe's reckoning with racial justice, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the rapid expansion of digital technologies in migration governance and a growing political shift towards the far right all reshape the environment in which PICUM works.

The **COVID-19** pandemic exposes with unprecedented clarity the structural inequalities experienced by undocumented migrants across Europe. As countries introduce lockdowns and emergency public health measures, many undocumented migrants continue to perform essential work in sectors such as agriculture, food production, cleaning, domestic work and care, while facing barriers to accessing healthcare, social protection, vaccination campaigns, housing assistance and income support. Drawing on the experiences of its members, PICUM rapidly adapts its advocacy to document these realities and provide recommendations for more inclusive pandemic responses. Its first overview of countries' policies on access to COVID-19 vaccines for undocumented people becomes a key resource for journalists, civil society organisations, health professionals and policy makers advocating for equitable access.



The same year, the killing of **George Floyd** in the United States and the worldwide mobilisation against racial injustice bring renewed attention to systemic racism and discrimination. As the European Union adopts its first Anti-Racism Action Plan in 2020, PICUM deepens its work at the intersection of migration, racism and human rights. While the Action Plan fails to recognise and address these linkages, PICUM strengthens its collaboration with anti-racist organisations and develops analysis highlighting how migration governance is rooted in colonialism and systemic racism, and how immigration enforcement today disproportionately affects racialised communities.

2020 is also the year when European migration policy enters a period of major reform. From its proposal in September 2020 to its final adoption at the end of 2024, the **Pact on Migration and Asylum** introduces a comprehensive overhaul of EU migration rules. Throughout the negotiations, PICUM analyses the proposals from the perspective of undocumented migrants and frontline organisations, denouncing how the Pact will lead to more detention, lower safeguards, and restricted access to residence permits outside asylum procedures.



Since the early 2020s, PICUM has become a **leading source** of analysis and commentary on EU migration policies and is regularly quoted on international press agencies like Associated Press, Agence France Press and Reuters, European media such as Euronews, EU Observer, Euractiv and Politico Europe, as well as top-tier national newspapers such as El Pais, Le Monde, Le Soir, The Guardian and many others.

←PICUM's Director on Euronews' TV show Brussels, My Love in 2023.

Digital technologies become ever more pervasive in migration control. As the EU expands interoperable migration databases and systems for sharing migrants' personal data, PICUM warns that large-scale data collection and information exchange risk undermining privacy, equality and access to rights, while reinforcing existing forms of discrimination in immigration enforcement. Working alongside digital rights organisations, PICUM develops resources and analysis showing how these systems affect undocumented people in practice, including by creating barriers to accessing essential services and increasing surveillance of racialised communities. This collaboration grows over the following years as digitalisation becomes an increasingly central feature of EU migration governance, particularly during negotiations on the **AI Act**, the world's first comprehensive framework regulating artificial intelligence. PICUM joins the *Protect Not Surveil* coalition in calling for stronger fundamental rights safeguards, warning that the final legislation leaves significant loopholes for AI systems used in law enforcement, migration control and national security, further entrenching discriminatory surveillance practices and inequalities.

Russia's full-scale invasion of **Ukraine** in February 2022 once again transforms Europe's migration landscape. PICUM welcomes the EU's unprecedented decision to activate the Temporary Protection Directive, demonstrating that rapid, coordinated and rights-based responses to displacement are both possible and effective. While acknowledging the remarkable mobilisation of governments in support of people displaced from Ukraine, PICUM denounces Europe's double standards experienced by racialised people fleeing the same conflict, as well as those escaping other wars and situations of danger. At the same time, it advocates against new restrictions to temporary protection for people fleeing the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Throughout this period, PICUM also intensifies its longstanding work on the **criminalisation of migration and solidarity**. Building on more than two decades of



> There is no competition when it comes to raising the voice of undocumented migrants at the EU level.
>
> – Josefine Johansson, Trade Union center for undocumented migrants (Sweden)

advocacy following the 2002 Facilitation Directive and its revision started in 2023, the organisation publishes annual reports documenting cases in which migrants, humanitarian organisations and ordinary citizens face arrests or prosecution for acts of solidarity. These reports reveal a continuing pattern of criminalisation across Europe and become an important evidence base for European institutions, journalists, researchers and civil society organisations advocating for the protection of migration and solidarity from criminalisation.

In 2025, the European Commission proposes a new **Return Regulation** to replace the 2008 Return Directive and escalate deportations across the EU. The proposal makes deportation the default response for people without residence status, expands immigration detention - including for children - and lowers safeguards in return procedures. It also allows member states to send people to deportation centres in third countries, while encouraging the use of surveillance and detection measures, including home raids. Mobilising its network and working with partners across Europe, PICUM helps build a broad coalition of civil society organisations opposing the proposal. As the proposal is finally adopted in 2026, this collective mobilisation will remain central to challenging the implementation of this Regulation in the years ahead.



PICUM's work matters more than ever. We are at a critical point where far right policies are trying to take over the mainstream across Europe. PICUM is perfectly placed to bring together a network of voices across Europe to challenge that.

- Neil Bruton, Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (Ireland)

While EU governments and institutions continue to advance an escalating deportation agenda, they are also confronted with Europe's economic and demographic realities, leading some countries to expand work permit opportunities for third-country workers or adopt targeted regularisation programmes. These measures largely remain insufficient: work permits are often too limited, and many migrant workers continue to face conditions that leave them vulnerable to exploitation. Yet the revision of the **Single Permit Directive**, adopted in 2024, marks an important step forward. For the first time at EU level, the Directive establishes a right for migrant workers to change employers without automatically losing their residence and work permits, including in situations of exploitation. As one of the few European organisations working on labour migration and migrant workers' rights, PICUM has long advocated for this change alongside trade unions and partners. This reform is a clear win of this advocacy - and a reminder that progress remains possible.

Alongside its advocacy on labour migration, PICUM continues to promote **regularisation** as a practical and rights-based response to the realities of undocumented people. Over these last few years, PICUM has been documenting regularisation initiatives across Europe and highlighting its benefits for social inclusion, public services, welfare systems and public finances alike. With this work, PICUM is laying the ground for a broad European campaign for fair and effective regularisation policies, bringing together migrant rights organisations, grassroots groups and movements from across Europe to advocate for pathways out of legal limbo and marginalisation.

All of this work would fall flat without undocumented people themselves. Since its foundation, PICUM has recognised that people directly affected by migration policies must be at the centre of efforts to defend their rights – and worked to create spaces where people with lived experience can shape advocacy, research and public narratives in safe and meaningful ways. In 2025, PICUM establishes its first **Task Force on Meaningful Participation**, bringing together members of affected communities to strengthen its approach and ensure that lived experience continues to inform the organisation's work and priorities.



←

PICUM Task Force on Meaningful Participation, October 2025

Looking ahead

Today, PICUM works in an increasingly hostile environment. Far-right forces are in power or leading in various European countries, or yet emerging in once unlikely places. Their narratives and policies are increasingly being normalised by centre-right and centre-left parties alike. Large swathes of European public opinion have negative views of and attitudes towards migrants and immigration.

In the migration/human rights field, many observe that our movement is losing ground, that international (human rights) institutions and norms are losing legitimacy and power, that red lines are being crossed over and over – all while digital tech and AI are being increasingly used to police, discriminate and control non-EU nationals and racialised communities.

Labour shortages will continue to deepen across EU regions and sectors. For Europe, this will mean choosing between building societies where all workers enjoy decent working and living conditions, or maintaining and expanding a system that relies on a large, exploitable workforce.

Against these trends, mobilisation, resistance and a few wins still happen throughout Europe. Every day, we see neighbours rally to shield people and families from deportation. Faith groups, health professionals, civil society and other actors mobilise for solidarity and care. Newsrooms and journalists continue to question and investigate systems and policies that marginalise and scapegoat undocumented people. Many lawyers, judges and courts stand firm to uphold human rights law. In some cases, policies are moving toward greater care and dignity, the 2026 Spanish regularisation programme being the clearest, if rare, example.

Our very network shows us every day how small and big groups can come together to help each other and strengthen our shared calls for change. Grassroots groups and migrant-led spaces will remain central to our work, and we commit to advancing safe and meaningful participation of undocumented people and other affected communities. In the years to come, we will work to make this network a strong space for joint mobilisation and a stepping stone for building larger coalitions with anti-racism organisations, service providers, trade unions, journalists, and anyone who thinks human rights should not depend on residence papers.

→

PICUM members celebrating 25 years at the 2026 General Assembly


PICUM
25

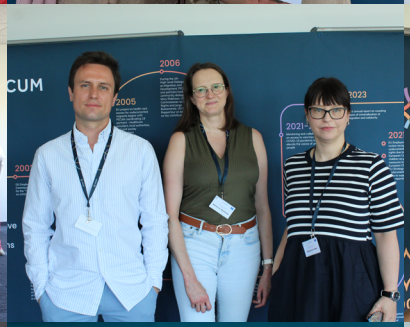

PICUM


2006
2024
2021



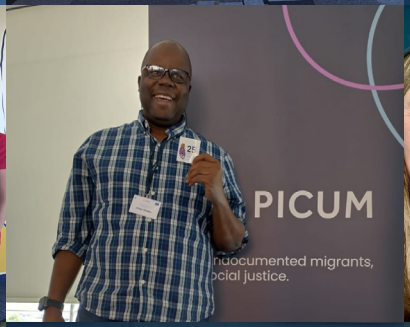

PICUM
2005
2002
2021-2022
2010


Next steps


2006
2005
2023


PICUM
2006
2008




PICUM


2024
2026
Celebrating
25 years
with over
150 member






2006
2005
2023
2024
2026
Celebrating
25 years
with over
150 members


2026
Celebrating
25 years
members




PICUM


PICUM
2002
2003




25
25

© PICUM, 2026

This publication was made possible with the kind support from:













Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2021-2027). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



PICUM

For undocumented migrants,
for social justice.

Rue du Congres 37,
1000 Brussels, Belgium
+32 2 883 68 12
info@picum.org
www.picum.org