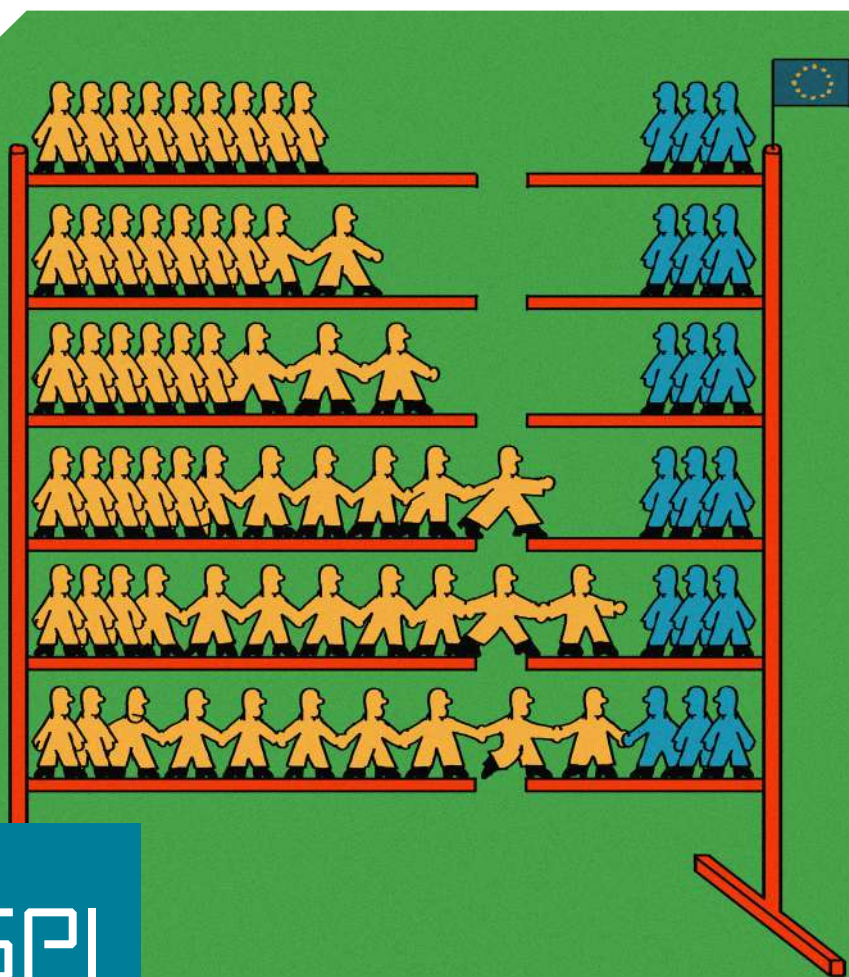


EU-AFRICA: “DEALING” WITH MIGRATION?

edited by **Matteo Villa**

introduction by **Paolo Magri**



ISPI

EU-AFRICA: “DEALING” WITH MIGRATION?

edited by Matteo Villa



© 2025 Ledizioni LediPublishing
Via Antonio Boselli, 10 – 20136 Milan – Italy
www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

EU-AFRICA: “DEALING” WITH MIGRATION?

Edited by Matteo Villa

First edition: October 2025
Cover image by Francesco Fadani

Print ISBN 9791256005260
ePub ISBN 9791256005277
Pdf ISBN 9791256005284
DOI 10.14672/56005260

ISPI. Via Clerici, 5
20121, Milan
www.ispionline.it

Catalogue and reprints information: www.ledizioni.it




**Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation**

This Report is realized with the support of the Policy Planning Unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation pursuant to art. 23-bis of Presidential Decree 18/1967.

The opinions contained in this Report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and ISPI.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Paolo Magri..... 7

1. Turning Inward or Turning Outward?

Paradoxes in EU-Africa Migration Trends

Matteo Villa..... 19

2. Why Externalisation Will Not Resolve the EU's Migration Dilemma

Gaia Mastrosanti..... 49

3. Externalisation on the Fast-Track?

Two Tensions Around Internal Reform and Externalisation Efforts

Eleonora Milazzo..... 73

4. Routes in Flux: Irregular Migration, Restrictive Policies, and Smuggling Resilience

Roberto Forin, Bram Frouws Peter Grant..... 89

5. Securitisation, Resistance and the Future of EU-Africa Migration Cooperation: Towards a Rights Based Approach <i>Amanda Bisong</i>	131
About the Authors.....	161

Introduction

Migration between Africa and Europe has always been part of the story of the Mediterranean world, but since the early 2010s it has become one of its decisive plot lines. To the wider public and to politics across the European continent, intra-Mediterranean mobility registers as a background issue that flares up only in moments of crisis. However, the reality is that it has become a structural, ever-present force shaping our daily lives.

Few topics have redefined European politics as powerfully as migration over the last two decades. It influences electoral cycles, determines governing coalition, and conditions relations with African partners far beyond the confines of migration policy itself. In the 1990s, Lampedusa came to symbolise irregular sea arrivals and the limits of ad-hoc responses, and yet the number of people reaching the island was almost irrelevant compared to later years. The 2000s saw the birth of Frontex as a modest coordination office and the first hesitant attempts to build common European tools at the borders.

But it was the Arab uprisings of 2011, and the collapse of Libya's state authority in particular, that triggered unpredictable surges, forcing countries at the forefront or the EU as a whole into improvised bargains. Then came 2015, when more than a million people – predominantly Syrians – reached the EU in a single year and turned irregular migration into a political cleavage. Even the COVID-19 freeze could only suspend, not reverse, this long arc. When borders reopened, movement

returned with renewed intensity: by 2023 irregular sea arrivals from Africa to Europe had climbed to roughly 215,000, the highest level ever recorded. One year later, after a controversial agreement with Tunisia, arrivals dropped to around 130,000, and many leaders claimed vindication for tougher controls.

Yet that headline missed a larger change unfolding in parallel. In 2023, the EU issued over 3.8 million first residence permits (an all-time record), and in 2024 African citizens alone received well over 600,000 permits, roughly twice the number of a decade earlier. Over the past few years, Italy has multiplied work-permit quotas, Germany has revamped its Skilled Immigration Act, France streamlined "talent" channels, and Spain moved toward regularizing a very large share of undocumented migrants already working in the country. The juxtaposition is hard to ignore: while the spectacle of politics dramatizes deterrence, the demands of economics require openness.

The deeper structure behind this paradox is demographic and economic. By 2030, one in four Europeans will be over 65, while the working-age population shrinks and the demand for labor in health, long-term care, transport, agriculture, and construction remains healthy. Africa, by contrast, is demographically young: a median age under twenty, with millions entering the labor market each year.

These facts do not predetermine policy, but they tilt the field. They mean mobility between the two shores is not a temporary storm to be weathered; it is a climate to be managed. There is also the arithmetic of returns, a persistent gap between promise and reality. European governments commit to sending home those who have no legal right to stay, yet only about one in five return orders is enforced in general, and toward African countries the effective rate has hovered around one in seven. Meanwhile, the budgets and operational powers devoted to containment have grown dramatically: Frontex's allocation rose from the hundreds of millions a decade ago to more than a billion annually and is projected to approach two billion by the next EU budget cycle. At the same time, family reunification

has been tightened in many capitals even as labor channels widen. It's as if the political message to voters is increasingly split from the economic message to employers. Europe pledges to harden asylum while expanding work visas. It builds fences but enlarges quotas. It is in this tension between restrictive narratives and expansive necessities that EU-Africa migration diplomacy now lives.

This volume maps that terrain with four complementary perspectives. It opens with Matteo Villa, who reconstructs how the continent has turned inward in rhetoric and law while turning outward in practice. It proceeds with Gaia Mastrosanti, who explains why externalization (outsourcing migration control to third countries) cannot settle Europe's dilemma. It then turns to Eleonora Milazzo, who shows how the political acceleration of externalization rests on the incompleteness of internal reform and creates two deep tensions: between the promise of control and the reality of interdependence, and between normative claims and operational practices. Roberto Forin, Bram Frouws and Peter Grant take us to the routes themselves, where smugglers, migrants, and officials constantly adapt, reminding us that irregular movement is resilient because migration hopes form a market, and this market for irregular movement has developed into a deep network. Finally, Amanda Bisong offers a complementary perspective by shifting the focus to African agency. She traces how EU migration policy has become increasingly securitized and externalized, while African frameworks continue to emphasize mobility as a driver of development and integration, highlighting the asymmetries this has created: European priorities dominate cooperation, while African voices are often marginalized. Read together, the contributions suggest that the frequent paradoxes in migration policy that are presented here are not an accident, but the system's operating condition.

Matteo Villa approaches the current predicament by first tracing the political weather. Over the past five years, rightwing parties have gained grounds all across Europe, and with them,

policies have followed. Amid this shift in political fortunes, governments of many ideological families across Europe (including center-left ones) have converged on restriction as the default migration policy. The Netherlands declared an "asylum crisis" and designed what it called its strictest policy ever; Sweden formalised a pledge to be no more generous than EU minimum standards; France narrowed appeals and lengthened detention; Germany passed a Repatriation Improvement Act and introduced comprehensive land-border checks in 2024; Italy cut reception standards, limited NGO rescues at sea, shortened protection statuses, raised thresholds for family reunification, and even launched offshore processing in Albania; and even Denmark's Social Democrats announced a "zero vision" for asylum. The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum stitched these initiatives into a shared frame: screening at the border with biometric checks, fast-track procedures for low-recognition nationalities, an attempt at connecting more closely inadmissibility and returns, an upgraded role for the concept of "safe third country", and a solidarity regime designed to be mandatory in spirit yet flexible in practice, so as not to scare away governments that are used to close down borders, rather than sharing responsibilities. Alongside, cooperation with third countries deepened: memoranda with Tunisia, tightened engagement with Libya and Egypt, a partnership with Mauritania, and exploratory debates on extraterritorial processing. Frontex, once a coordinator, became more of a "deployer", with a standing corps, high-tech surveillance and a growing mandate.

And yet, Villa emphasizes, this architecture of restriction coexists with an expansion of legal migration so large that it refutes simplistic talk of "Fortress Europe". First residence permits peaked in 2023, with more than 3.8 million issued, and remained near record levels in 2024; permits to African nationals roughly doubled compared with a decade earlier. Among other reasons, this was a result of the fact that Italy's quota system for work visas was scaled up several times over; Spain moved

to recognise and incorporate hundreds of thousands already at work; Germany lowered barriers for skilled entrants and created more flexible points-based pathways; and France streamlined “talent” channels. In other words, humanitarian access has been narrowing while labor access continues to broaden.

According to Villa, the dissonance is not accidental: it reflects a governing strategy that visibly squeezes the first (to keep political consensus) while quietly expanding the second (responding to economic necessities). Even supposed successes of the restrictive turn appear brittle under a steadier light. The sharp fall in crossings from Tunisia followed the use of heavy coercion (mass round-ups, expulsions toward desert borders) that carry high ethical and diplomatic costs and are inherently unstable. Meanwhile, the long-promised increase in effective returns has not arrived yet: overall enforcement remains around the low twenties percent, and for Africans is closer to 15%, with some bilateral arrangements swiftly signed as well as swiftly unravelling as soon as domestic protests intensified. External bargains generate images of control, but not necessarily durable order. As Villa frames it, Europe is turning inward in narrative and instruments while turning outward in results. That double movement (restriction paired with expansion) shapes the whole field of EU-Africa diplomacy and sets the reader up for the debates that follow.

Gaia Mastrosanti turns to externalization and asks a hard question: if the New Pact and its companion proposals push responsibility outward, can that strategy resolve the dilemma inside the Union? She reconstructs the legal and operational mechanics the Pact assembled into a “seamless” chain: screening for identification and vulnerability assessment; accelerated border procedures to decide claims from nationalities with low recognition rates; and border return that is meant to follow swiftly from rejection. In parallel, the Safe Third Country idea is expanded so that mere transit may suffice to render a claim inadmissible, subject to evolving definitions of “effective protection”. The Commission has also placed on the table

a returns regulation that would allow one state to enforce another's return decision, and has floated the possibility of "return hubs" in third countries for people already rejected. On paper, the model promises coherence: speed at the perimeter, common ground rules inside, and easier logistics afterward. But for Mastrosanti the very reliance on third-country execution is the model's fragility. Cooperation is hard to sustain because incentives diverge. Readmission is politically toxic for partner governments that rely on remittances and face their own publics; hosting people for whom Europe has no place is even more sensitive; and the conditional tools the EU can apply (visas, funding, market access) buy compliance at the expense of goodwill. Mastrosanti notes how often arrangements have faltered: agreements celebrated in Brussels can become liabilities in Nouakchott or Banjul within months, as civil society mobilizes against deals perceived as externally imposed. Nor does externalization repair the fissures inside the EU. The Pact's solidarity mechanism, mandatory in the abstract but flexible in execution, permits states to substitute equipment or money for relocations, lowering the political cost of opting out. The more responsibility is pushed outward, the less incentive there is to complete the unfinished work of an internal "grand bargain" that will necessarily see winners and losers.

Mastrosanti also lingers on legitimacy, a quality that policy proposals tend to treat as noise rather than signal nowadays. A memorandum framed as a "comprehensive partnership" on the European side may be experienced as an enforcement contract by African counterparts, especially where soft-law instruments, limited transparency, and loosely articulated safeguards prevail. In The Gambia, public protest helped unravel cooperation shortly after it was announced. In Mauritania, a 2024 package delivered short-term operational gains but fueled unrest in an election year and generated accusations that the country was being folded into a part of Europe's containment architecture. The more externalization advances through opaque arrangements, the more it undermines claims to normative leadership that the

EU regularly makes in other domains. Not even the numbers suggest a decisive payoff: despite new instruments and large budgets, effective returns toward African countries remain in the teens, and flows respond to enforcement not by conclusively collapsing, but by re-routing. Externalization, Mastrocanti argues, is a politically compelling answer to a question Europe has struggled to solve (i.e., how to show control without sharing responsibility) but it cannot, by its nature, supply the internal solidarity it presupposes. Unless legal mobility is treated as a strategic tool in its own right, rather than a bargaining chip offered to secure return and readmission, the model will keep reproducing the conditions that make it necessary.

Eleonora Milazzo takes the reader a step further into the political logic of the current cycle. Why, she asks, has externalization been fast-tracked? Because the internal bargain is partial. The Pact's innovation on solidarity is real (moving the conversation beyond voluntary gestures), but its core is flexibility, and flexibility is a path of least resistance rather than a foundation. When member states can choose to pay instead of relocating asylum seekers, political coalitions for burden-sharing thin out instead of thickening. That vacuum invites countries and the European Commission itself to look for an outward pivot. External agreements, which hinge on government-to-government negotiation, are easier to deliver than intra-EU compromises that demand parliamentary consent and public persuasion. The first of Milazzo's tensions is therefore between the promise of control and the inevitability of interdependence. Offshore processing, "safe" transit designations, and returns coordinated from a distance may reassure publics at home, but they extend the chain of implementation: each new link (from coast-guard cooperation to asylum processing, from detention facilities to documentation for removal) multiplies places where the chain can fail.

The second tension is normative. The Union champions rights, due process, and accountability, yet in migration has lent increasing weight to opaque memorandums, accelerated

procedures with narrower safeguards, and the fiction of non-entry that justifies holding people in "liminal" spaces. The more the EU leans on these instruments, the more it legitimizes the accusation that its values are upheld only where other interests are not at stake. That is not an academic problem: it affects the degree of leverage the EU enjoys. Partners who see the EU trade away its own standards will likely treat its conditional offers as transactional and temporary, rather than descending from stable convictions.

Milazzo finally examines how these external reflexes feed back into the Union. When solidarity is flexible and externalization is available, decision-makers prefer the latter because it buys time. But time bought at the border is time not invested in the core: and so the Union does not focus on building up reception capacity where it is needed, making the relocation system more binding (as well as more politically sound and sustainable), or scaling regular pathways beyond pilot projects that are ultimately left to waste away. This is one of those catch-22 moments that feeds on itself: when the internal EU architecture for managing migration is cracking at the seams, governments turn to outsourcing; but outsourcing reduces the incentive to go back to the table in search for a sustainable and long-term deal among EU countries. Ultimately, however, Milazzo does not argue against engagement with African partners. Rather, she argues for anchoring it in a sturdier internal architecture so that diplomacy serves strategic purposes, rather than becoming its substitute. Otherwise, she warns, Europe will keep sprinting outward while eroding the coherence that gives its external voice weight.

Moving on, Roberto Forin, Bram Frouws, and Peter Grant pull the frame back to the routes, where policies meet markets and choices. Their vantage point is empirical and dynamic, and they teach us a very important lesson that we recurrently tend to forget: routes for irregular migration are never still. They respond to incentives, enforcement, weather, and information. When Libya's departures were squeezed after

2017, it took only a few years before Tunisia grew central; and when Tunisian authorities cracked down in late 2023, flows surged toward the Canary Islands. When controls rose in the central Mediterranean, more people attempted long overland journeys through the Sahara and across multiple borders. Smuggling is not a random collection of opportunists but an ecosystem with local facilitators, transnational coordinators, and digital recruiters who advertise risks and prices in real time. If enforcement rises, prices do too, responding to demand and supply mechanisms that ultimately allow similar amounts of people to move irregularly across borders. If one corridor closes, another may open. And if timelines become stretched, smugglers will offer “packages” that break journeys into stages. In turn, migrants learn how to move irregularly through contacts with diasporas and social media, comparing notes on routes, patrol patterns, and the likelihood of detention. Policy shocks travel fast through these networks: a bilateral agreement signed in Brussels today alters the price a group of people in Agadez will face next week.

The authors show how crackdowns tend to displace rather than suppress movement, while raising the risk of harm in each attempt. The Tunisian expulsions toward desert borders in the past two years produced humanitarian crises but did not halt attempts to reach Europe through irregular routes across the region. At the same time, when family reunification opportunities narrow, families adapt by staggering their journeys or turning to irregular reunification later. Each of these adjustments strengthens the business model of smuggling, a vicious circle where scarcity raises profits, as policy control increases the price per journey but often still finds would-be migrants who are willing to pay.

The lesson is not that control is futile. It is that control unaccompanied by credible, predictable legal alternatives entrenches smuggling rather than undercutting it. When lawful pathways are scaled, prices and risks fall. When they are not, the market for irregular passage thickens. Forin, Frouws and

Grant therefore invite a shift of perspective: away from counting interdictions as success, and toward measuring how far policy reduces harm, shrinks the smuggling margin, and stabilizes decision-making for those who will move anyway.

Finally, Amanda Bisong examines the securitization of EU-Africa migration cooperation and calls for a paradigm shift toward a rights-centered approach. She shows how European actors have consistently framed migration from Africa as a security threat (prioritizing returns, readmission agreements, and externalization measures) while African institutions have highlighted migration's role in livelihoods, remittances, and regional integration. This divergence, she argues, has produced asymmetry: EU funding and leverage push African governments to act as "gatekeepers", often at the expense of their own free-movement commitments under ECOWAS, the AU Free Movement Protocol, or other regional frameworks. The resulting bargains may satisfy short-term European political pressures, but risk eroding trust, reinforcing a perception of dependency while sidelining African priorities.

The chapter reconstructs key turning points: from the Cotonou Agreement of 2000, which tied development aid to readmission obligations, to the 2015 Valletta Summit and the creation of the EU Trust Fund for Africa, which channeled billions mainly into containment rather than development. It then traces how the 2023 Pact on Migration and Asylum reaffirmed externalization as the cornerstone of EU policy, introducing expanded "safe country" categories, return hubs, and potential outsourcing of asylum processing. Bisong underscores how these policies raise legal and ethical concerns: from possible violations of the principle of non-refoulement to the weakening of accountability when protection is shifted outside the EU's legal space.

But the chapter also shows that African responses are not uniform. Some states collaborate fully, seeking financial or diplomatic concessions; others signal compliance but delay the actual implementation of the agreed-upon policies; still others

resist outright. Deportation agreements with the EU, the US, or individual member states reveal this ambivalence, as African governments need to balance sovereignty and domestic political pressures with external incentives to cooperate fully. Such “dual motives” reflect how migration has become a bargaining chip in broader geopolitical relations, with African governments leveraging cooperation to extract concessions while managing domestic backlash.

For Bisong, the way forward lies in re-centering rights and African agency. She proposes four main pathways: reframing migration beyond “root causes” toward opportunity; aligning EU initiatives with Africa’s integration agendas; expanding legal mobility schemes such as labor pathways, student exchanges, and recognition of qualifications; and enhancing mutual accountability through co-designed EU-AU mechanisms. Bisong calls for embedding safeguards in all agreements, ensuring that returns are dignified and voluntary, mobility is credible and scaled, and civil society plays a central role in oversight. Only then can EU-Africa migration governance move beyond its crisis-driven short-termism and build a durable, balanced framework based on partnership rather than imposition.

Read as a whole, the contributions in this book sketch a portrait of an EU-Africa migration regime governed by clear incentives, but where policymakers tend to let paradoxes coexist. Villa shows how Europe narrows humanitarian access while expanding labor entry at the same time; Mastrosanti suggests that outsourcing responsibility cannot substitute for the internal solidarity the system lacks; Milazzo reveals how the rush outward follows from an incomplete bargain at home and undermines the very credibility the Union uses abroad; and Forin, Frouws and Grant remind us that irregular migration is not a static “problem” to be fixed once and for all, but a set of adaptive practices that respond to incentives and choices.

The current system delivers short-term effects and adapts well to political narrative, but at the cost of long-term fragility: brittle bargains with transit states that crumble under pressure,

returns that remain stubbornly low, routes that re-route, and legal channels that expand quietly because economies require them. It is difficult to imagine a future in which these tensions simply vanish. Europe will keep needing workers; African households will keep needing opportunity; smugglers will keep exploiting scarcity; and electorates will keep demanding credible signals of control.

What follows from recognizing that the paradox is structural is not resignation but rather a re-ordering of priorities. Legal pathways should move from peripheral pilots to central instruments, sized to labor needs and communicated clearly to origin countries so that they function as real alternatives rather than rumors on social media. Returns should be targeted and realistic, aligned with reintegration support and mobility incentives so that governments in origin countries may gain politically from cooperation (or, at the very least, not lose). External engagement should be transparent and accountable, with safeguards that are not merely signaled but enforced.

Fences will remain, as will screenings and patrols and detention centers, but without investments in opportunity and trust they will keep producing volatile effects rather than stable outcomes. The choice is not between open borders and closed borders. It is between a politics that treats mobility as a permanent emergency and one that treats it as a permanent feature to be managed with strategy, rather than spectacle.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Managing Director and Chair Advisory Board

1. Turning Inward or Turning Outward? Paradoxes in EU-Africa Migration Trends

Matteo Villa

Over the past two decades, migration has become one of the defining issues of European politics. Few policy areas have reshaped the continent's political landscape so profoundly, driving electoral debates and influencing coalition dynamics. This, in turn, has had a ripple effect on how national and EU policy makers interact with African ones.

At the policy level, what makes this story compelling is not only the intensity of the debate but also its paradoxes. At closer inspection, in fact, Europe is turning inward and outward at the same time. Inward, in its rhetoric and practice of restriction and deterrence; outward, in its reliance on migrant labour and the need for cooperation with partner countries.

This chapter situates these paradoxes within the broader rightward shift in European politics. We start by retracing the hardening of migration policies across the EU over the past five years, showing how restrictive measures have spread across governments of all ideological colours, with Denmark and Spain offering contrasting but equally radical departures. We then examine the fragility of apparent migration-related “successes”, such as the temporary drop in arrivals after the EU-Tunisia MoU, the chronic failure of return policies, and the spiralling securitization embodied by an ever-increasing Frontex budget. The next section highlights the paradox

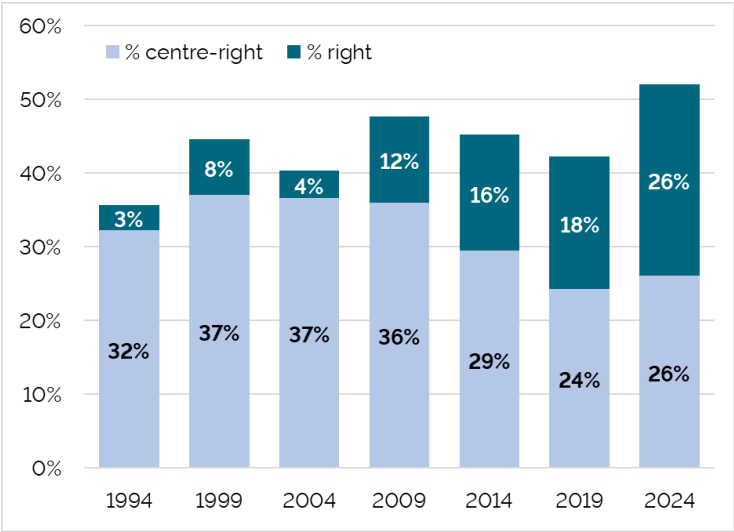
of legal migration: despite restrictive asylum policies, first residence permits reached record highs in 2023 and 2024, driven by demographic realities and labour market needs. These simultaneous trends show that there is a dissonance between political narratives and structural realities: European politicians promise closure but depend on openness; they seek deterrence, yet rely on cooperation for its success.

In a nutshell, in today's Europe restrictive and (somewhat) liberalizing policies coexist albeit they are not communicated with the same emphasis or given the same salience. Europe is narrowing asylum while selectively widening legal pathways, securing short-term wins while eroding long-term trust with Africa. This contradiction is now the defining feature of EU-Africa migration diplomacy: an uneasy balance between political signalling and demographic necessity, between containment and cooperation.

EU Politics (and Migration Policies) Swinging to the Right

Across Europe, migration policy over the past decade has undergone a marked transformation. A close reading of national measures and EU-level initiatives shows a broad and accelerating pivot toward restriction, deterrence, and externalization. However, while this general tendency is unmistakable, the nuances across member states reveal contrasting political strategies and, in most cases, the need to balance political narratives with factual realities. The continent as a whole seems to be tightening its borders and narrowing access to protection. Yet, the ideological provenance of these measures and the degree of their severity vary – sometimes widely.

FIG. 1.1 - EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SEATS HELD BY CENTRE-RIGHT OR RIGHT-WING PARTIES



Source: author's calculations on European Parliament data (seats at start of each legislature).

The scale of the political rightward turn in European politics is clearly visible in the electoral arithmetic of the European Parliament.¹ Figure 1.1 shows the distribution of seats held by centre-right and right-wing parties at the beginning of each legislature. In 2004, such parties accounted for about 41% of seats; by 2024, their share rose to 52%, for the first time mustering alone an absolute majority of the seats (albeit not a politically viable one, so far). These gains in the broader right-of-centre political spectrum mask a second, even more crucial shift: the surge of hard-right parties. While twenty years ago, centre-right parties gained 37% of seats at the European Parliament while hard-right parties held a meagre

¹ C. Mudde, “The 2024 EU Elections: The Far Right at the Polls”, *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2024, pp. 121-34.

4%, the tables have completely turned now, with both groups holding 26% of seats, a perfect parity. For hard-right parties, this numerical consolidation translates into a capacity to shape EU migration legislation from within, rather than merely pressuring governments from the margins. And given that, in order to counter this trends, even centrist parties have shifted their migration policy preferences rightwards, there is currently a clear majority in favour of restrictive migration policies at European level.²

At the policy level, data assembled for 2021-25 show that virtually every member state has at some point tightened asylum, deportation, or family reunification rules (see Table 1.1). Even countries with historically liberal reputations have either curtailed access to protection or slowed naturalization. In Austria, for instance, the government accelerated deportations, suspended asylum applications for Syrians in December 2024 and reserved the right to suspend applications entirely in case of a "significant increase" in arrivals. In March 2025 family reunification for refugees and asylum seekers was halted for at least six months. These policies, coupled with Vienna's opposition to EU-wide emergency relocations (rebuked by the European Commission), illustrate how even mid-sized EU countries that placed themselves along the moderate centre of migration policies a decade ago have moved from managing migration toward pre-empting it.

Amid this rightward turn in European politics, Denmark represents perhaps the most striking paradox. Here it is not the hard right but the Social Democrats who have spearheaded some of Europe's most restrictive initiatives.³ Since 2019, Mette Frederiksen's government has adopted a "zero vision" plan to drive asylum applications down to zero over time. Family reunification rules have been tightened, deportations rules

² P. Broniecki and B. Hoyland, "What unites the right in the European Parliament?", *European Union Politics*, letters, published online 2 June 2025.

³ E. Rauhala, "How progressive Denmark became the face of the anti-migration left", *Washington Post*, 6 April 2023.

have been relaxed, and benefit payments for asylum seekers curtailed or eliminated after a claim is rejected. Denmark even legislated to allow third-country asylum processing (the so-called “Rwanda Plan”), though this has yet to be enacted. Moreover, the government’s expansion of the “parallel societies” law to “prevention areas” enables municipalities to label neighbourhoods with more than 30% non-Western residents as at risk, permitting landlords to refuse rentals to non-citizens.

Politically, this left-wing restrictionism has coincided with a sharp decline in support for Denmark’s hard-right Danish People’s Party (DPP). At the 2014 European Parliament elections, the DPP came first with close to 27% of the vote. By 2019, the year Frederiksen took office, its share had shrunk to 11%, and in 2024 it fell further to 6%, bucking the trend at a time when hard-right parties were climbing all across Europe and Social Democratic parties were struggling. Denmark thus suggests that electorates can reward mainstream parties that adopt stringent migration controls, potentially blunting the appeal of radical right challengers, although this might come at high ethical costs.

This is not an isolated case of “policy convergence” towards more restriction. France, while easing regularization for undocumented migrants in shortage sectors, simultaneously tightened asylum appeals, expanded detention and lengthened administrative detention for “dangerous” irregular migrants from 3 to 7 months. Germany too moved along this track: after amending its Skilled Immigration Act to attract high-skill labour, it passed a Repatriation Improvement Act in December 2023 to facilitate deportations, introduced comprehensive border controls at all land borders in September 2024, suspended family reunification for subsidiary protection holders until 2027, and abolished automatic legal aid in asylum procedures just last August. The duality of these policies – more openness for selected categories, harsher treatment for asylum seekers – illustrates the shift toward an “economic filter” approach, in which countries continue to be open to recruiting

desired workers, while closing avenues for protection (see later sections).

In Southern Europe, Italy's government has progressively cut reception standards, shortened asylum appeal times, restricted NGOs' sea rescue operations, expanded administrative detention from 12 to 18 months, and placed new limits on family reunification, including higher income thresholds and language requirements. It has also established offshore processing centres in Albania to manage sea arrivals, echoing Australia's "Pacific Solution" and the UK's "Rwanda plan".⁴ Greece's trajectory mirrors Italy's, moving from stricter regularization requirements to a new asylum law that speeds up processing for certain nationalities, enhanced deportations, and ultimately to criminalizing irregular entry with prison terms of up to 5 years. In 2025, detention for irregular migrants was lengthened to 24 months, and rejected asylum seekers from "safe third countries" now face prison terms and heavy fines if they fail to depart within two weeks. Even Portugal, historically an outlier on openness, ended "post-entry legalization" for foreign workers, doubled the residency requirement for citizenship to 10 years, and restricted regularization and family reunification procedures.

Meanwhile, after suspending family reunification visa issuance in 2022, the Netherlands declared an "asylum crisis" last year that allowed it to introduce emergency measures, and before the collapse of the governing coalition that included the far-right PVV party was moving toward what it called its "strictest asylum policy ever": suspending applications and family reunification for two years, criminalizing undocumented residence, downgrading reception facilities and creating a two-tier system of temporary protection. A similar trend has been followed by Sweden. After the Tidö Agreement of 2022, the country openly embraced a paradigm shift: it would no more

⁴ E. Muharremaj and G. Cami, "The "Externalization" of the European Union Migration and Asylum Policy: A Case Study of the Italy – Albania Agreement", *International Organisations Research Journal*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2024, pp. 40-60.

be “more generous” than EU minimum standards required it to be. By 2025, asylum seekers were obliged to reside in reception centres and face benefit cuts if they refused integration courses, while work permits were restricted to higher-salary thresholds and low-skilled entries were cut.

Any account of Europe’s rightward swing must also acknowledge that its origins predate the 2020s. Since the migration crisis of 2015, the so-called Visegrád countries (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) have been the most consistent and uncompromising opponents of EU-wide relocation schemes and liberal asylum policies. Hungary erected border fences and codified the concept of “transit zones” as early as 2016, while Poland systematically refused to take part in any relocation quotas and continues to do so even after the election of centre-right Prime Minister (and former President of the European Council) Donald Tusk. This collective resistance not only limited the scope of EU burden-sharing in the recent past, but also served as a model for later restrictive stances across the continent. What seemed extreme in 2015 (mass border fortifications, blanket refusals of relocation) has, by 2025, become mainstream policy in several western and northern member states.

Interestingly, The Visegrád group’s influence lies less in numbers (together they account for fewer than 65 million people) than in narrative power.⁵ By relentlessly framing migration as a sovereignty issue, they shifted the “Overton window” of EU debates, making harsher policies palatable even in countries without significant inflows, and normalizing discourse on restrictive measures that would have been unthinkable to moderate parties a decade ago. In this sense, Central Europe was not simply a regional outlier but an early laboratory for this restrictive rightward turn.

⁵ K. Vaagland and N. Zaun, “Strategising solidarity: an examination of the Visegrád group’s role and motivations in EU migration policies”, *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 47, 2025, pp. 559-79.

Last July, the consolidation of this shift was symbolized by the creation of the so-called "Zugspitze Group", an informal alliance made up of Visegrád members (Poland and the Czech Republic), formerly liberal countries that have turned highly restrictive (Austria and Denmark), and political heavyweights (France and Germany), alongside the European Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration Magnus Brunner (himself an Austrian politician). Meeting at the summit of Germany's highest peak was more than symbolic: it projected an image of resolve at Europe's "highest point" against what some leaders described as "unsustainable pressures". The Zugspitze declaration called for strengthened border controls, accelerated return procedures, and joint negotiations with third countries to manage migration effectively.⁶ This grouping illustrates that the centre of gravity of restriction has moved westward: not only Visegrád or Mediterranean governments, but also Germany and France, the EU's core, now explicitly endorse restrictive policies.

At the EU level, this shift is codified in the New Pact for Migration and Asylum, whose staggered enactment runs from mid-2024 through mid-2026. The Pact foresees robust border screenings including biometric checks, fast-tracked asylum processing at borders for low-recognition-rate nationalities, automatic return orders upon rejection, and stricter Dublin rules to prevent secondary movement. At the same time, last year 14 member states requested that the EU explore outsourcing asylum processing to third countries, while the Commission advanced proposals to facilitate applications of the "safe third country" concept, and strategies to accelerate returns. Finally, the draft Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028-35 proposes to double the financial envelope for migration management and to strengthen Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard (see next section). Taken together, these measures indicate not

⁶ German Federal Ministry of the Interior, "Zugspitze Summit – reforming European migration policy", 18 July 2025.

merely a series of national experiments but an emerging EU-wide doctrine of deterrence.⁷

Against this backdrop, Spain stands out as a notable exception or, at least, a counterpoint. While Madrid has not been immune to the general tightening (for instance, it expanded detention for irregular migrants and has focused on striking deals with countries of transit in the wake of the latest surge in arrivals to the Canary Islands), the Sánchez government has been pushing a radical policy in the opposite direction by seeking to legalize close to a million irregular migrants already working in Spain. This approach reflects a calculation that integrating existing workers will benefit the economy and society more than trying to expel them or maintain them in illegality. It also signals a distinct political narrative: whereas hard-right parties elsewhere argue that migration undermines national cohesion, Spain's governing left presents regularization as a tool to stabilize the labour market and for demographic rebalancing.

This Spanish approach, no less radical than the restrictions elsewhere, reimagines the state's role not as a gatekeeper but as an incorporator. By reducing the residency requirement to regularize irregular migrants from three to two years and allowing rejected asylum seekers with six months of work to gain a permit of stay, Spain diverges sharply from the "deterrence first" logic. The strategy implicitly recognizes the structural demand for migrant labour and attempts to create legal pathways rather than drive irregularity underground. In this sense, Spain could become a test case for whether proactive regularization can coexist with public support for immigration at a time of rising nativism and anti-migrant rhetoric elsewhere in Europe.

The tension between Spain's "turning outward" stance and the rest of Europe's "turning inward" reveals deeper paradoxes. Even the most restrictive governments acknowledge the need

⁷ S. Wolff, "The new pact on migration: embedded illiberalism?", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 62, S1, 2024, pp. 113-23.

for certain kinds of migration, especially skilled labour and seasonal workers. Finland, for example, facilitated seasonal work permits in 2021 while later cutting asylum allowances and tightening citizenship. Germany expanded its Skilled Immigration Act even as it hardened deportation rules. France streamlined talent permits while extending detention for irregular migrants. Across Europe, the message is consistent: the door is closing for asylum seekers but selectively opening for "desirable" migrants. This dualism underscores the shift from humanitarian protection toward a labour-market logic, but it also shows a growing tension within current governing majorities in Europe which will be explored in later sections.

A striking feature of this period is the normalization of suspension clauses, legal devices allowing governments to halt asylum applications, family reunifications or regularizations under certain conditions. As shown above, this trend was mostly evident in Austria, which reserved the right to suspend asylum applications in case of a significant increase in arrivals; Greece, which suspended the right to apply for asylum for three months in mid-2025; and the Netherlands, which declared a national emergency to be able to move forward with special legislation. Such measures institutionalize emergency powers as routine tools, reducing predictability for asylum seekers and shifting discretion from parliaments to executives.

Externalization remains the other defining pillar of the shift. Italy's centres in Albania, Denmark's tentative "Rwanda plan", and the ongoing exploration of offshore processing at the EU level reflect a collective effort to push asylum responsibilities beyond Europe's borders. As already mentioned, such schemes echo the UK's contested Rwanda deal and Australia's offshore processing, but with an EU twist: a coordinated effort, already launched with new rules foreseen by the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, that aim to relax current rules and make the plans resilient to judicial challenge. Whether these schemes will fully materialize remains uncertain, but their political symbolism is clear: Europe wants irregular migrants to stay away, even before

evaluating their vulnerability or grounds for legal claims for protection.

In sum, the 2021-25 period reveals a Europe whose migration policies have swung sharply to the right, though not always under right-wing governments. What stands out is the continent-wide retreat from the expansive asylum norms of the past half century, coupled with an embrace of temporary, selective, and externalized migration management. The New Pact institutionalizes this new orthodoxy at the supranational level, while national governments coordinate (and often compete) on ways to deter unwanted arrivals.

TAB. 1.1- TRENDS IN MIGRATION POLICIES, 2021-25
(EU-WIDE AND SELECTED COUNTRIES)

Country	Policy (month/year)
Austria	• accelerated deportations; suspended asylum applications for Syrians (12/2024); • government reserving the right to suspend asylum applications in case of “significant increase” in arrivals. Oppose EU’s emergency relocations of asylum seekers from other EU countries (02/2025) • suspended family reunification for refugees and asylum seekers for at least 6 months (03/2025)
Denmark	• “zero vision”: goal to reduce asylum applicants to zero → family reunification rules tightened, deportation policies increased, social benefit payments to asylum seekers lowered (and no benefits after claim is rejected) (since 2021) • allows third-country asylum processing (“Rwanda Plan”), although not yet enacted (since 06/2021) • expansion of “parallel societies” law to “prevention areas”: municipalities can designate areas at risk of becoming immigrant-heavy (>30% non-Western) as “prevention areas”, landlords can refuse rentals

European Union

- New Pact for Migration and Asylum: new robust border screenings, including biometrics; fast-tracked asylum processing at borders for low-recognition-rate nationalities (<20% protection rate), with automatic return orders if rejected; stricter Dublin rules to prevent secondary movement; integrated return procedures; permanent solidarity mechanism with mandatory burden sharing between EU countries (staggered enactment 06/2024 through 06/2026)
- upon request of 14 Member States, exploring outsourcing of asylum processing (05/2024)
- proposal to facilitate application of safe third country legislation (09/2024)
- proposal to facilitate returns (03/2025)
- in the MFF 2028-2035's initial proposal, doubling financial envelope for migration management and strengthening Europe's borders (including Frontex) (07/2025)

Finland

- facilitations for seasonal workers (06/2021)
- cuts daily allowances to asylum seekers by 40% or more (04/2024)
- stricter requirements for Finnish citizenship, from 5 to 8 years of continuous residence (07/2024)
- prohibited asylum seekers from switching to work or education residence permits while claim is pending or after rejection (09/2024)
- restrictions to family reunification requirements (05/2025)
- comprehensive asylum reform: stricter interview protocols, banned travel to countries of origin, faster deportations (06/2025)

France

- eased regularization for undocumented migrants in shortage sectors (01/2024)
- tightened asylum appeals, expanded detention, introduced a "republican principles" contract for residence permits (01/2024)
- 15-day obligation to leave country for rejected asylum seekers, allowing house arrest or detention for non-compliance (07/2024)
- suspend asylum applications for Syrians (12/2024)
- new rules for regularizing undocumented migrants, with stricter criteria like longer stays, French proficiency, integration proof (01/2025)
- administrative detention extended from 3 to 7 months for "dangerous" irregular migrants (03/2025)
- streamlined talent permits, doubled employees' fines for non-compliance, limits family accompaniment to integrated cases (06/2025)

- Germany**
- amended “Skilled Immigration Act” to make Germany more attractive to skilled labor immigrants (11/2023)
 - Repatriation Improvement Act: simplified deportation procedures for rejected asylum seekers, especially by expanding detention powers and facilitating forced returns (12/2023)
 - introduced comprehensive border controls at all land borders, suspending Schengen rules (since 09/2024)
 - reduced welfare benefits for asylum seekers (01/2025)
 - suspended family reunification for those granted subsidiary protection until 2027 (05/2025)
 - ended fast-track naturalization for well-integrated migrants, bringing it back from 3 to 5 years (05/2025)
 - proposed expansion of safe countries of origin list (06/2025)
 - - abolished automatic legal aid in asylum procedures (08/2025)
- Greece**
- stricter regularization requirements, points-based: 5 years of residence, B1 Greek proficiency, financial self-sufficiency, no criminal record (04/2021)
 - new asylum law introduces stricter asylum procedures, and faster processing for certain nationalities (09/2021)
 - stricter conditions for international protection and reception; reduced material support for asylum seekers, enhanced deportations for rejected applicants (06/2022)
 - new Immigration Code: quotas for low-skilled work, tightened family reunification (10/2023)
 - migrants can't apply for residency anymore after 7 years of stay in country
 - up to 5 years in prison for illegal entry (06/2025)
 - detention for irregulars from 18 to 24 months (06/2025)
 - suspension of right to apply for asylum for 3 months (07/2025)
 - rejected asylum seekers from safe third countries face 2-5 years of imprisonment and up to €10,000 fine if do not voluntarily depart within 14 days (09/2025)

Italy

- stricter reception conditions, mandatory integration courses, reduced allowances for asylum seekers (03/2022)
- restricting NGOs' sea rescue operations (fines and seizures), expanded administrative detention from 12 to 18 months, shortened asylum appeal times, "special protection" shortened from 5 to 2 years (03/2023)
- reduced reception standards for non-vulnerable asylum seekers, faster processing and deportations, limits family reunification for those holding subsidiary protection (10/2023)
- established centers in Albania for processing asylum claims of sea arrivals (11/2023)
- stricter requirements for family reunification: limits reunification to core family (spouse, children under 18), income threshold to 150% of social allowance, A2 Italian proficiency (12/2024)
- suspended asylum processing for Syrians (12/2024)

Netherlands

- suspended family reunification visa issuance (08/2022 to mid-2023, partial lifting)
- introduced new "credibility assessment" for asylum applicants that must provide "objective evidence" (authenticated documents) to support their claims (07/2024)
- declared "asylum crisis", introducing emergency measures (09/2024)
- ended state-funded housing for rejected asylum seekers (01/2025)
- expanded border controls, deportations to "safe" Syrian areas resume (05/2025)
- "strictest asylum policy ever": suspending asylum applications for 2 years; suspending family reunification for 2 years; criminalizes undocumented residence; downgrades reception facilities; introduces "preliminary decision procedure" to accelerate rejections; creates two-tier system for refugees including "temporary protection" with limited duration (still pending as of 09/2025)

Portugal

- end of "post-entry legalization": foreign workers without official work permit cannot apply to be regularized (06/2024)
- major campaign to expel irregular migrants (05/2025)
- doubling residency requirement to apply for citizenship to 10 years (06/2025)
- restricted regularization procedures; work visas for highly qualified candidates only and 120-day limit (07/2025)
- restricted family reunification: two years of legal residence (07/2025)

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Spain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • streamlined residence and work permits by reducing types; facilitated regularization after 3 years of irregular stay; tightened requirements for family reunification (06/2022) • unified reception system for asylum seekers and migrants, mandating integration programs; expanded detentions for irregular migrants (11/2022) • reduced residency requirement to regularize irregular migrants from 3 to 2 years; rejected asylum seekers who work for 6 months can get permit of stay (11/2024) |
| Sweden | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • made temporary restrictions permanent: permanent residence permits for refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection downgraded to temporary ones (up to 3 years); restricted family reunification to immediate family after 2 years; narrowed humanitarian protection (06/2021) • Tidö Agreement: paradigm shift in asylum policy, Sweden will “in no respect be more generous” than required by international and EU law (10/2022) • adjustment of asylum regulations to EU minimum levels (10/2023) • asylum seekers must reside in reception centers and receive mandatory integration courses, or face benefit cuts (03/2025) • ended option for rejected asylum seekers to switch to work permits; deportation orders’ validity extended indefinitely (04/2025) • restricted work permits: raised salary threshold to 100% of median salary, restricts low-skilled entries, promotes high-skilled workers (06/2025) |

Source: author's own research

Short-Term Successes, Long-Term Challenges

At first glance, the restrictive turn in Europe's migration policies appears to have borne fruit. Irregular arrivals, after reaching record highs in 2023, dropped sharply last year. Politicians across the continent seized on this decline as evidence that tougher rules, stronger borders, and migration diplomacy with transit or origin countries were paying off. Yet when scrutinized more closely, these apparent victories look fragile, short-lived, and even counterproductive in the long run. What emerges instead is a pattern of short-term successes achieved at pretty

high costs (ethical, political, and strategic); successes that do not address the deeper drivers of mobility between Africa and Europe.

The most immediate yardstick for success in Europe's migration politics is the number of irregular arrivals. In 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted mobility worldwide, around 45,000 migrants reached Europe from African countries through irregular routes. By 2023, that figure had ballooned to 215,000, the highest level ever recorded. These numbers spurred a flurry of diplomatic activity from national governments and the EU alike, with Italy negotiating with Tunisia, Spain approaching several governments in Western Africa (see Chapter 3 in this volume). One year later, official statistics showed a drop to 130,000 arrivals in 2024: still higher than the pre-2019 norm, but much lower than the previous peak.⁸

The apparent "success story" of 2024 was largely tied to the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding, signed in mid-2023. Tunisia had become the main departure point for Mediterranean crossings, and European leaders presented the deal as a model for "effective partnership". In practice, however, the pattern was volatile. During the first months of the MoU's implementation, departures from Tunisia actually surged, as smugglers and migrants feared imminent crackdowns and rushed to leave. Only when Tunisian authorities launched a full-scale campaign of arrests, deportations to desert areas, and heightened coast guard patrols did departures collapse. By late 2024, flows from Tunisia had slowed dramatically, giving European governments a convenient talking point: deterrence works.⁹

Yet this interpretation ignores the broader dynamics at play. The decline in crossings owed less to structural solutions than to the repressive capacity of an authoritarian regime under acute pressure from Europe. It was achieved through methods (violent

⁸ Frontex, "EU external borders: irregular crossings down 18% in the first 7 months of 2025", 7 August 2025.

⁹ "Externalizing Migration Control to the MENA Region: Tunisia", The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 1 May 2025.

roundups, collective expulsions to the Libyan and Algerian borders, denial of basic rights) that drew sharp condemnation from human rights organizations. Moreover, the reduction proved fragile: any change in Tunisia's political calculus could reopen the routes overnight, while a surge in irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands proved that some flows can quickly adapt to repressive policies. Moreover, the lesson of past experiments looms large. Italy's 2017 deal with Libya temporarily reduced arrivals, but flows resumed after 2020 and are now consistently above 50,000 per year. The EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 slowed crossings for a time, but Ankara's periodic threats to "open the floodgates" underscored the inherent vulnerability of relying on partner governments whose interests only partly overlap with Europe's.¹⁰

Thus, while the 2024 figures offered politicians an opportunity to declare victory, the structural picture remains unchanged. Europe is still highly dependent on fragile bargains with transit states, bargains that delivered declining arrivals only when enforced with coercive measures that Europe itself could not legally or politically carry out on its own soil.

If reduced arrivals represent one "pillar" of European restrictive policies, the other is the promise of higher return rates. European governments routinely proclaim that they aim to sending back all (or most) irregular migrants to their countries of origin once their asylum claims are rejected. Here the gap between rhetoric and reality is even wider. Officially, EU leaders have long argued that credible return policies are the only way to deter irregular entry. In practice, however, the EU's effective return rate hovers at around 23% and has been stuck there for over a decade. Even that number, moreover, is inflated by high compliance from Western Balkan countries, which have a strong incentive to cooperate as part of their EU accession process.

¹⁰ S. Léonard and C. Kaunert, "De-centring the Securitisation of Asylum and Migration in the European Union: Securitisation, Vulnerability and the Role of Turkey", *Geopolitics*, vol. 27, 2022, pp. 729-51.

When it comes to Africa, figures are even lower. Between 2019 and 2023, EU states issued more than 1.2 million return orders to African nationals. Yet only about 180,000 migrants (or 15%) were actually repatriated. Country-specific cases show just how stark the failures are. Out of nearly 40,000 migrants whom EU states attempted to return to Senegal over the past five years, only 4% were successfully sent back. Mali's rate was a mere 2%, and Nigeria, one of the largest origin countries, hovered around 10%. Bureaucratic hurdles, limited administrative capacity, and above all the reluctance of African governments to be seen as complicit in Europe's containment strategy explain these paltry numbers.¹¹

Compounding the problem is the political instability of return agreements. For example, Germany negotiated limited cooperation on returns with The Gambia in the late 2010s, only to see it collapse within a year when Gambian domestic politics turned against the deal. A bilateral agreement between France and Côte d'Ivoire in 2022 faced mass protests and collapsed soon after. Even Morocco, which has stronger ties to Europe, enforces return cooperation only selectively, keeping repatriation rates below 20%.

This recurring failure exposes a fundamental contradiction of the EU's approach: Europe wants high return rates, but origin countries have little incentive to cooperate. Forced returns are politically toxic at home, where governments are accused of "selling out" their citizens, and they undermine the economic lifeline of remittances. The EU's insistence on returns thus produces diplomatic friction without delivering meaningful results.

Also given its failures in improving returns, Europe appears to be currently shifting towards a trend of ultra-externalization: the attempt to move asylum processing entirely outside the Union's territory. Italy's 2023 agreement with Albania epitomizes this

¹¹ M. Villa and G.M. Della Gatta, *High or Low Tide? EU-Africa Cooperation on Migration*, ISPI Policy Paper, 30 September 2024.

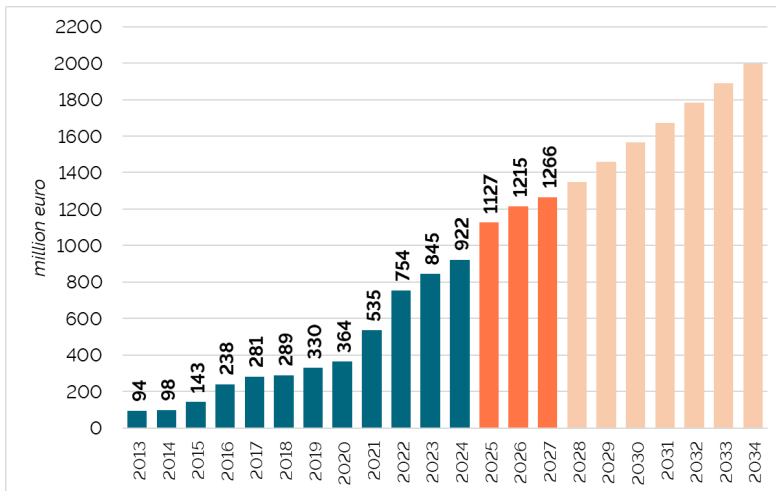
approach, both in its ambitions and in its inability to face basic reality tests. Under the deal, Rome sought to transfer part of the reception and processing of sea arrivals to facilities on Albanian soil. Ultimately, legal challenges delayed implementation, and it is highly unlikely that such a plan would have worked in practice. However, the very fact that such a plan was seriously pursued marked a new frontier, and the EU itself is now openly debating offshore processing as part of the New Pact.¹²

These schemes are attractive to European governments for two reasons: they offer symbolic reassurance to domestic voters that asylum seekers will not set foot on EU soil, and they shift responsibility for reception and processing costs to cheaper jurisdictions. Yet their flaws are glaring. Legally, they run up against the non-refoulement principle and existing jurisprudence that ties asylum responsibilities to territorial control. Politically and economically, they impose significant costs (Italy's deal with Albania was estimated at €600 million per year) while producing little evidence that deterrence actually works. Diplomatically, they alienate potential partners: few African states want to be permanently branded as Europe's detention yard.

A final illustration of how heavily Europe has bet on security-based solutions is the expansion of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Established in 2004 as a modest coordination body, Frontex has transformed into a quasi-military actor with a budget that skyrocketed from €143 million in 2015 to over €1.2 billion projected for 2027, and €2 billion by 2034. The agency now deploys advanced surveillance technology, rapid reaction teams, and joint operations not only in the Mediterranean but increasingly in West Africa and the Sahel.

¹² A. De Leo and E. Celoria, "The Italy–Albania Protocol: A new model of border-shifting within the EU and its compatibility with Union law", *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2024, pp. 595–618.

FIG. 1.2 - FRONTEX (EUROPEAN BORDER AND COAST GUARD)'S BUDGET



Source: author's calculations and projections on official past budgets and European Commission's MFF 2028-34 proposal

Supporters of Frontex's expansion point to improved detection rates (40% higher in 2023 compared to 2020) and to operational successes, such as the interception or rescue of over 100,000 migrants in 2023. But these metrics mask deeper issues. For one, Frontex has been repeatedly implicated in pushbacks and informal returns, with watchdogs reporting more than 20,000 such cases in 2023 alone. Second, its accountability mechanisms remain weak, even as its powers expand. Finally, the opportunity cost is stark: hundreds of millions spent on containment could have supported legal pathways, skills partnerships, or economic resilience in origin countries.¹³

¹³ R. Paul, "Risk Analysis as a Governance Tool in European Border Control", in A. Weinart et al., *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Migration in Europe*, 2025, pp. 227-38.

For African governments, joint operations with Frontex are often a source of embarrassment. In 2023, Senegal expressed reluctance to sign a Status Agreement that would let Frontex operate with executive powers on Senegalese soil, due to rights and accountability concerns baked into such a deal.¹⁴ In Dakar, civil society organizations openly campaigned to “push back Frontex”. Politically, this made overt cooperation costly for the government, and no agreement has been signed to date. In 2024, then, the EU concluded a €210m migration partnership with Mauritania, but the government sidestepped a full Frontex Status Agreement because it was “politically sensitive”.¹⁵ This year, moreover, Senegal itself together with Mali protested Mauritania’s mass pushbacks of their nationals, making Frontex’s position in both countries highly shaky. In the eyes of many African observers, Frontex symbolizes Europe’s unilateral security-first approach, undermining the rhetoric of “win-win partnerships”.

The result of all these policies is a fragile edifice of migration control: impressive in its budgetary scale, but brittle in its outcomes. Arrivals may decline in one year only to rise the next. Return rates remain stubbornly low despite decades of effort. And deals with transit states can crumble under domestic or regional pressures. Sure, a few short-term metrics – the numbers of arrivals in particular – may allow leaders to claim victory. But they obscure a long-term reality: Europe is locked in a reactive cycle, where each apparent success generates new tensions and vulnerabilities. The more it invests in containment, the less it “invests” in cooperation.

¹⁴ European Parliament, “Draft Report on a European Parliament recommendation to the Commission concerning on the ongoing negotiations on a status agreement on operational activities carried out by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in Senegal”, 2023/2086(INI), 27 October 2023.

¹⁵ H.O. Moctar, “Analysis: The politics behind the EU-Mauritania migration partnership”, 29 April 2024.

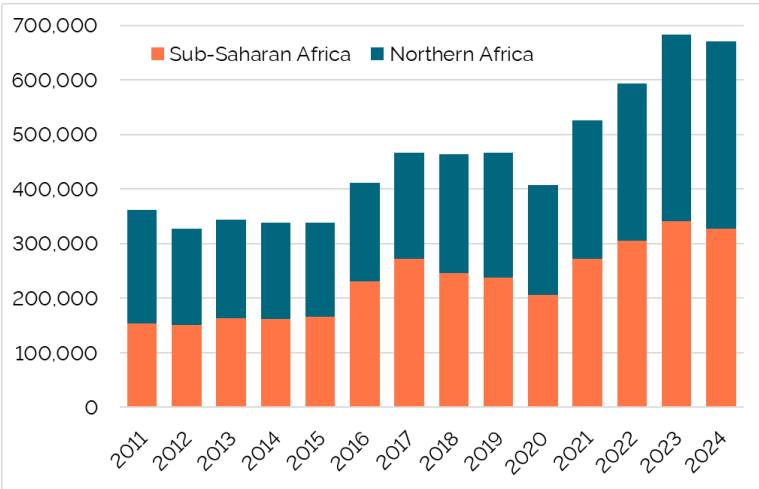
If migration diplomacy between Europe and Africa is to escape this cycle, it will require a fundamental rethink: away from the zero-sum logic of deterrence and toward a recognition of shared interests. But as of 2025, the political incentives point the other way. The rightward shift in Europe amplifies calls for ever-tougher measures, leaving little space for the patience and compromise that genuine partnerships demand.

The Apparent Resilience of Legal Migration

If the first half of the 2020s has been marked by Europe's relentless pursuit of restrictive measures on irregular migration, one striking countertrend stands out: legal migration pathways have expanded, not contracted. This paradox complicates the narrative of an unambiguously repressive "fortress Europe". While governments are building fences, tightening asylum rules, and attempting to outsource responsibilities to third countries, they are simultaneously opening new doors for workers. To understand this apparent contradiction, one must look beyond the rhetoric of restriction to the demographic and economic realities shaping European societies.

The numbers tell a story that political discourse often obscures. Over the past 15 years, EU countries have steadily expanded the issuance of first residence permits to non-EU citizens. In 2011, they collectively issued about 1.5 million permits. By 2019, the number had doubled to 3 million. The pandemic briefly interrupted this trajectory, pushing the total down to 2.3 million in 2020, but recovery was swift. By 2023, first permits exceeded 3.8 million, before moderating slightly to 3.5 million in 2024.

FIG. 1.3 - FIRST PERMITS OF STAY IN THE EU27 FOR CITIZENS OF AFRICAN COUNTRIES



Source: author's calculations on Eurostat.

The trend for African citizens is even more remarkable. As shown in Figure 3, fewer than 330,000 Africans received first residence permits in 2012. By 2019, before the Covid pandemic, the figure reached 465,000. And just four years later it climbed to 680,000, stabilizing at 670,000 in 2024. This represents a doubling within a decade, a striking fact given that African migration is so often portrayed as not only primarily irregular, but also “unmanageable”, and so much emphasis is placed on migration control, deterrence and returns.

The paradox sharpens when one sets these numbers against the backdrop of Europe’s political climate. In the very years when restrictive asylum rules became the dominant political narrative, legal entry opportunities expanded. This is not accidental, but it reflects a structural reality: Europe is an ageing continent, its native workforce shrinking, with acute shortages

in both low-skilled and high-skilled sectors.¹⁶ Restrictive rhetoric may win elections, but restrictive practice in labour migration would significantly hamper essential industries and crucial economic sectors.

Europe's population is ageing rapidly. By 2030, one in four Europeans will be over 65.¹⁷ Fertility rates are well below replacement level in most countries, while life expectancy continues to rise. Without immigration, labour force participation would decline even more sharply, and already sectors such as agriculture, construction, healthcare, and elder care face structural shortages.

More and more often, migrant labour is no longer an option but a necessity. Demographic and economic imperatives therefore force politicians to confront realities even when political narratives are starkly divergent. Across Europe, governments seem to be picking up a trend of publicly denouncing irregular migration, while quietly (but sometimes significantly) expanding legal channels to keep their economies in sufficiently good health.¹⁸ This duality explains why residence permits rose even as asylum access narrowed.

Italy provides a textbook example. Successive Italian governments, while loudly denouncing irregular migration, have steadily expanded the so-called "decreto flussi", which is the mechanism for issuing work permits to non-EU nationals. What was once a small, annual quota has become a multi-year framework, with quotas multiplied by a factor of five in recent years. Crucially, Italy has tied some of these legal entries to formal agreements with countries of origin, creating a system where legal migration becomes a bargaining chip in bilateral diplomacy. On paper, this allows Rome to reward cooperation on returns or border control with more permits for seasonal

¹⁶ EURES, *Report on labour shortages and surpluses 2023*, European Labour Authority, 2024.

¹⁷ Eurostat, "Demography of Europe 2025", Interactive Publications, 2025.

¹⁸ K. Hooper, T. de Lange, and J. Slootjes, "How Can Labour Migration Policies Help Tackle Europe's Looming Skills Crisis?", MPI Europe, June 2025.

or long-term work. In practice, it acknowledges that Italian employers would have a hard time without migrant labour.

Spain represents the other end of the political spectrum. Whereas Italy expanded legal migration under a rhetoric of restriction, Spain under Pedro Sánchez is pursuing a more openly pro-migration narrative. As remarked earlier, in late 2024 his government proposed the legalization of nearly one million irregular migrants already living and working in Spain. By reducing the residency requirement for regularization of irregular migrants that are in work from 3 years to 2, and by allowing rejected asylum seekers with 6 months of employment to qualify for a residence permit, Madrid explicitly framed regularization as a tool for economic stability and demographic resilience.

This was not merely a technocratic response: it was a political gamble. At a time when much of Europe was swinging to the right, Sánchez is betting on the argument that integration and regularization are more beneficial than exclusion. His approach reflects the distinctive structure of Spain's labour market (heavily reliant on seasonal work, with a large informal economy) and its recent experience with demographic decline in rural areas. By incorporating undocumented migrants into the formal labour force, Spain aims to boost tax revenues, expand social security contributions, and reduce exploitation.

Whether Spain's gamble will succeed politically is an open question, but it reveals an important truth: regularization is not a humanitarian gesture, it's a strategic economic tool. By contrast, countries that keep migrants in limbo often perpetuate informality (with the corollary of tax evasion) and stokes social tension.

It would be misleading, however, to suggest that Europe's expansion of legal migration reflects a newfound liberalism. What we see instead is the rise of an "economic filter" approach. Legal pathways are opening, but selectively, for those deemed economically desirable. In Germany, the Skilled Immigration Act's amendment in 2023 aimed explicitly to attract high-skilled

workers, easing requirements for qualifications and streamlining visa procedures. France, while tightening asylum appeals and detention rules, simultaneously expanded "talent permits" for highly skilled professionals. Finland facilitated seasonal work permits even as it slashed asylum allowances and tightened citizenship rules.

The message is clear: asylum seekers and low-skilled migrants face harsher treatment, while targeted labour migrants are courted.¹⁹ This dualism can be politically expedient, as governments can claim to be "tough" on unwanted migrants while pragmatic about labour needs. But this can only happen if governments start to acknowledge more openly this trend, rather than quietly expanding policies that contrast with political discourse.

The paradox of legal migration to Europe also has a darker side. While work permits and student visas expand, family reunification has become more restricted. Between 2023 and 2025, countries including Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and Austria all tightened family reunification rules. Higher income thresholds, stricter language requirements, and even outright suspensions have become common.

This trend fragments the very idea of integration and brings us back to the *Gastarbeiter* ("guest worker") era. Migrants may be allowed in as workers, but denied the right to build stable family lives, possibly with the ultimate prospect of going back to their countries of origin once their work periods expire.²⁰ Naturally, such policies treat migrants as temporary labour inputs rather than long-term members of society. By doing so, they run counter to the stated aim of many governments

¹⁹ M. Czaika, "Exploring Europe's external migration policy mix: on the interactions of visa, readmission, and resettlement policies", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 49, 2023, pp. 3140-61.

²⁰ P. Lutz, "Allowing mobility and preventing migration? The combination of entry and stay in immigration policies", *West European Politics*, vol. 47, 2024, pp. 840-66.

to promote integration: without family stability, integration becomes far harder.²¹ The expansion of legal work migration thus coexists with a contraction of social rights, producing a schizophrenic system in which Europe welcomes labour but discourages belonging.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of legal migration will likely remain upward. Demand for workers in healthcare, logistics, agriculture, and technology is set to grow. Eurostat projections suggest that the EU will require millions of additional workers by the mid-2030s just to sustain current growth rates. African countries, with their young and expanding labour force, are natural partners. The challenge is whether Europe can structure this relationship as a genuine partnership (offering pathways that are fair, transparent, and mutually beneficial) or whether it will continue to operate under the shadow of coercion and exclusion.

Some steps in the right direction are visible. Skills partnerships, programs that match African graduates with European employers, have begun to (very slowly) expand. Pilot projects in Germany and Belgium, for instance, link vocational training in Africa with guaranteed work permits in Europe. These schemes recognize that migration can be managed in ways that benefit both sides, rather than as a zero-sum struggle.²² But scaling them up requires political courage, long-term investment, and above all a willingness to move beyond the politics of fear.

For now, the paradox remains unresolved. Europe is turning inward in its asylum and border policies, but outward in its demand for workers. The same governments that build fences also sign agreements for labour quotas, and the same electorates that cheer deportations rely on migrant carers for their ageing

²¹ K. Jutvik and E. Holmqvist, "Precarious Residence? A study on the Impact of Restrictive Migration Policy on Migrants' Subjective Well-Being and Stress", *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2025, pp. 1-19.

²² K. Hooper and R. Sohst, "Competing for Talent: What Role Can Employment- and Skills-Based Mobility Projects Play?", Policy Brief, Migration Policy Institute, April 2024.

parents. This tension is unlikely to disappear. Instead, it will define the future of EU-Africa migration diplomacy: a battle between restrictive narratives and expansive necessities.

Conclusion

The past decade has seen Europe's migration policies undergo a decisive rightward turn. Across the EU, governments have expanded detention powers, restricted migrant rights, curtailed family reunifications, and embraced externalization schemes that shift asylum responsibilities beyond European borders. At the supranational level, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum codifies this new orthodoxy, entrenching deterrence and conditionality as guiding principles. From Berlin to Vienna, Rome to Stockholm, the message has been clear: irregular migration must be minimized, and asylum transformed from a durable right into a temporary concession.

Yet this apparent uniformity conceals two important paradoxes. Politically, Denmark demonstrates that restrictionism is not the preserve of the far right, while Spain illustrates that left-led governments can pursue the opposite course, betting on legalization and incorporation rather than deterrence. More fundamentally, the rise of legal migration pathways shows that Europe cannot afford to close itself off entirely. Residence permits for non-EU citizens have reached record highs, and African nationals in particular now have more legal entry (or regularization) opportunities than ever before. Labour shortages, demographic ageing, and structural economic dependencies drive these decisions even as political narratives emphasize the need for more "ethnically cohesive" and "closed" societies.

The paradox is sharpened by the outcomes of restrictive measures themselves. Irregular arrivals may decline temporarily, but only through fragile bargains with third country partners that carry high ethical and diplomatic costs. Despite years of effort and billions spent, for instance, return rates remain

stubbornly low. Conditionality erodes trust without delivering sustainable compliance, as third countries' governments might abide by the EU's asks for short periods of time but are often pushed to revise deals and agreements by domestic public opinions. Meanwhile, externalization processes and Frontex's securitization spiral raise questions about Europe's credibility as a rights-based actor. Short-term "successes" might be coming at the expense of their own long-term sustainability.

In conclusion, the broader picture is one of dissonance between politics and reality. European electorates demand visible crackdowns, and governments deliver them. But demographic pressures and economic imperatives push in the opposite direction, forcing the same governments to expand legal migration quietly, even as they trumpet restrictive agendas.

For EU-Africa migration diplomacy, this dissonance is corrosive. African governments see in Europe a partner that speaks of cooperation but acts with coercion. Unless this gap is bridged, by recognizing that mobility is not an anomaly to suppress but a structural reality to manage, Europe risks perpetuating a cycle of mistrust and fragility. The path forward requires not more containment, but a reorientation toward genuine partnerships. Partnerships that might align Europe's demographic needs with Africa's developmental aspirations. And reframe migration not as a crisis, but as a shared opportunity.

2. Why Externalisation Will Not Resolve the EU's Migration Dilemma

Gaia Mastrosanti

The European Union's migration strategy has increasingly gravitated towards outsourcing border management and return operations to third countries. Yet, persistent obstacles, ranging from fragile cooperation and reintegration difficulties to inadequate communication, expose the intrinsic limitations of this approach, especially in the absence of a cohesive internal framework and robust legal migration channels. The Pact on Migration and Asylum¹ embodies the EU's ambition to overhaul a system long plagued by dysfunction. However, since its adoption, the external dimension of EU migration policy has assumed a preeminent role within the current policy cycle. Recent proposals from the European Commission, including the broadened scope of the Safe Third Country concept, the creation of a unified EU list of safe countries of origin, and legislative proposals envisioning return hubs beyond EU borders, underscore a mounting preference among member states for externalised solutions. This paradigm is underpinned by two principal objectives: deterring irregular migration and streamlining returns. Nonetheless, the viability of this approach remains contingent upon effective and sustained collaboration with third countries, particularly in Africa, where political sensitivities and operational constraints persistently hamper progress.

¹ European Commission, *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, 21 May 2024.

The expansion of externalisation has corresponded with an erosion of internal solidarity. The Pact, forged after protracted impasse, rests upon a deeply political and sensitive consensus: the delegation of migration management beyond EU frontiers. While ostensibly designed to address systemic deficiencies within the asylum system, the Pact simultaneously enshrines a profound paradox. Responsibility is progressively outsourced, even as mutual trust and equitable burden-sharing among member states remain tenuous and fragmented.²

Brussels' migration policy is constructed upon a complex matrix of partnerships, conditionalities, both positive and negative, and financial incentives. Yet this externally focused framework has provoked mounting resistance from African governments, civil society actors, and diaspora communities alike, who advocate for a fundamental reorientation, from paternalistic postures to genuine partnership, from aid dependency to strategic investment, and from asymmetrical relations to reciprocal engagement.

This chapter offers a critical appraisal of the inherent contradictions embedded within the EU's migration architecture, exposing its structural frailties while illuminating pathways for reform and offering pragmatic recommendations. It contends that while externalisation may procure ephemeral political dividends, it ultimately falls short of resolving the core challenge: the absence of a coherent, equitable internal mechanism for responsibility sharing. Unless the EU recalibrates its strategy to harmonize enforcement with opportunity and articulates this balance with transparency to both external partners and migrants, it risks entrenching the very migratory dynamics it aspires to mitigate.

² M. Villa, *Between Shores: Reframing EU Migration Policy Through an African Lens*, ISPI Dossier, 14 July 2025.

The Pact on Migration and Asylum

In December 2023, after years of impasse, the European Parliament and the Council reached what was quickly labelled a historic agreement: the Pact on Migration and Asylum.³ The timing was no coincidence. With the June 2024 European elections approaching and far-right parties gaining ground across the continent, EU institutions were under growing pressure to deliver a tangible result on one of the most divisive issues in European politics. The Pact was presented as a breakthrough, as proof that the EU could still act. Yet behind the carefully crafted narrative of unity lay a fragile compromise, with deep political implications, shaped by urgency rather than consensus. The reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), long stalled by conflicting national interests and competing visions, was finally unblocked. However, the outcome, while significant, raised as many questions as it answered. The European Parliament gave the Pact its green light the following year, in May 2024, and the Council formally adopted it. It was a turning point: after years of deadlock, EU institutions had managed to push through a complex and politically sensitive legislative package.

The Pact lays the foundations for a new phase in EU migration and asylum policy. It introduces streamlined procedures at the Union's external borders, screening, border asylum, and return, while seeking to address one of the most divisive issues of the past decade: the fair sharing of responsibility for asylum seekers. It also establishes new governance tools and monitoring mechanisms, assigning EU institutions a more active role in managing migratory pressure, coordinating solidarity efforts, and overseeing compliance with fundamental rights. According to some, the Pact signalled a fresh start. Yet its adoption came with significant political and legal challenges. The Council

³ European Parliament, [Asylum and migration: deal for more solidarity and responsibility sharing](#), Press Release, 20 December 2023.

vote was not unanimous, reflecting persistent divisions among member states. And while the reform aims to make the system more efficient and resilient, several provisions, particularly those limiting safeguards during border procedures, have raised concerns about their potential impact on the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.

At its core, the Pact reflects three lessons drawn from years of deadlock in EU migration governance. It reworks the Dublin system while introducing a form of mandatory solidarity, though one that allows member states wide discretion. It reinforces the responsibilities placed on border countries, further entrenching the front-line/back-line divide. Most importantly, it puts externalisation at the centre of EU strategy, relying on stronger ties with third countries to manage and curb migration flows.⁴

The Pact's external dimension is, in fact, arguably its most politically significant and broadly supported element. Many of its reforms are inextricably tied to the external dimension of EU migration policy. The flexible solidarity mechanism, while central to the internal compromise, appears insufficient to deliver a truly functional system of responsibility-sharing. Rather than building primarily on internal solidarity, the Pact's architecture is thus anchored in two key strategies: reducing arrivals and increasing returns. It is this outward-looking approach that ultimately defines the core of the legislative package.⁵

The Building Blocks of the Pact

The legislation introduces a far-reaching restructuring of the EU's migration system, centred on a series of interconnected legislative reforms. One of its key reforms is the creation of a new three-step "seamless" border procedure, screening,

⁴ A. Neidhardt, "One step closer to getting the EU Migration Pact done. One step closer to ambitious change?", Brussels, European Policy Centre (EPC), 2023.

⁵ "From Compromise to Implementation: A New Era for EU Migration Policy?", European Policy Centre (EPC), June 2024.

border asylum processing, and border return, outlined in the Screening Regulation⁶ and the Asylum Procedures Regulation⁷ (APR). These measures aim to streamline the management of mixed flows at the EU's external borders. Nonetheless, their effectiveness will largely depend on the availability of resources, the clarity of operational roles, and the strength of fundamental rights safeguards, including through newly introduced national monitoring mechanisms. The Pact also replaces the old Dublin framework with the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation⁸ (AMMR), which introduces a mandatory yet flexible solidarity mechanism. While this marks an important step forward in recognising shared responsibility, the system's complexity and the lack of binding relocation obligations in most cases raise questions about its real potential to rebalance intra-EU dynamics. Complementing this, the Crisis and Force Majeure Regulation⁹ sets out exceptional derogations for emergency situations, but the risk of protracted derogations and unequal treatment across member states remains.

Return and readmission cooperation is treated as a structural pillar of the Pact, rendering third-country partnerships essential

⁶ European Parliament and Council, [Regulation \(EU\) 2024/1356 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 introducing the screening of third-country nationals at the external borders and amending, Regulations \(EC\) No 767/2008, \(EU\) 2017/2226, \(EU\) 2018/1240 and \(EU\) 2019/817](#), Official Journal of the European Union, 14 May 2024.

⁷ European Parliament and Council, [Regulation \(EU\) 2024/1348 of 14 May 2024 establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing, Directive 2013/32/EU](#), Official Journal of the European Union. 14 May 2024.

⁸ European Parliament and Council, [Regulation \(EU\) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, amending Regulations \(EU\) 2021/1147 and \(EU\) 2021/1060 and repealing, Regulation \(EU\) No 604/20](#). Official Journal of the European Union, 14 May 2024.

⁹ European Parliament and Council, [Regulation \(EU\) 2024/1350 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 addressing situations of crisis and force majeure in the field of migration and asylum](#), Official Journal of the European Union. 14 May 2024.

for its functioning. This reliance has been further bolstered by two recent legislative proposals by the European Commission: in mid-March, a draft regulation on Returns¹⁰ was put forward to fill the final gap in the Pact framework, and in late May, the Commission proposed a simplification of the Safe Third Country concept.¹¹ The latter would eliminate the requirement of a meaningful connection between the applicant and the third country, making mere transit, or even an agreement or arrangement with a third state, sufficient to consider an asylum application inadmissible. A common EU list of safe third countries has also been proposed.

A seamless process at the EU's borders

The reforms aim to make screening, border asylum procedures, and returns part of a "seamless process". Thus, the overarching goal is to effectively render the system coordinated, responding to the practical need of linking various policies and operational functions, especially in areas under pressure from mixed migration flows and irregular arrivals. At the same time, these measures reflect a focus on containment, and, most importantly, risk overlooking the interests of partner countries. In fact, rather than fostering more balanced international cooperation, they could end up reinforcing responsibility-shifting at the expense of responsibility sharing. In 2007, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had already emphasised the importance of a system capable of distinguishing between different categories of people on the move and ensuring referral to appropriate procedures¹²

¹⁰ European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing](#), Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC, 28 February 2025.

¹¹ European Commission, [Commission proposes to facilitate the application of the safe third country concept](#), Press Release, 20 May 2025.

¹² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *The 10-Point Plan: Mechanisms for profiling and referral* (Chapter 5).

Yet while the new EU framework claims to deliver on that vision, it does so through an increasingly security-focused lens.

In more practical terms, the three-stage border process forms a tightly integrated mechanism designed to control migration flows directly at the EU's external borders. Screening serves to triage individuals upon arrival, identifying those who may be channelled into swift asylum procedures or returned directly. The system applies a legal fiction of non-entry, allowing for the restriction of rights, including detention and limited access to procedural safeguards. By making border procedures mandatory in several cases, especially for applicants from countries with low recognition rates, the new rules operationalise a deterrence-based model that prioritises speed and control over individual guarantees. In doing so, this legislation reinforces the EU's externalisation approach: shifting responsibility away from the core of the Union and towards its periphery, while increasing reliance on third countries to absorb or prevent migratory movements in the first place.

These changes are anchored in several new and revised instruments under the Pact. The Asylum Procedures Regulation formalises and expands the use of border procedures, making them mandatory in a wider range of cases. The Screening Regulation introduces a compulsory initial phase for certain non-EU nationals, setting common standards for identity checks, biometric data collection, and vulnerability assessments. While these new instruments are meant to render migration management more effective, they also raise critical concerns around access to protection, procedural guarantees, and the risk of prolonged detention under the legal fiction of non-entry. In particular, the APR, by expanding the use of border procedures, institutionalize a form of filtering at the gates of Europe.

Recasting the Safe Third Country concept

At the same time, the APR expands and refines the Safe Third Country concept: unlike the previous Asylum Procedures Directive (APD), which required third countries to have

ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or offer comparable protection, the APR has introduced the concept of access to effective protection. This means a country can be considered safe if, beyond protection from persecution, serious harm, and refoulement, it also upholds basic human rights standards such as access to means of subsistence, essential healthcare, and education. However, these standards are less comprehensive than those guaranteed by the Refugee Convention, which includes guarantees like housing, employment, freedom of association, or property ownership. Moreover, the Commission's May proposal added a further element of flexibility in the application of STC, eliminating the much-debated connection requirement. Back in 2016, and again in its 2020 APR draft,¹³ the Commission sought explicitly to count transit through a third state as evidence of a sufficient link, only to see that provision stripped out during negotiations and relegated to non-binding recitals. Those recitals went on to suggest that merely staying in a country could satisfy the connection requirement, opening the door to overly loose interpretations, precisely the stance championed by countries like Italy, which argued that even brief passage through Tunisia should trigger inadmissibility for applicants from countries in West Africa. Yet, consistent CJEU case law has long held that mere transit cannot justify sending someone back to a third country, a doctrinal constraint that likely explains why the Commission's original wording was abandoned.

The new proposal abolishes the mandatory connection test altogether: transit now suffices as a standalone ground for inadmissibility, and, where neither transit nor any personal link exists, Member States may rely on agreements or arrangements to ensure an applicant's protection elsewhere (with explicit safeguards for unaccompanied minors). Appeals

¹³ European Commission, [Asylum and Migration Management Regulation \(AMR\): Proposal for a Regulation on asylum and migration management](#), Commission Staff Working Document / Legislative Proposal, 23 September 2020 (online).

against STC-based inadmissibility would lose their automatic suspensive effect, while any new agreements must be notified to the Commission, thereby preserving oversight and fundamental-rights guarantees.

Rethinking Returns: The New Draft Regulation

One of the core, and most politically sensitive, elements of the EU's migration policy is the strategy it adopts on returns. As mentioned above, by anchoring its legislative approach in two main goals, reducing irregular arrivals and increasing returns, member states have made it clear that a new returns framework is seen as essential. In this regard, the Commission's March proposal¹⁴ on returns marked a notable turn in the evolving trajectory of Europe's external migration management. Designed to fill a lingering gap in the recently adopted Migration and Asylum Pact, it also sought to replace the existing Return Directive, arriving just as the Commission's self-imposed 100-day deadline for a new returns' framework drew near.

The reform had been under discussion for months, with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen raising the issue of advancing a common approach on returns in a letter to member states in October of last year, calling for further exploration, while also addressing the growing use of Schengen suspensions, emphasizing that "the reintroduction of border controls should be a measure of last resort, exceptional and proportionate to the identified threat".¹⁵

Her remarks came just weeks after Germany temporarily reintroduced border controls, citing the need to curb migration and "protect against the acute dangers posed by Islamist terrorism and serious crime". The decision underscores the

¹⁴ European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing...](#), cit.

¹⁵ European Council, *October 2024 EUCO Migration Letter*, 15 October 2024.

growing strain on Europe's borderless Schengen area, where 11 member states have now reinstated internal border checks on a temporary basis.¹⁶ It is no coincidence that increasing pressure on Schengen has gone hand in hand with tougher return policies, aimed at tackling irregular migration while preserving the free-movement area and reinforcing the EU's external borders.

Toward a common system?

The proposal quickly ignited debate, with much of the attention drawn to one particularly sensitive measure: the potential establishment of return hubs in third countries. Yet this focus has eclipsed other consequential elements in the draft, in particular, the provision allowing national authorities in one Member State to enforce a return decision issued by another. Such a shift could sideline national-level deliberations, in favour of a more streamlined, cross-border mechanism for removals.

However, to fully grasp what is at stake, it helps to take a step back and look at what are the main faults within the current existing frameworks.¹⁷ First, many, including the EU's Commissioner for Migration, Magnus Brunner, pointed to the low rate of returns, which has stagnated around 20% for the last two years,¹⁸ as the main evidence of ineffectiveness. However, the structural faults in the system go beyond the rate of returns: diverging practises across the Union must be taken into consideration, leading to different outcomes in different states and widening gaps. CJEU caselaw has also identified many shortcomings in terms of protecting fundamental rights.

¹⁶ European Commission, [Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control in the Schengen Area \(Schengen Borders Code, Article 25 ff\)](#), European Commission – Migration and Home Affairs.

¹⁷ European Parliament and Council, [Directive 2008/115/EC on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals](#), 16 December 2008.

¹⁸ Eurostat, [Returns of irregular migrants – quarterly statistics](#).

Under the current directive, for instance, detention is meant to be a measure of last resort, yet in practice, states have resorted to it far more frequently than they should. On top of this, the absence of any obligation for states to grant rights to people who cannot be returned leaves many in a legal vacuum. Thus, while opinions on the current framework differ, something is clear: it needed revision.¹⁹

Thus, with the aim of revising the current system, the draft regulation introduces key changes. Remarkably, it makes it compulsory to recognise a return decision issued by another member state, with the aim of standardising return procedures across all 27 EU countries. If adopted, this change would bring the returns process closer to a common European framework, harmonising practices across the bloc. As for detention, the grounds on which states can resort to this measure have been expanded, increasing the maximum detention period to up to two years for individuals considered a flight risk, an increase from the current 18-month limit under existing legislation. This provision, along with newly proposed appeal deadlines, has prompted concerns over a potential erosion of procedural safeguards.

Effective and modern solutions?

The Commission's call for "effective and modern" solutions takes shape in the proposal to create return hubs in third countries, paving the way for deals with non-EU states to host people who have been ordered to leave the EU.

These hubs would be reserved exclusively for individuals whose asylum claims have already been rejected, explicitly excluding unaccompanied minors and families with children. While the EU itself would not operate the facilities, the

¹⁹ M. Moraru, *Chapter 20: EU Return Directive: a cause for shame or an unexpectedly protective framework?*, in P. de Bruycker and L. Tsourdi (eds.), *Research Handbook on EU Migration and Asylum Law*, London, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022, pp. 435-54, DOI: [10.4337/9781786439635.00030](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786439635.00030).

plan would establish a legal framework for member states to negotiate agreements with third countries. Under this system, returns could take place to the country of origin, the country of transit, or a country hosting a return hub under such an agreement.

The proposal differs from both the UK's now-abandoned Rwanda scheme and Italy's ongoing migration deal with Albania. The former aimed to transfer anyone arriving irregularly in the UK to Rwanda, where their claims would be processed, and where they would remain, even if granted asylum. Italy's deal is more limited: it envisions the transfer of non-vulnerable men, intercepted at sea before reaching Italian waters, to two processing centres in Albania. In contrast, the proposed return hubs would come after the asylum process and apply only to those whose claims have already been rejected.

Uncertain ground?

The newly proposed returns framework rests on fragile ground. Much of its success hinges on sustained cooperation with third countries, yet this is precisely where past efforts have faltered. While the proposal acknowledges that insufficient cooperation from third countries undermines the EU's returns system, it fails to directly address the structural limits of an approach that continues to outsource migration management.

The Commission calls for greater collaboration from third countries, to be secured through positive or negative conditionalities. But levers, like visa restrictions or trade measures, fall outside the scope of this proposal.²⁰ Thus, how the EU plans to make cooperation on returns more effective remains unclear.

One thing is clear: for the system to work, countries of origin must agree to readmit their nationals. Still, the draft regulation offers no clear strategy to secure such deals. The challenge is

²⁰ E. Woodford, *Returns under the spotlight: Towards an effective common EU system*, European Policy Centre (EPC), 15 April 2024.

not just diplomatic: returnees represent an economic loss: even irregular migrants send remittances home, supporting entire households. Accepting deported citizens may mean losing that income and absorbing the costs of reintegration, an unappealing prospect for many governments.

Externalisation Depends on Cooperation, but Cooperation Keeps Crumbling

Since the EU's migration framework relies heavily on cooperation with third countries, especially in Africa, its long-term sustainability is only as strong as the stability of those partnerships. However, despite the proliferation of diplomatic initiatives, migration diplomacy between the EU and African partners remains fraught with tensions, asymmetries, and recurring breakdowns. Rather than reflecting a shared vision, these arrangements often reveal a structural mismatch in priorities and expectations, one that casts serious doubt on the long-term viability of externalisation as a strategic pillar of EU migration policy.

At the core of this dysfunction lies a fundamental contradiction. While European actors seek rapid and measurable results, above all, a reduction in irregular arrivals and an increase in returns, their African counterparts are frequently confronted with intense domestic opposition, limited administrative capacity, and divergent political incentives. The outcome is a cooperation framework that appears coherent on paper but routinely falters in practice. The EU's average return rate toward African countries stands at 15%, compared to the EU-wide of 23%, a figure inflated by the higher compliance rates of countries in the Western Balkans.

In countries like Mauritania and The Gambia, deals with European countries have sparked strong domestic backlash. In The Gambia, protests followed the perception that the government was acting under pressure from Germany, ultimately forcing the government to suspend its engagement.

In Mauritania, a 2024 migration partnership with the EU provoked widespread resistance, not just from opposition parties and civil society, but also from Afro-Mauritanian and haratin communities (historically marginalised groups where many migrants reside).²¹ There, increased policing linked to migration control overlapped with existing discriminatory practices, fuelling unrest during the 2024 presidential elections. Protests were violently repressed, and the public voiced deep concerns that Mauritania was becoming a dumping ground for Europe's unwanted migrants. While EU rhetoric stressed "social cohesion", the local perception was one of coercion and instability, revealing just how politically risky these agreements are for African governments.

Episodes of political backlash in African countries underscore a broader reality too often overlooked in Brussels: cooperation on migration is not merely a matter of institutional alignment or financial incentives, but of political legitimacy. When European actors fail to account for the domestic constraints, electoral, societal, and symbolic, faced by their African counterparts, the resulting agreements may be signed but rarely survive the test of implementation.

The design of these agreements further undermines their credibility. Partnerships with Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania, framed as "comprehensive", tend to follow a familiar, opaque pattern: soft-law arrangements, minimal transparency, loosely defined conditionalities, and development funding tied to progress on border control. Such mechanisms raise serious concerns on multiple fronts. From a human rights perspective, they risk legitimising practices that contravene international standards, as seen in Tunisia's treatment of sub-Saharan migrants. From a governance standpoint, they sidestep democratic accountability both in Europe and in partner countries. And from a strategic angle, they are vulnerable to manipulation:

²¹ H.O. Moctar, *The EU-Mauritania Partnership: Whose Priorities?*, ECRE Working Paper 21, European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), October 2024.

African governments, aware of Europe's political urgency to contain migration, have at times used it as leverage, calibrating cooperation to extract financial or diplomatic concessions.

This dynamic has created a loop that is increasingly difficult to escape. On the one hand, European governments double down on enforcement, readmission, and deterrence, often under domestic pressure. On the other, African states, rightly or wrongly, interpret these demands as externally imposed, one-sided, and at odds with their own priorities. In this context, mutual trust erodes quickly, and cooperation becomes transactional at best, opportunistic at worst.

A growing reliance on conditionalities has only exacerbated this fragility.²² Development assistance, once framed as a tool for long-term partnership, is now frequently subordinated to migration control objectives. While such a strategy may yield short-term results, it again risks hollowing out the foundations of EU-Africa cooperation. Reducing complex development relationships to instruments of border enforcement not only neglects the broader economic, social, and environmental challenges facing African societies, but also fosters resentment among local elites and populations alike. Many African governments, unsurprisingly, resist this instrumentalisation, and increasingly question whether European support is aligned with their long-term interests.

Moreover, this dependence on conditionalities is expected to intensify in the upcoming years, with the proposed Global Europe instrument, part of the MFF package for the 2028-34 period, effectively codifying negative conditionality. Article 12²³ of the proposed draft, indeed, formalizes the use of negative conditionality by introducing a suspension mechanism allowing the Commission to withhold funding when serious deficiencies in readmission cooperation are identified. This shift transforms

²² Villa (2025).

²³ European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Global Europe (COM(2025) 551 final; 2025/0227(COD)*, European Commission – International Partnerships.

an informal practice into an enforceable policy, enhancing the EU's leverage.

Legal Pathways as a Missed Opportunity

While the twofold approach championed by Brussels mainly focuses on returns and irregulars, legal migration pathways are considered secondary tools in the current EU policy cycle; framed as conditional incentives rather than strategic goals. Legal migration is often presented as a potential reward for cooperation on border control, rather than as a standalone priority. This framing may be politically convenient, but it is strategically shortsighted. Migration remains a highly sensitive and politicised issue across Europe, and the dominant narrative, both in institutional rhetoric and public debate, is focused on curbing irregular arrivals.

Consequently, even when member states undertake meaningful steps to expand regular channels, these efforts tend to be under-communicated and underused. Italy's most recent migration decree, approved this 30th of June, serves as a poignant embodiment of this tendency. After granting 450,000 permits for 2023-25, the government has now laid out nearly half a million more, 497,550 work permits, for the coming three years. Despite its scale, this initiative has received little visibility and has therefore not been effectively communicated to countries of origin, inhibiting its capacity to create realistic alternatives to irregular migration. In the absence of clear and coordinated messaging, origin states cannot relay these legal opportunities to their citizens. This undermines the potential of regular pathways to reduce irregular flows, while further vilifying the EU's reputation in African states and fomenting anti-Western sentiment.

It comes as no surprise that the Italian government has chosen not to spotlight this initiative, such measures rarely win political points. Still, it marks a welcome shift: a lesson learned from past missteps and a move to decouple cooperation

from border enforcement, tying it instead to legal migration. The result is a more balanced framework, one that can benefit both sides. However, Italy is largely alone on this path. Elsewhere in Europe, the mood is turning colder. Germany's new government is reintroducing border checks and freezing family reunifications, steps applauded by the Netherlands, where the government is moving towards increasingly stricter asylum policy. Across the continent, internal Schengen borders are hardening, exposing just how fragile the system has become. These measures may play well with voters. But they result in short-term fixes, politically expedient, perhaps, but ultimately unsustainable.

As for the legislative and operational initiatives put forth by the European Commission, endeavors to expand legal migration pathways remain scanty compared to those aimed at curbing irregular migration. Under AMIF investment via the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF), €35 million has been allocated to legal migration and mobility projects since 2016. Contrarily, more than €10 billion has been earmarked under the same funding stream for border security and migration management for the 2021-27 period. A similar imbalance is evident in AMIF Action Grants: since 2021, only 3% of the funding has supported labour migration initiatives, while over ten times as much has gone to preventing irregular migration and supporting durable solutions for refugees and other migrants in third countries. This is a stark discrepancy which reveals a growing inclination towards enforcement-based solutions over opportunity-driven ones, despite Europe's declining working age population. Regrettably, this approach induces extensively fortified borders, while legal channels remain essentially fragmented, underfunded, and underused.²⁴

The proposal for the 2028-34 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)²⁵ largely continues this trend. Total EU

²⁴ C. Kumar, *Expanding legal pathways for labour immigration: a stocktake of the European Commission's efforts*, Research report, 25 November 2024.

²⁵ European Commission, "EU Budget 2028-2034", 16 July 2025.

funding for migration, borders, and security is set to triple to €81 billion, with nearly half earmarked for border enforcement, including enhanced law enforcement powers, infrastructure, and technology for border agencies. At the same time, funding for asylum and inclusion programmes is de-emphasised, with previous spending targets removed and greater discretion given to member states in allocation decisions. The EU's external funding for migration is being consolidated under the Global Europe Instrument, a €200 billion framework that merges development assistance, humanitarian aid, and migration partnerships into a single structure. Migration is framed as a strategic lever: cooperation on returns and readmission may be tied to the disbursement of external funds, formalizing a negative conditionality mechanism that was previously incentive-based and flexible.

How Outsourcing Shapes Responsibility Sharing Within the EU?

It is no coincidence that, as EU member states increasingly opt to outsource migration management to third countries, mutual trust and internal responsibility-sharing continue to erode. In fact, the lack of trust is not merely a consequence of this dynamic, it is part of the starting point. The paradox is clear: the more member states look outward to manage migration, the less they are willing to engage in burden-sharing within the Union. Seen from this angle, the consensus around externalisation has become the only real point of unity in the EU's migration governance.

At the heart of the EU's migration puzzle lies a persistent issue: the lack of internal trust among member states. Despite years of negotiations, this remains the single most critical obstacle to establishing a functioning system of shared responsibility. The newly adopted Asylum and Migration Management Regulation attempts to address this by introducing a mechanism of "mandatory, yet flexible solidarity". However,

the risk is that flexibility may once again come at the cost of true burden-sharing.

The system allows member states to choose among three types of contributions, relocations, financial support, or material aid, rather than enforcing a more even distribution of asylum responsibilities. While this compromise was necessary to bring more reluctant governments on board, it also reveals the limits of trust. The unwillingness to commit to relocations, in particular, signals that many member states continue to view migration primarily as someone else's problem, especially for frontline countries.

This lack of trust is not only horizontal, among member states, but also vertical, between the EU institutions and national governments.²⁶ As the implementation of the AMMR unfolds, there is a real danger that financial contributions will be used to reinforce border control measures in third countries rather than to strengthen asylum systems within the EU itself. This would merely shift responsibility further away, rather than building a system grounded in collective accountability.

There is a striking irony in this dynamic: a mechanism designed to promote solidarity may, in practice, deepen fragmentation. The continued reliance on externalisation, paired with the flexibility of the AMMR, risks undermining the very principles of protection and responsibility that the EU claims to uphold. Solidarity cannot be just a menu of options; it requires a baseline of mutual trust and a genuine commitment to sharing, not outsourcing, responsibilities. Without this, Europe's migration policy will remain reactive, piecemeal, and ultimately unsustainable.

This erosion of trust extends well beyond migration management but also touches the very foundations of the Schengen area. Free movement within the EU was built on the assumption that asylum claims would be handled efficiently

²⁶ A. De Leo and E. Milazzo, *Responsibility-Sharing or Responsibility-Shifting? Implications of the New Pact for Future EU Cooperation with Third Countries*, Policy Study FEPS, Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), June 2024.

and fairly under the Dublin Regulation. In theory, the system assigns responsibility to the first country of entry and allows for swift transfers. In practice, it has never worked as intended. Southern states argue that geography makes them bear the brunt of asylum claims, while northern countries blame delays and lack of cooperation for low transfer rates.

The result is a cascade of fragmented responses. Internal border checks, once exceptional, have become normalised. Amendments to the Schengen Borders Code, rather than restoring trust, have mostly served to codify these reactive measures. Thus, Schengen has not undergone meaningful reform but rather is quietly unravelling. The core issue is this: Schengen and Dublin are legally separate but politically and operationally entangled. When one fails, the other falters. Without shared responsibility, free movement becomes a casualty.

The Reality Behind Externalisation

Ultimately, the EU's reliance on externalisation reflects deeper unresolved tensions within its migration governance. The emphasis on reducing irregular arrivals and facilitating returns is clearly fraught with structural constraints, chief among them the limited and inconsistent cooperation from countries of origin. Despite repeated efforts by EU policymakers to render returns more effective, including through development aid conditionality, actual return rates to African countries remain low. Political sensitivities surrounding readmission, combined with the stigma and reintegration challenges faced by returnees, continue to undermine the sustainability of these efforts.

Internally, the Pact enshrines the principle of flexible solidarity, allowing member states to choose between relocation, operational support, or financial contributions. In practice, this flexibility risks resulting in a redirection of resources toward external actors, reinforcing a pattern in which funding is channelled away from internal solidarity mechanisms and

into migration control partnerships abroad. While framed as pragmatic burden-sharing, this strategy reveals a deeper reliance on transactional arrangements.

Initiatives such as return hubs and the proposed common list of safe countries of origin, alongside the expansion of the Safe Third Country concept, have further underscored this externalisation trend. These measures may ease immediate political pressures but raise fundamental concerns about legal certainty, protection standards, and the use of legal tools to serve political ends. They risk transforming diplomatic cooperation into legal shortcuts that prioritize enforcement over rights.

Therefore, the sustainability of this model remains uncertain. Many African partner countries have voiced frustration over the asymmetry of expectations and the limited incentives offered. Agreements with Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania follow a familiar pattern: soft-law arrangements, conditional funding, and minimal transparency. These deals not only raise human rights concerns but have also caused internal divisions within the EU, as seen in the controversial approval of the EU-Tunisia memorandum of understanding.

This chapter's analysis underscores a central conclusion: externalisation, though tempting as a quick fix, fails to address, and may deepen, the root problem of a fragmented and politicised internal system for responsibility sharing. Without recalibrating its approach to harmonise enforcement with meaningful opportunities for regular migration, and without transparent, reciprocal partnerships, the EU risks entrenching instability and reinforcing the very dynamics it seeks to curb.

The Way Ahead

By making externalisation the linchpin of its migration policy, the EU risks locking itself into a cycle, one marked by inefficiency, fragmentation, and the gradual erosion of credibility. Unless it repositions itself not only through the expansion of legal pathways but also in how it articulates and envisions them, this

approach will remain fundamentally unsustainable. At its core lies an unresolved contradiction: a policy that seeks to distance rather than engage, to contain rather than connect. If the EU is to move beyond this impasse, it must rebuild internal solidarity and cultivate mutual trust, reshaping its posture toward the very partners on whom it increasingly relies. EU migration policy is not doomed to fail. However, it does demand a shift, from the narrative of crisis to one of continuity, from short-term solutions to enduring strategies that acknowledge the aspirations and demographic realities of its partners.

To this end, the EU must confront the pervasive challenge of internal cohesion, constituting one of its most pressing issues. The New Pact, built on fragile compromises, created a flexible solidarity mechanism that ultimately falls short of establishing a truly binding framework among member states. Without genuine internal trust, frontline countries will continue to bear a disproportionate burden while others remain shielded. This lack of mutual trust fuels dependence on externalisation, further deepening fragmentation. It is therefore essential to invest in the capacities and infrastructure of border states, enabling them to manage arrivals efficiently without compromising fundamental rights or procedural safeguards. Equally important is the strengthening of national asylum systems, supported by rigorous monitoring and accountability measures, to nurture trust and fairness across the Union.

On the external front, partnerships with third countries must be forged on the bedrock of genuine dialogue, mutual respect, and transparent accountability. Too often, these relationships have been reduced to mere transactions, financial aid and migration control exchanged for border enforcement. Such a tendency has repeatedly sown seeds of instability, stirred political backlash, and opened the door to human rights violations. The EU must therefore embrace rigorous, ongoing assessments of fundamental rights and reception standards, making these the indispensable conditions for cooperation and funding. Embedding human rights safeguards transcends

mere legal obligation; it also serves as a shield against litigation, halted returns, and the heavy weight of lingering uncertainty.

Furthermore, the EU must exercise greater caution in its choice of partners, especially avoiding engagements with autocratic or politically fragile regimes whose cooperation comes at a heavy cost to local stability, governance, and Europe's own strategic autonomy and reputation. Instead, it should prioritize partnerships grounded in development, rule of law, and respect for human rights, thereby tying migration cooperation to broader objectives of sustainable development, poverty reduction, and social inclusion. Migration deals with countries such as Tunisia and Egypt serve as cautionary tales rather than templates, highlighting the dangers of narrowly focused border control agreements detached from wider socio-political realities.

Crucially, the EU's policy must expand and more effectively promote legal migration pathways as a core pillar, not an afterthought. Legal channels for labour migration, family reunification, resettlement, and humanitarian admission provide indispensable safe and orderly alternatives to irregular journeys. The New Pact introduces promising tools, such as the Talent Partnerships and a reinforced Resettlement Framework, which should be scaled up, adequately funded, and communicated systematically to countries of origin. Without clear, accessible, and visible legal opportunities, many migrants will continue to resort to dangerous and irregular routes, undermining the EU's objectives. Enhancing legal pathways also helps alleviate pressure on frontline countries and fosters a more positive narrative that balances control with opportunity.

Individual member states must also play a crucial role in normalizing and scaling up regular migration channels. Italy offers a noteworthy example, having significantly expanded its *decreto flussi* by increasing work permit quotas fivefold and integrating the measure into a forward-looking three-year plan. However, these initiatives highlight both potential and limitations: when not accompanied by coordinated information

campaigns and active engagement with countries of origin, even generous legal migration quotas risk going underutilised. This underscores that, alongside EU-level frameworks, national action, if proactive, transparent, and well-communicated, can meaningfully expand regular migration opportunities and promote safer, more orderly mobility, to the benefit of both migrants and receiving societies.

Moreover, reforming the returns system demands not only greater efficiency but also a deeper commitment to humanity and sustainability, with the interests of partner countries firmly kept in view. Return procedures must integrate comprehensive reintegration support, breaking the relentless cycle of displacement and detention, a measure expanded in the Commission's latest proposal but one that must remain a last resort, carefully bounded by strict safeguards.

Finally, the EU must also rebalance its financial priorities. The overwhelming focus on border security and migration control in EU funding instruments, such as the AMIF and the Migration Partnership Facility, must be matched by significant investment in reception conditions, access to protection, legal migration facilitation, and integration support. Such a shift will require a recalibration of political discourse and public debate in Europe, to foster greater understanding that sustainable migration management necessitates a holistic and rights-informed approach.

Rebuilding trust, internally among member states and externally with partner countries, demands sustained political will, transparency, and a genuine commitment to shared responsibility. Only by moving beyond externally driven, enforcement-centric fixes toward a comprehensive, balanced, and principled migration policy can the EU secure a durable and equitable system that respects human rights, reinforces Schengen, and enhances Europe's standing globally.

3. Externalisation on the Fast-Track? Two Tensions Around Internal Reform and Externalisation Efforts

Eleonora Milazzo

The New Pact reforms adopted in spring 2024 rely on the external dimension of migration policy and cooperation with third countries to build a more stable and effective European asylum system by reducing irregular arrivals and increasing returns.¹

As the New Pact reaches its halfway implementation milestone, two critical tensions around internal and external migration management risks undermining the reform's core objectives. The first regards competing priorities between advancing on the internal aspects of the migration reforms and pursuing further externalisation efforts. The second relates to the contradiction between aspirations for comprehensive, multi-sectoral partnerships with third countries and the reality of predominantly EU-centred, security-focused approaches that risk undermining partner countries' own priorities and strategic interests.

This chapter examines these tensions and zooms in on two recent legislative developments which raise fundamental questions about the EU's migration governance priorities and the risks of excessive reliance on externalisation.

¹ A. De Leo and E. Milazzo, *Responsibility-sharing or shifting? Implications of the New Pact for the future cooperation with third countries*, Policy Study, Brussels, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and European Policy Centre, 2024.

The External Dimension and the New Pact

The external dimension of EU migration policies encompasses various forms of engagement with countries of origin and transit in managing cross-border mobility, including through instruments such as dialogues, arrangements, statements, and deals.² It developed as what were traditionally internal affairs policies and instruments started to shift "outwards" and be incorporated into the domain of foreign policy cooperation.³

These instruments have gained prominence as the EU and Member States took steps to compensate the shortcomings of traditional migration policies by outsourcing responsibilities.⁴ In fact, the failure of internal migration management, the salience of migration in EU and domestic politics, as well as its progressive securitisation have driven the expansion of external action.⁵ Today externalisation – or cooperating with third countries to control migration framed as a security issue – has been largely normalised. This despite the risks it represents for fundamental rights protection, the EU's own strategic autonomy from its partners, and the latter own agendas.⁶

² A. Niemann and N. Zaun, "Introduction: EU external migration policy and EU migration governance: introduction", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 49, no. 12, 2023, pp. 2965-85.

³ S. Lavenex, "Shifting Up and Out: The Foreign Policy of European Immigration Control", *West European Politics*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2006, pp. 329-50; S. Carrera, R. Radescu, and N. Reslow, *EU External Migration Policies: A Preliminary Mapping of the Instruments, the Actors and Their Priorities*. EURA-net project, 2015; A. Geddes, *Migration as Foreign Policy? The External Dimension of EU Action on Migration and Asylum*. Svenska institutet för europapolitiska studier, 2009; I. Fontana and M. Rosina, "The Tools of External Migration Policy in the EU Member States: The Case of Italy", *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 62, 2024, pp. 1448-74.

⁴ C. Boswell, "The 'External Dimension' of EU Immigration and Asylum Policy", *International Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2003, pp. 619-38.

⁵ Fontana and Rosina (2024).

⁶ C. Boswell, "The 'External Dimension' of EU Immigration and Asylum Policy", *International Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 3, 2003, pp. 619-38; D.S. FitzGerald, "Remote Control of Migration: Theorising Territoriality, Shared Coercion, and

In parallel to the expansion of external migration management, migration diplomacy – i.e. ‘the use of diplomatic tools, processes, and procedures to manage cross-border population mobility as well as the strategic use of migration as a means to obtain other aims’, including aid or other concessions – has developed to permeate international politics well beyond Europe.⁷ It has become common place that migration can be used transactionally as leverage by both the EU and partner countries.⁸

In this context, the EU and the Member States have undertaken the extensive reform effort of the New Pact to remedy to long-standing internal compliance and solidarity issues. At the same time, however, they have also invested significant efforts and resources in external migration management, particularly through deals and agreements with third countries. The legislative texts making up the Pact, in fact, rely substantially on the success of external migration management to deliver on the objectives of the reform, particularly by reducing arrivals and increasing returns. This makes the two areas, internal EU migration governance and external migration management, even more interlinked.⁹

In this respect, with the implementation of the New Pact at the halfway point, EU institutions and Member States face at least two tensions: one regarding internal reforms versus external solutions to migration management, and the other related to their aspirations of multi-sectoral cooperation with third countries versus a strongly EU-centred, security-focused approach to third countries.

Deterrence”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, pp. 4–22.

⁷ G. Tsourapas, *Migration Diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa: Power, Mobility, and the State*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2021, p. 8.

⁸ F. Keane, “[Migrant crisis: How Europe went from Merkel’s ‘We can do it’ to pulling up the drawbridge](#)”, *BBC News*, 3 September 2025.

⁹ De Leo and Milazzo (2024).

Internal Reforms vs “Innovative Solutions”

The first tension regards the commitment to internal migration management reforms and, on the other hand, the push for “innovative solutions to counter irregular migration”.¹⁰

The central goal of the New Pact’s legislative texts is to address the longstanding lack of lack of solidarity and responsibility sharing among Member States. The future of the Schengen area and the Union’s credibility – both internally and globally – hinges on resolving this fundamental issue.

Shortly after the reforms were adopted, however, Member States’ political will and commitment to deliver on the most crucial and arguably most daunting aspects of the reforms – solidarity and responsibility sharing – started to falter. In response to political and electoral pressure, some Member States have refused to implement the Pact. Others have reintroduced border controls, undermining mutual trust and reciprocity and, consequently, the New Pact’s core ambitions.

At the same time, managing migration at the external borders or outsourcing responsibility for it to third countries started to gain increasing traction. In May 2024 11 Member States issued a letter to the European Commission urging the development of “innovative solutions” to manage migration through stronger third-country solutions.¹¹ At the European Council level, too, meetings have been accompanied by coalition building around strengthening relations with countries of origin and transit.¹² Statements, deals and agreements have proliferated with various and often widely criticised initiatives, most notably the “Team Europe” approach to negotiations with Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon,

¹⁰ European Commission, [Mission Letter to Magnus Brunner, Commissioner for Internal Affairs and Migration](#). 1 December 2024.

¹¹ “Joint Letter from the undersigned Ministers on new solutions to address irregular migration to Europe”, 15 May 2024, p. 3.

¹² J.-L. De Brouwer, “[Migration: Give the Pact a Chance](#)”, *Egmont Institute*, 28 August 2025.

the ongoing support for the Libyan coast guards, and bilateral initiatives like the Spain-Mauritania deal.

The implementation process has now reached its halfway through milestone. In June 2025, the European Commission published the “State of play on the Implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum”. This interim assessment highlights progress made at the technical level in the transition to the new legal framework and the development of National Implementation Plans, as well as the steps still needed to achieve the ambitious reform objectives by the June 2026 deadline.

Despite some advances, the implementation process is unfolding within a political climate where migration remains a highly politicised issue. Even as irregular arrivals decrease, alarmistic narratives about the need to curb migration and protect Europe’s borders continue to dominate electoral campaigns across Europe.¹³ While external migration management and fair and dignified returns are part of well-functioning migration and asylum system, the overemphasis on these aspects risk overshadowing – symbolically, politically, and practically – the central issues that this reform seeks to address, namely Member States’ compliance with solidarity measures and more effective internal migration management.

Against this backdrop, the European Commission has attempted to support Member States and maintain commitment around the implementation of the reforms, while also directly or indirectly supporting initiatives to outsource migration management responsibility. This is the case, for example, for the “Team Europe” deal with Tunisia or the support to Italy’s unsuccessful attempts to operationalise its bilateral arrangement with Albania.¹⁴

In this respect, it is significant that halfway through the implementation of the New Pact, during the State of the Union

¹³ Frontex, “EU external borders: irregular crossings down 21% in the first 8 months of 2025”, *News Release*, 12 September 2025.

¹⁴ N. Nielsen, “EU lays groundwork to more easily offshore asylum”, *EUobserver*, 21 May 2025.

address in September 2025, Commission President von der Leyen touched upon migration briefly. While she mentioned the New Pact’s implementation, she emphasised the importance of fighting human smuggling in a nod to national governments pushing for stronger deterrence and migration containment policies. She also referred to the next Multi-annual Financial Framework and the proposal to treble funding for migration and border management to “protect our external borders” and reiterated the need to increase returns of rejected asylum seekers and counter-smuggling and trafficking efforts.¹⁵

While the reforms waver under political pressure, Member States and EU institutions seems to increasingly prioritise externalisation. The key question around the tension between internal migration management objectives and externalisation is therefore whether the latter will facilitate continued political commitment to implementation or will ultimately risk eroding it.

Migration Cooperation Aspirations vs an Eu-Centric, Security-Focused Approach

The second tension regards the aspirations for more comprehensive and intersectoral migration partnerships versus a dominating EU-centred, securitised approach to externalisation.

Effective cooperation strategies with origin and transit countries have long been a priority for the EU and its Member States. The Commission and the Council have repeatedly endorsed using a mix of positive and negative conditionalities like visas, development aid, and trade to obtain progress on returns and readmissions. Migration management has become progressively embedded in partnership frameworks, from development cooperation to trade arrangements and diplomatic dialogues. The EU’s Neighbourhood, Development

¹⁵ European Commission, “2025 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen”, 10 September 2025.

and International Cooperation Instrument is an example of a financial instrument that combines development support with migration-related clauses.¹⁶

However, despite ambitions of a “Global Europe” approach, partnerships continue to be largely centred on terms and objectives defined by the EU, and not jointly with the national governments of partner countries. The heavy reliance on conditionalities, in particular, runs the risk of framing cooperation as purely transactional and focused solely on migration control rather than, for example, the expansion of legal pathways. This further feeds into distrust and undermines the EU’s credibility and legitimacy as a global actor.¹⁷ The uncertain internal reform outcomes and the Member States’ predilection for externalisation further complicate this picture and project the message that third countries will have to at least partially bear the costs of the EU’s failed reform efforts.¹⁸

Among recent developments, under the newly-established Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA), the European Commission has launched the new Pact for the Mediterranean as a political instrument to deepen strategic cooperation with its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood as a priority for the 2024-29 term.¹⁹ This signals commitment to engagement with neighbours to address shared challenged and comprehensive partnerships in areas of mutual interests, including migration but also trade, investment, economic stability, environment, energy, connectivity, security, and climate mitigation and adaptation.²⁰ It is also meaningful

¹⁶ M. Villa and F. D’Aguanno, [Cracking at the Seams? Reassessing the EU’s External Migration Policies](#), ISPI Report, Milan, Ledizioni-ISPI, July 2023.

¹⁷ A. Bisong, [“Centering African Voices: Why EU Migration Policy Should Include African Perspectives”](#), *ISPI Commentary*, 14 July 2025; V. Rietig and M. Walter-Franke, [Conditionality in Migration Cooperation](#), DGAP Report No. 7. Berlin, German Council on Foreign Relations, 3 July 2003.

¹⁸ De Leo and Milazzo (2024).

¹⁹ MedECC [“Shaping policy: Regional consultation on the New Pact for the Mediterranean”](#).

²⁰ Mediterranean Alliance of Think Tanks on Climate Change (MATTCCh),

that, in the European Commission's priorities for the 2026, new sanctions against smugglers and traffickers appear under "Defence and Security" and the "Pact for the Mediterranean" under the "Global Europe" heading.²¹

The new legislature and funding cycle offer opportunities to strike a better balance between migration control, other areas of cooperation, and partners' agendas and interests. Without credible advancement in EU internal migration management and the expansion of legal pathways, however, the strong focus on migration control conditionalities risks reinforcing asymmetries and undermining genuine "global" partnerships.²²

Externalisation on the Fast Track

Two recent legislative developments around the New Pact illustrate how these tensions play out in concrete policy terms. Specifically, the Commission has proposed to bring forward elements of the reform regarding the expanded use of "safe country" concepts. It has also tabled a new proposal for a Return Regulation foreseeing a revamped common return system.

Both developments have significant implications for the external dimension of migration management, as they contain provisions that could potentially contribute to the outsourcing of responsibilities to third countries. The fact that negotiations on these new proposals are proceeding simultaneously with the implementation of the New Pact, in addition, may divert crucial time and resources away from the reform and reinforce the appeal of systematically outsourcing migration management to transit and origin countries rather than achieving a more effective and equitable internal migration governance system.

Climate Action as a Strategic Priority for the New Pact for the Mediterranean, 2025.

²¹ European Commission, "State of the Union 2025 – Letter of Intent" by President von der Leyen. 10 September 2025.

²² Mediterranean Alliance of Think Tanks on Climate Change (MATTCCh) (2025).

“Safe Country” Concepts

The Asylum Procedure Regulation (APR) adopted under the New Pact foresees an expanded use of safe country concepts. These include the concept of “safe country of origin”, which allows accelerated processing or border procedures for applicants whose country of origin is deemed safe; and the “safe third country” concept, whereby applicants can be transferred to any third country considered safe to receive protection there. These concepts aim primarily to expedite asylum procedures by reducing caseloads and easing pressure on national asylum systems.²³ At the same time, by so doing they also limit the number of those receiving protection in the EU by potentially increasing transfers or increasing returns.

The APR already foresees wider application of these concepts.²⁴ However, following disagreements between among Member States, the European Commission reviewed the safe third country concept and proposed amendments to the APR in May 2025.²⁵ Among other proposed changes, the requirement for a meaningful connection between a person requesting asylum and a third country where protection could be provided would no longer be mandatory. Member States would be free to determine whether to apply the connection requirement or consider transit or the existence of an agreement or arrangement to justify transferring asylum applicants to a third country.²⁶

²³ De Leo and Milazzo (2024).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation \(EU\) 2024/1348 as regards the application of the ‘safe third country’ concept, COM\(2025\)/259 final, 20 May 2025](#); European Commission “Commission proposes to facilitate the application of the safe third country concept”, 20 May 2025.

²⁶ European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC, COM\(2025\) 101 final, 11 March 2025](#).

If adopted, these changes would significantly expand the circumstances under which asylum claims can be rejected as inadmissible on the basis that protection is available in a "safe" non-EU country.²⁷ The APR also requires lower safety threshold for third countries to qualify as safe. This element, combined with the removal of the connection requirement risks foreclosing access to asylum procedures without sufficient protection guarantees. Additionally, the amendments could result in greater fragmentation, with EU member states applying different criteria for transfer.²⁸

To accelerate the processing of asylum applications, the European Commission has also proposed the fast-tracked implementation of other provisions contained in the APR regarding accelerated border procedures and safe country clauses, as well as an EU list of safe countries of origin that would include EU candidate countries and seven countries considered "safe countries of origin".²⁹

Overall, these amendments may result in substantial outsourcing of responsibility to third countries, requiring their cooperation for effective application.³⁰ Moreover, they raise serious concerns regarding respect for fundamental rights of those to be transferred to presumed safe countries, including the possibility that they remain in limbo rather than being effectively transferred.³¹ From an operational perspective, their prioritisation while Member State are engaged in implementing the Pact risks creating additional operational burdens,

²⁷ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), "[Proposed reform of the Safe Third Country concept](#)", 21 May 2025.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ European Commission, "[Commission proposes to frontload elements of the Pact on Migration and Asylum as well as a first EU list of safe countries of origin](#)", 16 April 2025; S. Peers, "[Jumping the Gun? The proposed early application of some of the EU's new asylum pact – and a common list of supposedly 'safe countries of origin'](#)", *EU Law Analysis*, 21 April 2025.

³⁰ Nielsen (2025).

³¹ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), "[Proposed reform of the Safe Third Country concept](#)", 21 May 2025.

fragmentation and diverging practices among Member States, and the risk that they cannot be implemented meaningfully before the full Pact implementation deadline in June 2026.

Return Reform

The other key development shedding light on tensions between reform objectives, the EU's global migration cooperation objectives, and the tendency towards externalisation regards the European Commission's recent proposal of a Return Regulation.

Increasing the return rate, i.e. the number of third-country nationals who receive a return decision and are actually returned to their country of origin or to a third country, has long been a priority for Member States. Against this backdrop, the European Council has urged the European Commission to take action to increase and accelerate returns by submitting a new legislative proposal as a matter of urgency.³²

In response, in March 2025 the Commission put forward a Regulation establishing a common system for the return of third country nationals staying illegally in the Union ("the Return Regulation") that repeals the existing 2008 Return Directive (Directive 2008/11/EC) to establish a Common European System for Returns with "swifter, simpler and more effective return procedures across the EU". This common system would include standardised processes for issuing return decisions and ensuring that these decisions are recognised by all EU countries.³³

³² European Council, [European Council meeting \(17 October 2024\) – Conclusions](#), 17 October 2024.

³³ European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC, COM\(2025\) 101 final](#), 11 March 2025; A. Radjenovic, [A common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the European Union](#), EPRS Briefing PE 769.538, Brussels, European

Among other measures proposed, the Regulation expands the range of countries to which individuals with a return decision could be transferred to include any non-EU country beyond the country of origin or residence, including transit countries, countries to which the person has the right to enter or are deemed safe, and countries with which there is an agreement – be it legally binding or not – or an arrangement concluded bilaterally between a Member State or the EU and a third country. These arrangements would therefore provide a basis for the so-called “return hubs”, i.e. areas or facilities in third countries where migrants are transferred before being returned. Their creation has been strongly criticised as being largely legally unfeasible, extremely costly, and as contributing to an expanded deportation regime rather than a coherent and rights-based return system.³⁴

The proposal specifies that these agreements or arrangements may be concluded only with countries that abide by international human rights law, with appropriate transfer, conditions and monitoring.³⁵ However, the safeguarding and monitoring of these conditions against human rights abuses appear weak, particularly because these aspects are left to further bilateral agreements.³⁶ Additionally, the provisions contained in the Regulation expand the obligations of returnees and foresee harsher sanctions for non-cooperation with the return procedure.³⁷ The proposal also makes it more difficult for third-

Parliamentary Research Service, March 2025.

³⁴ N. Nielsen, “EU to expand deportation regime as Europe turns against migrants”, *EUobserver*, 10 March 2025; Radjenovic (2025).

³⁵ Z. Şahin Mencütek and S. Barthoma, “Why the EU’s migrant ‘return hubs’ are doomed to fail”, *The Loop ECPR*, 2025.

³⁶ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), *ECRE Comments on the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC*, June 2025.

³⁷ Danish Refugee Council (DRC), “DRC recommendations on the reform of

country nationals to return voluntarily after a return decision has been issued.³⁸

Despite this restrictive turn, the Regulation, by its very nature, cannot address the crucial and largely unsolved aspect of incentivising cooperation from third countries in the implementation of the proposed return system. To encourage third-country cooperation, the proposal mentions a mix of obligations, incentives, and negative conditionalities. However, in addition to be largely controversial, tools such as visa restrictions or trade measures fall outside the remit of the return framework. The fact that its effectiveness ultimately depends on sustained third-country cooperation, therefore, raises concerns about the overall coherence of the return system with other EU policies.³⁹

Beyond the likely impact and implications of its provisions, the Return Regulation also highlights another tension between advancing efforts on the New Pact implementation and responding to national governments' agendas. At a time when Member State governments are and will be dealing with considerable pressure on their technical capacity and human resources to implement the reforms, adding additional commitments and obligations can lead to resource management issues and prove counterproductive for the achievement of the main reform objectives.⁴⁰

the EU return rules", 1 July 2025.

³⁸ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), [ECRE Comments on the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC](#), June 2025.

³⁹ A.-H. Neidhardt, "Returns under the spotlight: Towards an effective common EU system?", Commentary. Brussels, European Policy Centre, 26 March 2025.

⁴⁰ L. Vosyliute and F. Trauner, [The EU's Return Regulation: Negotiating on the Basis of Evidence, not Narratives](#), BIRMM VUB.

Abandoned Ambitions?

The strong focus on limiting irregular migration and increasing returns, including through piecemeal approaches to governance and legislative reform, is likely to remain a constant throughout the Pact's implementation. What are the implications of these tensions for the reform outcomes? And for the EU's external migration management and cooperation with third countries?

Recent analysis has suggested two equally viable scenarios regarding the rollout of the reforms, one optimistic and the other pessimistic.⁴¹ The optimistic scenario would see the EU and Member States successfully implementing the new legislation, addressing existing gaps and compliance deficits through better migration management, including fair returns and border procedures. Successful implementation would also mean that the solidarity mechanism works effectively, restoring confidence in the CEAS.⁴²

If implementation goes forward and ultimately proves successful, for EU leadership, particularly the European Commission, advancing externalisation efforts and reforms that directly or indirectly contribute to reducing arrivals and increasing returns remains a way to preserve commitment around the reform and improve the chances that the most controversial parts of the deal survive implementation and the test of compliance.

The prioritisation of externalisation, in fact, may reflect political pragmatism in pursuing the path of least resistance to manage migration compared to the solidarity and responsibility elements and the difficult internal compromises that they entail. In contrast to the strenuous attempts at reforming internal solidarity and responsibility sharing, in fact, outsourcing

⁴¹ D. Thym, [2024 conference on EU legislation after the pact on migration and asylum. Session 1](#) [Video], 2024, cited in A. Radjenovic, "[Implementation of the EU pact on migration and asylum](#)", EPRS Briefing PE 767.218. Brussels, European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2025.

⁴² Ibid.

responsibility allows governments to demonstrate action on migration through immediately visible measures, providing short-term political benefits compared to the gradual, trust-based common asylum procedures and cooperation mechanisms.

However, another, more pessimistic scenario is also possible. Here Member States would end up refusing to implement or comply with the new legislation and existing implementation gaps and non-compliance issue would persist.⁴³ In this case, the emphasis on externalisation and outsourcing of migration management responsibilities to third countries would become a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than a solution to facilitate political support for the reforms, maintain momentum and ease pressure on the internal migration management system.

Without functioning solidarity mechanisms, the burden would continue to fall disproportionately on frontline Member States, perpetuating the very asymmetries the New Pact was designed to address. The over-reliance on external solutions would likely prove unsustainable as third countries, facing increased pressure without adequate support or genuine partnership benefits, become less cooperative or demand increasingly costly concessions.

This scenario would undermine the EU's strategic autonomy in migration governance while also compromising its credibility as a reliable partner.⁴⁴ The failure to deliver on internal reforms would reinforce concerns that European solidarity remains insufficient, potentially contributing to further fragmentation within the Schengen area. In such circumstances, external migration management would have evolved from a complementary instrument into a primary mechanism to compensate for ineffective internal governance, creating dependencies that risk constraining the EU's policy autonomy and partnership potential in the longer term.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ De Leo and Milazzo (2024).

Conclusion

The internal and external dimensions of migration management are likely to remain inextricably linked, reflecting both the structural interdependencies of contemporary migration governance and the political imperatives driving EU policy choices.

The continued focus on externalisation, even as the EU complete an extensive internal reform effort, is both the result of and may further reinforce Member States' reluctance in delivering on the complex, long-term institutional reforms that the New Pact was designed to achieve. The emphasis on "innovative solutions" and external migration management may create perverse incentives for Member States to focus on these seemingly more politically acceptable alternatives rather than much more complex and uncertain internal solidarity.

This approach, however, is unlikely to resolve the long-standing structural problems and compliance issues of the Common European Asylum System. It also risks proving unsuccessful as a strategy for advancing genuine migration cooperation with third countries. In fact, the instrumentalization of partnerships around narrow migration control objectives may ultimately undermine the trust and reciprocity necessary for sustainable cooperation.

Unless EU institutions and Member States continue on the path toward full implementation of the New Pact, prioritising externalisation efforts at the expense of internal reforms may prove a self-defeating strategy and undermine both EU migration governance and cooperation with third countries.

4. Routes in Flux: Irregular Migration, Restrictive Policies, and Smuggling Resilience

Roberto Forin, Bram Frouws, Peter Grant

Against a backdrop of renewed border securitisation and an increasing number of migration deals with countries on the Mediterranean southern shores and on the Atlantic, in July 2025 the EU's migration agency, Frontex, celebrated a milestone. In the first half of 2025, the total number of detected crossings had fallen by 20% compared to the same period in 2024¹ – itself a year that saw a reduction of around 38% in total compared to 2023² – a development that has been tentatively celebrated by EU officials as a validation of their hardline, deterrence-based approach to managing irregular migration.³

Taken in isolation, the recent figures suggest a fairly unambiguous picture of declining irregular migration. However, it is uncertain whether this continued decline will be sustained. As of August 2025, the trajectory suggests the 20% drop could reduce as the year progresses. It is already substantially lower than the figures at the end of the first quarter – down by 31% compared to the first quarter of 2024 – and may reduce

¹ Frontex, [EU external borders: Irregular crossings drop by 20% in first half of 2025](#), 2025.

² Frontex, [Irregular border crossings into EU drop sharply in 2024](#), 2025.

³ For example, see European Commission, [Opening remarks by President von der Leyen at the joint press conference with President Michel following the meeting of the European Council of 17 October 2024](#), 2024.

further, given that updated figures for July meant the decrease for the first seven months of the year had narrowed to 18%.⁴ Furthermore, as Frontex itself made clear, the situation differed significantly depending on the route. While some routes, such as the Atlantic Route and Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR) had seen marked drops (-41% and -24% respectively) in the first half of 2025, others including the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) and the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) had risen during this period (by 12% and 19% respectively).⁵

This chapter seeks to explore to what extent this picture of effective deterrence can be justified on the ground and whether – as the numbers might at first glance suggest – irregular migration to Europe is truly in retreat. With this in mind, the dynamics of irregular migration are analysed through a lens of supply and demand. Demand for irregular migration emerges from sustained drivers such as economic instability, aspirations for better opportunities, conflict and persecution, alongside limited accessible regular pathways; the supply side of irregular migration refers to smugglers who provide services to satisfy that demand by enabling irregular migration as well as the official corruption that facilitates it. The report profiles four of the key routes into Europe – the CMR, the WMR, the Atlantic Route, and the EMR – briefly summarising recent policy developments, current migratory

⁴ Frontex, [EU external borders: irregular crossings down 18% in the first 7 months of 2025...](#), cit.

⁵ Ibid. According to Frontex data, the Western Balkans (WBR) route account for a significant share of the reported reduction in irregular migration, falling by 78% during 2024, and more than halved again (-53%) in the first six months of 2025 (see: Frontex, [Irregular border crossings into EU...](#), cit.; Frontex, [EU external borders...](#), cit.). This may explain why UNHCR's figures for 2025 diverge significantly from Frontex's: while monitoring the situation in the region, it does not include the WBR in its Europe arrivals data. While the UNHCR data corroborates the broad trends highlighted by Frontex, the figures for 2025 are somewhat more muted, with the total number of recorded arrivals in the first half of 2025 (68,949) only 10% lower than the same period in 2024 (76,546) (UNHCR, [Europe sea arrivals](#), 2025).

trends and key issues that complicate or even contradict this narrative.⁶



Irregular Migration into Europe: Recent Policies, Current Trends and Future Implications

This section focuses on four key migratory routes into Europe: the CMR to Italy, the WMR to Spain, the Atlantic route (to the Canary Islands in Spain), and the EMR (primarily to Greece and Cyprus).⁷ Besides profiling the specific policy contexts on each route, it highlights recent trends in terms of arrivals and the extent to which these can be linked to deterrence-based measures in place.

⁶ The analysis builds on the findings of a recent MMC publication, *Beyond restrictions: How migration and smuggling adapt to changing policies across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the English Channel*, including in-depth interviews conducted with dozens of experts, activists, journalists and most importantly, migrants themselves. Full details of the research methodology, as well as additional findings not included in this chapter, can be found at the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), [Beyond restrictions: How migration and smuggling adapt to changing policies across the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and the English Channel](#), 2025.

⁷ To be noted that 2025 arrivals in Crete from Eastern Libya were also included under the EMR.

Central Mediterranean Route (CMR)

Policy context

Connecting North Africa with Italy and to a lesser extent Malta, the CMR in many ways exemplifies the deterrence-based approach to irregular migration that has increasingly become the norm across Europe. Migration governance along the CMR is underpinned by a number of ongoing transactional agreements between the EU, its member states and countries of departure along the route. Of these, one of the most long-standing is the agreement with post-Gaddafi Libya, first brokered in 2017, whereby the EU and the Italian government have effectively outsourced patrolling of the Central Mediterranean to Libyan coastguards in return for significant financial and technical support. This arrangement has continued, despite significant human rights concerns around the widespread detention, torture, and extortion of migrants returned to Libya.⁸

Expansion of partnership agreements. At the EU-level, an increasing number of partnership agreements have been brokered with North African countries to reduce the number of arrivals reaching Europe along the CMR. In response to the increasing number of departures from Tunisia to circumvent coastguard patrols along the Libyan coast, in 2023 the EU agreed a €1 billion package of financial assistance to the country, including €105 million in direct support to strengthen border security and reduce irregular migration, again in the face of significant human rights concerns⁹. More recently, in the wake of the outbreak of conflict in Sudan and the displacement of half a million Sudanese citizens into Egypt,¹⁰ in March 2024 the EU brokered a €7.4 billion deal with Egypt that combined soft concessional loans with grants earmarked specifically for

⁸ Amnesty International, *Libya/EU: Conditions remain 'hellish' as EU marks 5 years of cooperation agreements*, 2022.

⁹ E. Geddis, "In Tunisia, the EU is repeating an old and dangerous mistake", *Politico*, 21 September 2023.

¹⁰ UNHCR, "Sudan emergency", 2024.

migration management.¹¹ As it is the case with some other partnership agreements – the provisions in the agreement with Egypt around reducing irregular migration are accompanied by stated commitments to development “a holistic approach to migration, including legal migration pathways in line with national competences, and mobility schemes such as the Talent Partnerships”,¹² though these will likely address a very small portion of the demand to migrate.¹³

The rollback of humanitarian rescue. Italy has implemented a range of increasingly restrictive measures to curb irregular migration, as illustrated by the passing of the controversial Piantedosi Decree in January 2023, enabling Italian authorities to fine or detain NGO-run humanitarian vessels.¹⁴ The law is widely perceived to have increased levels of danger for migrants by curtailing Search and Rescue operations in the Mediterranean.¹⁵

Offshore asylum centres and “return hubs”. Italy also signed a multi-million-dollar agreement with Albania in November 2023 to establish two offshore closed centres to hold people intercepted in Italian waters while their asylum claims are being processed. However, while the centres opened in October 2024, repeated legal rulings in the months that followed have forced the government to suspend its operations, pending a ruling by the European Court of Justice. In the interim, the authorities have repurposed the facilities as “return hubs” for rejected asylum seekers. This approach, which is now being embraced

¹¹ “EU announces \$8bn package for Egypt as part of deal to check migration”, *Al Jazeera*, 17 March 2024.

¹² European Commission, *Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between The Arab Republic Of Egypt and the European Union*, 2024.

¹³ J. Van Moorsel and A. Bonfiglio, “A conscious coupling: The EU-Egypt ‘strategic and comprehensive partnership’”, Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 29 April 2024.

¹⁴ Government of Italy, D.L. 1/2023: *Disposizioni urgenti per la gestione dei flussi migratori*, 2023.

¹⁵ S. Glinski, “EU policies partly to blame for 3,000 deaths in Mediterranean last year, say rights groups”, *The Guardian*, 15 February 2024.

by the EU¹⁶ and even cautiously welcomed by UNHCR,¹⁷ nevertheless raises some important practical questions given that the primary barrier to returns remains cooperation with countries of origin – something that is unlikely to be strengthened through the process of third-country detention. As such, especially when the additional costs of return hubs are considered, it seems likely that at least part of their function is to signal deterrence.

Current mixed migration trends and challenges along the CMR
Numbers have fluctuated and are now rising again, despite restrictions. Though the CMR has been the most popular maritime route into Europe since 2020, it has experienced significant fluctuations over the years. While the Italian government has attributed falls in irregular migration to its policy actions,¹⁸ in many cases these shifts may be temporary or subject to a variety of factors outside their control. Over the past decade, for instance, while certain policy milestones have coincided with sharp drops in the number of arrivals in Italy – like the Memorandum of Understanding in 2017 that initiated Libya's interception of migrant vessels in return for financial and technical assistance – numbers have also risen again, notwithstanding the strong restrictions in place. Having spiked in 2016 with 181,436 crossings, movement along the route dipped sharply in the ensuing years to a low of 11,471 in 2019, before increasing year on year until numbers reached 157,651 in 2023. Though numbers in 2024 dropped by 60% with 65,251 crossings, numbers have risen again in the first seven months of 2025 to 36,406, almost 9% higher than the total during the same period of 2024 (33,480).¹⁹

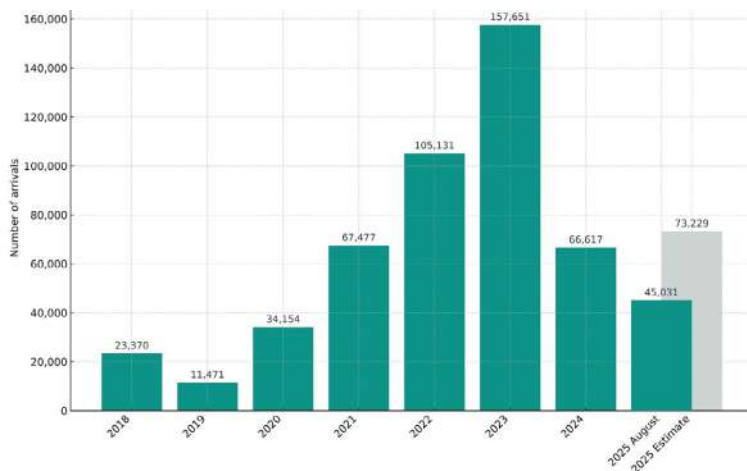
¹⁶ European Commission, [New Common European System for Returns](#), 2025.

¹⁷ UNHCR, [UNHCR welcomes EU Return Regulation Proposal, calls for strong safeguards and focus on effective and sustainable returns](#), 2025.

¹⁸ InfoMigrants, [Italy: "Drop in irregular arrivals thanks to our efforts", says Meloni](#), 2025.

¹⁹ UNHCR, [UNHCR Operational Data Portal](#), 2025.

FIG 4.1 - TOTAL NUMBER OF ARRIVALS TO ITALY VIA THE CMR



Data from UNHCR's Operational Data Portal on Europe Sea Arrivals. Estimates for 2025 are based on average (2018–2024) proportion of arrivals to Europe occurring in the last third of the year.

While restrictions have obstructed migrants from some countries, other nationalities have filled the gaps. The composition of arrivals has shifted significantly from year to year.²⁰ In 2024, for instance, Bangladeshis were the primary nationality on the CMR, estimated at 21% of the total number of arrivals, followed closely by Syrians (19%), Tunisians (12%), Egyptians (7%) and

²⁰ One factor that may skew the data on arrivals to Italy via the CMR is that certain nationalities face higher interception rates than others. This is likely linked to differences in smuggling networks, the cost of the journey, and the involvement of corrupt officials in smuggling operations. For instance, previous reports indicate that Sudanese and Malians have had an estimated interception rate of 71%, significantly higher than the 31% for Bangladeshis, suggesting disparities in migrants' ability to evade the Libyan Coast Guard. As a result, the proportion of Sub-Saharan nationals attempting the journey may be significantly higher than the figures on arrivals suggest. See R. Forin and B. Frouws, [What's new? Analysing the latest trends on the Central Mediterranean mixed migration route to Italy](#), Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 2022.

Guineans (5%).²¹ This marked a shift from previous years which saw much greater representation of Sub-Saharan migrants along the route.²² In the first half of 2025, meanwhile, the composition of migrants attempting the journey has continued to evolve: while Bangladesh still accounts for the largest group (32%), it is followed by Eritrea (15%), Egypt (12%), Pakistan (9%) and Ethiopia (5%).²³ This points to a persistent demand for irregular journeys, met by a relative fluidity of smuggling networks and their ability to quickly adapt to different markets, depending on changing restrictions and demand.

Smuggling routes remain adaptive and difficult to predict. The fluctuations both in the number of migrants attempting the journey and the relative share of different nationalities highlight the dynamic and unpredictable nature of this movement. While restrictive policies undoubtedly have an impact, smugglers are highly adaptive to policy developments on the ground, charting new or unexpected routes (often in remote or dangerous waters) to circumvent surveillance elsewhere. This flexibility is demonstrated in how, year on year, the primary embarkation points have moved between Libya and Tunisia to avoid wherever border patrols are currently focused.²⁴ While Libya was previously the most popular point of departure, the intensification of surveillance there contributed to Tunisia superseding it in 2023 as the main country of embarkation for migrants travelling to Italy. However, by 2024, as Tunisia ramped up maritime interceptions as well as the mass expulsion

²¹ UNHCR, [Italy sea arrivals dashboard: December 2024](#), 2025.

²² UNHCR, [Italy sea arrivals dashboard: December 2023](#), 2024.

²³ UNHCR, UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2025. The increasing number of Eritreans, up from 4% in the first half of 2024, illustrates the dynamic nature of irregular migration. As predicted by MMC in a report earlier in the year, the drop in the number of Eritreans from previous levels appears to have been reversed as difficult conditions in North Africa and the shrinking possibility of resettlement since Donald Trump's second US presidency appear to be pushing more Eritreans to attempt the crossing to Italy. Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), [Where to next? Eritrean displacement amidst shrinking spaces of refuge](#), 2025.

²⁴ KII, on-line, October 2024.

of migrants in the country to Algeria and Libya, Libya again emerged as the primary place of departure.²⁵ More recently, there has been an increase in departures from the eastern part of the country, including an uptick in movement to Crete (a development covered in more detail in the section on the Eastern Mediterranean Route).

FIG. 4.2 - CROSSING VIA THE CMR ROUTE



Criminalisation efforts target migrants, not smugglers. While both the EU and the Italian government have justified their policies as a “fight” against smuggling gangs, there is increasing evidence that in practice it is migrants themselves (as well as NGO workers engaged in search and rescue efforts)²⁶ who are most likely to be penalised as a result. While smugglers appear to enjoy a relatively low risk of prosecution (see Case Study below), migrants have repeatedly been prosecuted on charges

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ L. Tondo, “Crew of migrant rescue boat acquitted in Italy after seven-year ordeal”, *The Guardian*, 19 April 2024.

of people trafficking.²⁷ This is again a reflection of how the tactics of smuggling gangs have adapted in response to recent crackdowns, with migrants increasingly forced to pilot the vessels themselves, often in exchange for free passage: interviews described how these migrants are often given drugs to manage their fear.²⁸ If the boat is subsequently intercepted, the migrant rather than the smuggler will be arrested.²⁹

Anti-smuggling efforts incentivise collusion between officials and smuggling gangs. Corruption facilitates irregular migration and there are pervasive and long-standing links between smugglers and authorities. These links used to be a signifier of success – well-connected smugglers would be allowed to send boats across the Mediterranean.³⁰ Now, however, even though smugglers are still connected to authorities, this no longer guarantees safe passage. Because the Libyan Coast Guard and Tunisian National Guard receive funding both from the EU (for anti-smuggling) and from smuggling networks (for assisting or ignoring migrant vessels), this perversely incentivises smugglers and corrupt officials to let some, but not all, migrants reach Europe.³¹

²⁷ BBC, [The African migrants who Italy accuses of people smuggling](#), 31 March 2022.

²⁸ Migrant and KII interviews, Sicily, October 2024.

²⁹ KII, on-line..., cit.

³⁰ R. Horsley, *Libya: Sophisticated Smugglers Thrive as Libyan Governance Stagnates*, Global Initiatives against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), September 2023.

³¹ KII, on-line..., cit.

CASE STUDY

THRIVING UNDER PRESSURE: HOW SMUGGLERS IN NORTH AFRICA ARE ADAPTING TO MIGRATION RESTRICTIONS

MMC's 4Mi initiative conducts surveys with both migrants and smugglers, producing insights into their methods and motivations that often challenge EU narratives. By capturing both sides of the journey, the data sheds light on realities that official discourses usually overlook.

Recent MMC research in North Africa, based on 910 migrant and 102 smuggler surveys (2024/2025), offers a corrective to common assumptions about the Central Mediterranean Route. Although arrivals to Italy declined compared to 2023, **44% of smugglers reported increased demand for their services, suggesting the market remains strong.** These findings reveal that smuggling adapts to restrictions, contradicting deterrence-based narratives. Survey results show how networks adjust. **Nearly half of smugglers (49%) changed routes in the last six months, while 59% raised their fees, mainly due to intensified border enforcement.** Some even said that stricter security created more demand, pushing migrants toward smugglers. With rising prices and steady demand, **37% reported increased revenues, demonstrating a surprisingly resilient market.**

Equally significant are the findings on risk. While smugglers acknowledged stricter policies increased interception risks for migrants, most still considered them low. Widespread collusion with state officials helps explain this. **Around half (49%) admitted contact with border guards, police, coast guards, or detention staff.** These interactions ranged from receiving patrol information to facilitating border crossings, releasing detainees, or even providing documentation.

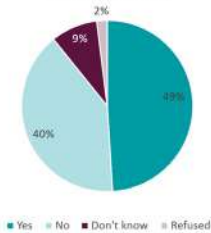
At a personal level, smugglers also reported limited legal risks. **Nearly half (44%) said they had never been confronted by law enforcement.** Among those who had, most described encounters as infrequent, often just once. This perception of safety, both for clients and themselves, challenges the assumption that enforcement discourages smuggling. Instead, smugglers adapt, profits grow, and the market persists despite restrictions.

Western Mediterranean Route (WMR)

Policy context



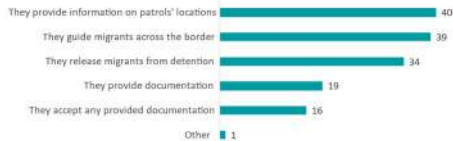
Do you or your group have any contact with state officials to facilitate migrant smuggling? (n=102)



Which type of state officials are you/your group in contact with? (n=50)



How are public/state officials involved in migrant smuggling? (n=50)



The WMR encompasses a number of land and maritime routes from Morocco and Algeria to Spain, including the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the North African coast, as well as the southern coast of mainland Spain and the Balearics. While the EU has not (yet) successfully brokered a comprehensive migration agreement with Algeria, Morocco's ongoing role as both a transit and destination country for migrants has created significant opportunities for it to leverage its position in "managing migration" between mainland Europe and Africa.

Increasing cooperation between the EU and Morocco. Over the past two decades there have been multiple deals signed between the EU and Morocco in the area of migration.³² Most

³² The EU devoted around 1.5 billion Euros to overall bilateral cooperation with Morocco between 2014 and 2020, including under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), and allocated 631 million Euros between 2021 and 2022 under the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe). Morocco is also a recipient of EU funding for migration under other financing instruments, including the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), EU Migration Support in Morocco, 2023.

recently, the EU launched an Anti-smuggling Operational Partnership (ASOP) with Morocco in July 2022, ostensibly to “tackle criminal networks, address irregular migration and save lives”.³³ Morocco has significantly stepped up enforcement mechanisms since, claiming to have stopped tens of thousands of “illegal crossings” since early 2023.³⁴ This partnership sits within broader support to Morocco by the EU of €1.6 billion for “reforms and increased resilience” until 2027.³⁵ Alongside the agreements relating to irregular migration, Morocco has also entered into various bilateral agreements with the EU or individual Member states to facilitate legal migration and labour mobility pathways.³⁶

Spain and Morocco’s transactional relationship on migration.

The bilateral relationship between Spain and Morocco, relating in particular to the management of the border between Morocco and Ceuta and Melilla, goes back decades and in many ways established the blueprint of border securitisation and externalisation that has informed EU policy in the years since.³⁷ The relationship has experienced some turbulence in recent years, with Morocco suspending cooperation in 2021 in an apparent effort to “weaponise” migration,³⁸ though relations were restored the following year.³⁹ Since then, Spain

³³ European Parliament (2023).

³⁴ “Morocco Stops 45,000 Migrants crossing to Europe”, *Reuters*, 7 September 2024.

³⁵ European Parliament (2023).

³⁶ EU (n.d.) [Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa](#).

³⁷ J. Fanjul, “Why Spain is a window into E.U. migration control”, *The New Humanitarian*, 21 May 2018.

³⁸ J. Vallentine, B. Frouws, and R. Forin, “Power dynamics, arm twisting and migrant rights: the many (ugly) faces of migration diplomacy”, Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 11 April 2024.

³⁹ In 2021, the relationship between the two countries soured after Spain allowed the leader of the Western Sahara independence movement Polisario Front, Brahim Ghalil, to receive emergency medical treatment in Logroño. Shortly afterwards, in early May, approximately 9,000 people entered Ceuta in one day, enabled by the apparent inaction of the Moroccan security guards to prevent the crossings. Relations were only restored the following year, when Spain – breaking

and Morocco have repaired and strengthened their “strategic partnership” on migration through a series of agreements on “migration management” in 2023.⁴⁰

Current mixed migration trends and challenges along the WMR
Numbers on the rise, driven by new migration routes. Since the WMR spiked in 2018 with more than 64,000 crossings, making it the primary entry point to Europe that year, numbers have steadily reduced and then remained relatively stable, with similar numbers of crossings in 2023 (17,208) and 2024 (17,475).⁴¹ However, in the first seven months of 2025, the WMR has shown the most relative growth of any route, with 9,025 maritime and land arrivals – up 16% from the same period in 2024 (7,755).⁴² While absolute numbers remain low, much of this increase is due to the sharp increase in the number of arrivals at the Balearic islands,⁴³ with more than 4,300 arrivals between January and mid-August 2025 – around 77% more than the same period in 2024.⁴⁴

away from its long-standing position on Western Sahara’s right to determine its own future – came out in support of it being governed as an autonomous region under Moroccan control. However, while restoring diplomatic relations with Morocco, Algeria responded to Spain’s announcement by suspending its long-standing cooperation around migration in protest – a situation that points to the difficulty of maintaining partnerships with multiple countries with competing interests. International Organization for Migration (IOM), “[IOM statement on recent arrivals in Ceuta, Spain](#)”, 28 May 2021; *AfricaNews*, “[Spain changes tune on Western Sahara](#)”, 19 March 2022; *Reuters*, “[Algeria suspends Spain treaty, bars imports over Western Sahara](#)”, 8 June 2022.

⁴⁰ InfoMigrants “Spain and Morocco mend ties with migration agreements”, 2023.

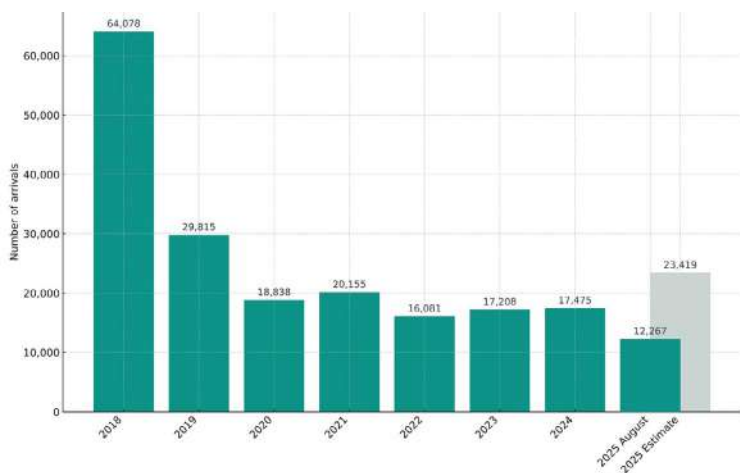
⁴¹ UNHCR Data Portal, Europe Sea Arrivals - Spain, 2025.

⁴² UNHCR, [Spain Weekly snapshot - Week 31 \(28 Jul - 3 Aug 2025\)](#), 2025.

⁴³ P. Grant, R. Fortin, and B. Frouws, [Are Crete and the Balearics revealing cracks in the EU migration deterrence?](#). Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 18 July 2025.

⁴⁴ *Majorca Daily Bulletin*, “[77% surge in number of migrants arriving in the Balearics by small boats](#)”, 19 August 2025.

FIG. 4.3 - ARRIVALS TO SPAIN VIA WMR 2018-2025



Data from UNHCR's Operational Data Portal on Europe Sea Arrivals. Estimates for 2025 are based on average (2018-2024) proportion of arrivals to Europe occurring in the last third of the year.

Algeria an increasingly important departure point. The increasingly popular route from Algeria to the Balearics, with the majority of those making the journey being Algerians themselves,⁴⁵ has quickly overtaken local capacity to adequately respond to the continued arrival of small boats.⁴⁶ The concern is that the situation in the Balearics may also not be short-lived, but instead develop into a protracted emergency with a significant death toll incurred along the route.⁴⁷ While the rise in migration from Algeria has been driven by a range of factors, including economic and political uncertainty within the country, the impacts of Europe's increasingly restrictive migration policies have also

⁴⁵ InfoMigrants, [Spain: More than 700 migrants rescued off the Balearics over four days, 2024](#).

⁴⁶ R. Robinson, "Crisis in Balearic Islands as migrants keep flocking in small boats", MSN, 2025.

⁴⁷ M. Panara, "Alarming rise in shipwrecks on Algerian migratory route to Spain", InfoMigrants, 2025.

played a major role in the expansion of these routes: the harsh securitisation evident in Morocco and Tunisia, as well as the shrinking opportunities for legal migration from Algeria, where Schengen visa denial rates are among the highest of any country.⁴⁸

The emergence of the route, besides highlighting the fluidity of migration along the WMR, also points to a fundamental weakness in the architecture of the EU’s partnership agreements across North Africa. Unlike its neighbours, Algeria has been unwilling to commit to a comprehensive agreement on migration with the EU, meaning the available options to curtail movement along this route may be more limited.

FIG. 4.4 - MARITIME AND LAND ROUTES TO SPAIN
(INCLUDING THE SPANISH ENCLAVES)



⁴⁸ M. Taddele Maru, “Africans who apply for Schengen visas face high rejection rates – migration scholar explains why”, *The Conversation*, 2024; Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), *Quarterly mixed migration update: North Africa – Quarter 3 2024*, 2024.

Resilient poly-criminal networks. While the WMR has decreased in significance since 2018, this does not necessarily imply a concomitant contraction in criminal activity. Smuggling networks along this route are operating poly-criminal networks with diversified income sources across a variety of different avenues including illicit drugs and other goods trafficking.⁴⁹ Accordingly, these networks are able to capitalise on different criminal markets to maintain revenue and remain active in case of an uptick in migration.⁵⁰ This suggests that, rather than being disrupted, smuggling gangs along the WMR remain active and are positioned to respond quickly to an increase in demand for migration along this route, should it occur. Indeed, this appears to have occurred along the route to the Balearics, with organised “mafia” allegedly playing a role in the swift revival of the route from 2024 onwards.⁵¹

Atlantic Route

Policy context

The Atlantic route, connecting the Western African coastline (from Western Sahara to as far as south as The Gambia and even Guinea-Conakry) with the Canary Islands, has emerged in recent years as one of the most important pathways for migrants to reach Europe. With increasing movement along this route, the EU and Spain have focused on replicating similar migration partnerships with key transit countries in the region, such as Mauritania and Senegal. In Mauritania, the ensuing crackdown on irregular migration has extended far beyond maritime interceptions, with mass arrests, detentions and expulsions carried out on thousands of migrants.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Grant, Fortin, and Frouws (2025); Majorca Daily Bulletin, “Organised mafia” helping illegal immigrants in Mallorca”, 2025.

⁵² Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), [Quarterly mixed migration update: West Africa – Quarter 2 2025](#), 2025.

Expansion of migration agreements to Western Africa.

Both Senegal and Mauritania serve as the primary points of embarkation on the Atlantic route for migrants, including nationals from these countries as well as migrants from other countries in the West Africa region. In particular, Mauritania's strategic importance for the EU has grown significantly, especially since becoming the primary country of embarkation in 2024. This was reflected in a €210 million EU partnership announced in February 2024 and finalised the following month, with the stated aim of supporting "migration management including the fight against migrant smuggling, as well as [to] promote security and stability, humanitarian aid for refugees and support to host communities", along with investments in job creation.⁵³ An agreement between the EU and Senegal was also reached in 2024, with 30 million euros allocated to prevent irregular migration.⁵⁴

Bilateral agreement with Spain. At the same time, Spain has signed or strengthened a number of bilateral agreements with West African states – including new agreements with The Gambia and Mauritania in 2024, with an earlier agreement around circular migration with Senegal in 2023⁵⁵ – aimed at stemming irregular migration through a transactional "carrot and stick" approach of supporting coastguards, putting in place returns agreements, and creating circular migration programmes to regularise labour migration from the respective countries.⁵⁶ The apparent success of the agreements in reducing migration to the Canary Islands has paved the way in 2025 for

⁵³ The European Commission, The European Commission launches new migration partnership with Mauritania, 2024.

⁵⁴ *Le Monde*, "EU announces 30 million package to prevent irregular migration from Senegal", 16 October 2024.

⁵⁵ E.A. Dom, "Spain and Mauritania agree to stem Mediterranean migration flows", *Euronews*, 28 August 2024; *Euronews*, "Spain and The Gambia sign partnership agreement on migration control in the Canary Islands", 29 August 2024; InfoMigrants, "Spain extends migrant worker program to Senegal", 2023.

⁵⁶ AP and E.A.-M. Dom, "Spain and Mauritania agree to stem Mediterranean migration flows", *Euronews*, 28 August 2024.

Spain bolstering private investment in Mauritania and piloting a temporary labour migration programme for Mauritanian nationals to work seasonally in Spain,⁵⁷ with similar initiatives in Senegal and The Gambia.⁵⁸

Current mixed migration trends and challenges along the Atlantic Route

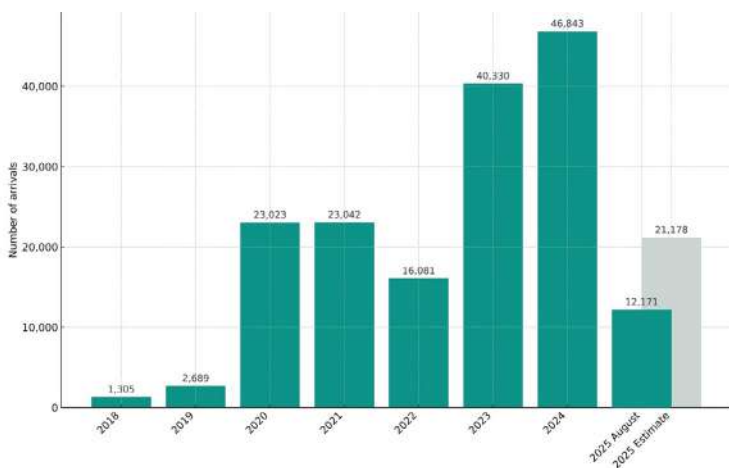
Numbers are down in 2025, but still very high. The Atlantic route is notable for having been relatively dormant since 2006, when more than 30,000 migrants travelled along the route to the Canary Islands, until late 2019 when numbers began to pick up again. With the exception of 2022, when numbers dipped temporarily, the route broke a record in 2023 (with over 40,330 crossings) and again in 2024 (46,843). However, the first seven months of 2025 have seen a marked drop in movement along this route, with 11,614 arrivals – 48% less than the total during the same period in 2024 (22,035).⁵⁹ Much of this reduction can be attributed to the large-scale crackdown on migrants within Mauritania, discussed below. However, the apparent success of these measures in curbing migration needs to be set against the wider context of the route, particularly its historic fluctuations, and continued demand for migration from sending countries such as Mali.

⁵⁷ *La Moncloa*, “Spain will collaborate with Mauritania in the field of social security to strengthen the protection of migrant workers”, 2025; Energy, Capital and Power, “Spain commits €200 million to boost investment in Mauritania”, 2025.

⁵⁸ European Commission, *Spain: New order for migrant employment and circular migration*, 2025.

⁵⁹ UNHCR, *Europe sea arrivals: Spain*, 2025.

FIG. 4.5 - ARRIVALS TO SPAIN VIA THE ATLANTIC ROUTE
2018-2025



Data from UNHCR's Operational Data Portal on Europe Sea Arrivals. Estimates for 2025 are based on average (2018-2024) proportion of arrivals to Europe occurring in the last third of the year.

Insecurity and conflict drive increasing numbers of Malians.

Migrants travelling along the Atlantic route are primarily West Africans and include nationals from the prime departure countries – Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco. There have been increasing numbers of Malians using the Atlantic route due to ongoing conflict and insecurity, with 10,000 arrivals between January and September 2024.⁶⁰ In 2024 Malians became the dominant nationality (36%), followed by Senegalese (27%), Guinean (9%), Moroccan (8%), Mauritanian (7%), and Gambian (6%) nationals.⁶¹ Mirroring the general reduction in movement along this route during 2025, the number of Malians has decreased by 44% in the first half of 2025, according to

⁶⁰ KII, on-line, September 2024.

⁶¹ See UNHCR data portal.

Frontex data,⁶² but it is likely that many more as a result are either becoming stranded in Mauritania or apprehended and expelled back to Mali, despite the dangers there.

Abuse of migrants in Mauritania. The situation for migrants in Mauritania has becoming increasingly hostile, particularly since a new law came into effect in January 2025 requiring all foreigners to have a residency permit: previously, nationals from neighbouring countries were able to move freely in the country. From the beginning of the year, authorities reportedly apprehended more than 30,000 migrants between January and April 2025.⁶³ The impact of this crackdown has been alarming, with reports of foreign nationals (including those with legal documentation) mistreated in detention and stripped of their belongings before being forced back across the border into Senegal or Mali.⁶⁴ Besides widespread human rights concerns, the crackdown led to significant diplomatic tensions with neighbouring countries and sparked criticism from the opposition within Mauritania, with one MP calling for the country's agreement with the EU to be cancelled.⁶⁵

Demand on the Atlantic route remains strong, with smugglers adapting to meet it. The rise of the Atlantic route in recent years up to 2024 can be attributed in part to the impacts of restrictions on other migration routes – an important reminder of the unintended consequences that EU-sponsored restrictions in one area can have elsewhere. It is also the case that, notwithstanding the increasing restrictions in place, the fundamental drivers of conflict and instability fuelling migration from countries such as Mali have not abated.⁶⁶ Until these are addressed, it is likely

⁶² Frontex, [Monitoring and risk analysis: Migratory map](#), 2025.

⁶³ InfoMigrants, [“Mauritania intercepts 30,000 migrants, cracks down on over 80 smuggling rings this year”](#), 2025.

⁶⁴ S. Lawal, [“‘Xenophobic’: Neighbours outraged over Mauritania’s mass migrant pushback”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 16 May 2025.

⁶⁵ Ibid.; *Focus on Africa*, [“Mauritania, Member of Parliament calls for cancellation of migration agreement with the EU”](#), 2025.

⁶⁶ African Security Analysis, [“Security Situation in Mali”](#), May 2025.

that significant numbers of people will continue to attempt the journey, particularly as smugglers have proven adept at adapting to changing conditions on the ground.

Diversification of smuggling routes. Within Senegal, there are now departures along the whole coastline, with the greatest number from St Louis and Mbour,⁶⁷ and in Mauritania the key departure points are Nouadhibou, but also Nouakchott.⁶⁸ More recently, there have been reports of boats departing from as far south as Guinea-Conakry,⁶⁹ further evidence of the adaptability of the route, even if the greater distance creates additional dangers for those making the journey. It is already one of the more dangerous routes due to the isolation and length of the journey, with the organisation Caminando Fronteras reporting that an average of 30 migrants a day perished at sea on their way to the Canary Islands during 2024.⁷⁰ While a significant proportion of migrant departures from Senegal are "community-led", the intensification of deterrence-based policies may serve to entrench the presence of organised smuggling gangs. In Senegal, for instance, these groups have proven highly reactive to the presence of the Coast Guard, moving to different cities or different parts of the shore as necessary to evade interception.⁷¹ Increasing interceptions boats may therefore contribute to the further growth of organised smuggling groups, as this agility will be necessary to evade authorities.

⁶⁷ KII, on-line, October 2024.

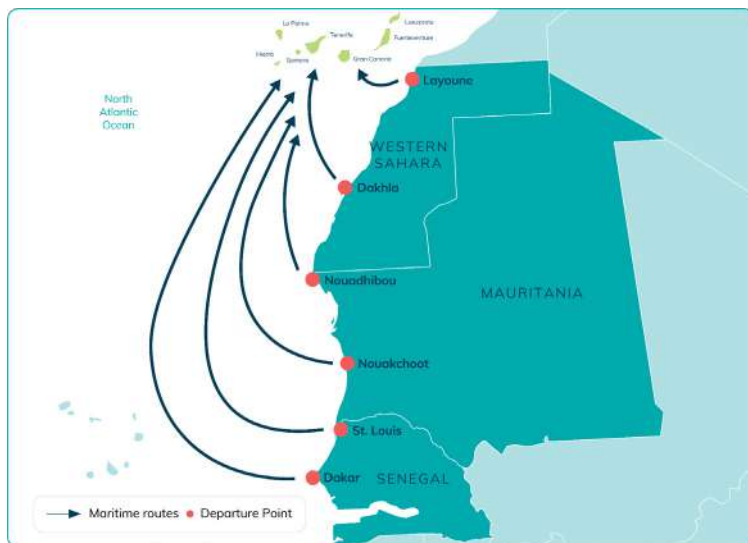
⁶⁸ KII, on-line, September 2024.

⁶⁹ F. Berger, R.B. Ruiz-Benitez e Lugo, and M. Kane, M. (2025) Why the deadliest migration route in the world is becoming more popular. Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).

⁷⁰ CaMinando Fronteras, "[Monitoring the right to life 2024](#)", December 2024.

⁷¹ KII, on-line, November 2024.

FIG. 4.6 - CROSSINGS VIA THE ATLANTIC ROUTE



Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR)

Policy context

The Eastern Mediterranean route is primarily connected between Türkiye and Greece, Cyprus, and Bulgaria, though other routes have also emerged in 2024 and 2025, notably between Lebanon and Cyprus and between Libya and Crete.

EU's migration partnerships in the region. Following unprecedented 2015 arrivals via the Eastern Mediterranean, the 2016 EU-Türkiye Statement aimed to curb irregular crossings to Greece by returning irregular migrants from Greece to Türkiye in exchange for EU funding and Syrian refugee resettlement; it initially reduced numbers but has been repeatedly strained – most notably when Türkiye briefly opened its borders in February 2020 before COVID-19 closures – yet remains in force, with recent EU disbursements including support to manage Türkiye's eastern border with

Iran, a key entry point for Afghan migrants.⁷² In addition, in response to growing numbers of departures from Lebanon and Egypt, the EU has extended similar partnerships to them as well. In 2024, besides the agreement with Egypt discussed in the CMR section (migrants depart from Egypt on both the CMR and EMR to Italy and Greece respectively), the European Commission announced a 1 billion Euro financial package to support Lebanon's "security and stability". Though some of this funding was earmarked for investments in basic services for refugees and other marginalised communities, it also included a specific component on migration management, encompassing anti-smuggling and financial assistance to the military.⁷³

Deterrence-based policies at the national level. Greece has implemented a range of restrictive policies in response to irregular migration. Besides contributing to an increasingly inhospitable environment for refugees and asylum seekers already there, these measures have made it more difficult for migrants to remain in the country.⁷⁴ Most recently, in July 2025 the Greek government announced a "disincentive-based policy" to deter new arrivals, including increased criminal penalties for staying in the country illegally and a further rollback in benefits for asylum seekers.⁷⁵ The parliament also approved a controversial three-month suspension of asylum applications for migrants travelling from North Africa. The move, justified as a necessary response to the uptick in movement between Libya and Crete, has been condemned by human rights groups as a violation of international law.⁷⁶ Cyprus, similarly,

⁷² European Commission, [EU adopts new programmes in support to refugees and border management in Türkiye worth over €1.2 billion](#), 2022.

⁷³ European Commission (2024) [President von der Leyen reaffirms EU's strong support for Lebanon and its people and announces a €1 billion package of EU funding](#), 2024.

⁷⁴ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, [Migration in the Eastern Mediterranean: Commonalities and differences among Egypt, Lebanon, Greece and Cyprus](#).

⁷⁵ N. Stamouli, "Greece plans new "disincentives" to deter migrants", *Politico*, 10 July 2025.

⁷⁶ E. Cossé, "Greece's asylum suspension denies rights, puts lives at risk", Human Rights Watch, 2025.

has tightened its policies in response to irregular migration. A bilateral agreement between Cyprus and Lebanon, brokered in 2020, includes provisions about the interception and return of migrants attempting to reach the island. Subsequently, beginning in 2022, the government began to introduce accelerated asylum and deportation procedures to filter applications and facilitate returns. This ultimately culminated in the controversial suspension of asylum for Syrians in April 2024.⁷⁷ That summer, Cypriot authorities also sealed off its border with the Turkish-occupied north of the island to prevent it becoming a “back door” for irregular migration, in the process trapping dozens of migrants there for months before finally (under pressure from the UN) allowing them entry.⁷⁸

Current mixed migration trends and challenges along the EMR Numbers slightly down in 2025, but buoyed by rising migration from Libya. As with other routes, the EMR has experienced significant fluctuations over time. After dropping sharply in 2020 (15,696) and 2021 (9,157), during the COVID-19 pandemic, irregular migration has steadily risen year on year between 2022 and 2024. The total in the first seven months of 2025 (25,870), however, was almost identical to the same period the previous year in 2024 (25,887).⁷⁹ However, a relatively recent development is the surge in arrivals to Crete, predominantly Egyptian, Sudanese, and Bangladeshi migrants travelling from Libya.⁸⁰ Though already evident in 2024, the increase was especially evident in 2025, with almost 11,000 travelling to Crete by mid-August.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, “Migration in the Eastern Mediterranean: Commonalities and differences among Egypt, Lebanon, Greece and Cyprus”, May 2025.

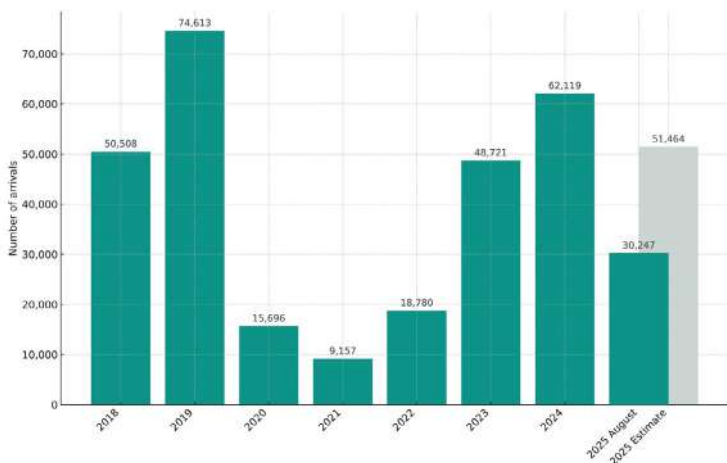
⁷⁸ *InfoMigrants*, “Cyprus: Migrants stranded in UN buffer zone”, 2024; E. Wallis, “UN urges Cyprus to start asylum process for migrants in buffer zone”, *InfoMigrants*, 2024.

⁷⁹ UNHCR, *Europe sea arrivals: Greece*, 2025.

⁸⁰ N. Mellersch, “Migrant arrivals in Greece drop, but asylum suspension draws sharp criticism”, *InfoMigrants*, 21 August 2025.

⁸¹ Refugees Support Aegean (RSA) *Crete – Gavdos: Sixfold increase in refugee*

FIG. 4.7 – ARRIVALS TO GREECE VIA THE EMR 2018-2025



Data from UNHCR's Operational Data Portal on Europe Sea Arrivals. Estimates for 2025 are based on average (2018-2024) proportion of arrivals to Europe occurring in the last third of the year.

Some of the recent reduction can be explained by the situation in Syria: in light of the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, a sudden and unexpected development that has likely contributed to a dramatic reduction in the number of Syrians attempting to reach Europe. For instance, between January and June 2024, Syrians were the second largest group among arrivals (4,861), accounting for more than a quarter (27%) of arrivals.⁸² In the same period of 2025, however, they accounted for just 2.9% of arrivals, totalling 495 people⁸³ – around a tenth of the number in the first half of 2024. This differential is several times greater than the reported decrease overall in 2025. This suggests that some of the decline in numbers during this period is attributable to external events rather than the EU's deterrence-based policies per se.

arrivals in 2024 – Lack of organised first reception and accommodation infrastructure, Arrival Data for 2024.

⁸² UNHCR, [Greece sea arrivals dashboard – June 2024](#), 2024.

⁸³ UNHCR, [Europe sea arrivals: Greece](#), 2025.

For Cyprus, the downward trajectory is clearer. While the number of arrivals in recent years is far fewer than for Greece, the impact has been exacerbated by the comparatively small size of the population overall: in relative terms, Cyprus has had the highest per capita asylum seeker population in the EU. After 2022, when the number of arrivals peaked at 17,286 and tougher restrictions were put in place, the total in 2023 fell to 10,920 and again to 6,097 in 2024. This latter reduction was largely observable from May, in the wake of the government's suspension of asylum, when sea arrivals dwindled from around 1,000 a month to less than 100. So far this reduction appears to have held, with arrivals in the first half of 2025 (1,258) just over a quarter (28%) of the total in the same period the previous year (4,474).⁸⁴

Egregious human rights abuses. Since 2020, when the arrangement with Türkiye temporarily faltered and Covid-19 provided a pretext for harder border security, Greece adopted a harsher approach to migrant arrivals. Aided by new technologies and by unidentified armed men – including masked migrants coerced into acting as proxies⁸⁵ – Greek authorities have reportedly carried out systematic pushbacks into Turkish waters,⁸⁶ illegal acts often accompanied by extreme violence, beatings, and humiliation.⁸⁷ In recent years, dozens of migrants have died as a direct result.⁸⁸ At the same time, authorities rolled back services for arrivals and weakened sea rescue capacity. The consequences were stark in June 2023 when a boat sank near Pylos, killing at least 596 people: questions arose about delays in the Greek coastguard's response, with 17 members charged in May 2025 for failing to act adequately.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ UNHCR, [Europe sea arrivals: Cyprus](#), 2025.

⁸⁵ Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), *Mixed migration review*, November 2023, p. 169.

⁸⁶ B. Frelick, "A landmark ruling on Greek border pushbacks", Human Rights Watch, 21 January 2025.

⁸⁷ UNHCR, [News Comment: UNHCR warns of increasing violence and human rights violations at European borders](#), 2022.

⁸⁸ L. Smith and B. Steele, "Greek coastguard threw migrants overboard to their deaths, witnesses say", *BBC*, 17 June 2024.

⁸⁹ *InfoMigrants*, "Greek Naval Court charges coast guards for Pylos shipwreck",

While the EU has often been accused of overlooking abuses,⁹⁰ Greece's actions have at times prompted scrutiny even from Frontex, which in April 2025 announced it was reviewing 12 incidents, including accusations of pushbacks.⁹¹ Notwithstanding years of EU tolerance of abuses in the name of border security, this raises questions about the sustainability of Greece's approach. The dubious legality of its three-month suspension of asylum applications from North Africa, for example, has been condemned by human rights groups as a violation of international law and criticised for potentially contravening domestic legislation.⁹²

Migration from Libya to Crete growing in prominence. One of the most significant recent developments along the CMR has been the emergence of the islands of Crete and Gavdos as the primary entry point of arrival for migrants travelling to Greece. As with the uptick in movement along the WMR from Algeria to the Balearics, this shift exposes a weakness in "migration partnerships" – in this case with Libya, one of its longest-standing partners. Despite this relationship, some sources imply that – against the backdrop of a controversial 2019 agreement between Libya and Türkiye around maritime oil and gas exploration that is disputed by Greece and Cyprus – Libya may even be weaponizing migration.⁹³ The situation is further complicated by the fact that much of Libya, including the eastern areas from which most Crete-bound boats depart from, controlled

25 July 2025; MMC (2023) [Mixed migration review](#), pp. 172–73.

⁹⁰ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), [Greece: Violations and deflection continue as does EU support and will-full "ignorance"](#), 2 December 2022.

⁹¹ R. Maltezou and Y. Souliotis, ["EU border agency reviewing 12 cases of potential rights violations by Greece"](#), *Reuters*, 8 April 2025.

⁹² M. Moschopoulos, ["Thoughts on Greece's \(new\) asylum ban"](#), *Deleted Scenes from Kafka*, July 2025; Amnesty International, ["Greece: New asylum and return proposals flagrantly breach international law and punish people seeking protection"](#), July 2025.

⁹³ S. Michalopoulos and S. Mandilara, ["Greece faces migrant surge as Libya, Turkey intensify Mediterranean energy ties"](#), *Euractiv*, 2 July 2025.

not by the internationally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli but its rival Government of National Stability (GNS). Concerns are growing that, with Russian support, General Khalifa Haftar, warlord and de facto ruler of eastern Libya, is using migration against the EU to extract concessions.⁹⁴ These developments highlight the volatility of the relationships underpinning the EU's externalisation regime. While Greece has responded robustly, threatening in June to dispatch warships into international waters near Libya and later suspending asylum applications of migrants who had embarking in North Africa, these actions have not, as of August 2025, stemmed migration on this route.⁹⁵

Are Restrictive Policies Really Working?

As shown in the previous section, while deterrence and restrictive migrations policies have had profound human rights implications for migrants – undermining protections and contributing to more migrant deaths en route – their impact on irregular migration dynamics is more ambiguous. While there has undeniably been a decrease in arrivals in 2025 compared to 2024 and 2023, irregular routes into the EU remain very much active – and in some cases have been on the rise again in 2025. Key structural drivers such as economic insecurity, conflict and violence ensure that overall demand for migration remains strong. Sustained demand for smuggling services to enable irregular migration, even (and sometimes especially) in the face of increased restrictions, has been matched by the capacity of smuggling networks to adapt and diversify, demonstrating a resilient supply side continually able to meet shifting demand.

⁹⁴ K. Knipp, “Russia’s role in trafficking, smuggling from Libya to EU”, *DW*, 22 April 2025; *The Times*, “Fears Russia could “weaponise” migrants using influence over Libya”, 12 June 2025.

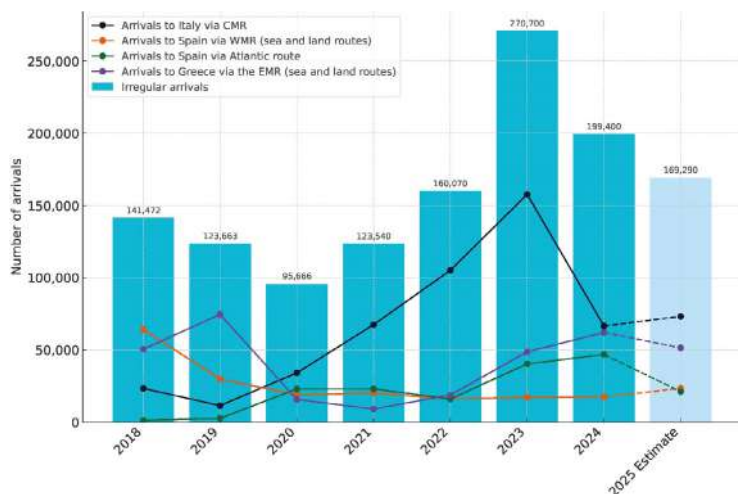
⁹⁵ *Euronews*, “Greece plans to deploy navy ships off Libya to ‘send a message’ to migrant smuggler”, 23 June 2025.

So, are the EU's restrictive migration and deterrence policies – and in particular, its approach to migration partnerships – really working? And is the current crackdown on smuggling having any real impact? To assess these questions, this section examines four key areas: arrival numbers, demand for irregular journeys, the supply of irregular journeys by smugglers and the current migration partnership model.

Are arrivals really down?

Yes – but only on some routes, and likely only for now. Given the fluctuations that have occurred over the past decade, the recent reduction in irregular migration into the EU should not be overstated. While border closures and mass expulsions may succeed, at least temporarily, in reducing migration along one route, other routes have (re)emerged or surged alongside this, including the recent uptick in movement from Libya to Crete and from Algeria to the Balearics. As explored in the last section, correlating policy developments with reduced irregular migration is not straightforward: notwithstanding short-term falls, the number of arrivals in Europe has fluctuated over time and between 2021 and 2023 was rising, despite the many restrictions in place. While 2024 saw a significant decrease, the total number of arrivals overall was still the second highest (after 2023) since 2016. This suggests a more complicated relationship between restrictive policies and mixed migration trends than the deterrence-based narrative suggests.

FIG. 4.8 – IRREGULAR ARRIVALS TO EUROPE 2018-2025



Data from UNHCR's Operational Data Portal on Europe Sea Arrivals.
Estimates for 2025 are based on average (2018-2024) proportion of arrivals to Europe occurring in the last third of the year.

Is demand for irregular journeys declining?

No. Demand remains high, and the forces driving it are intensifying.

Despite various policy changes, demand for irregular migration has stubbornly persisted. The assumption that migrants will calibrate their decision-making in response to harsher migration policies fails to recognise the strength of drivers, particularly in conflicted-affected areas such as Mali or Sudan – but also in countries like Bangladesh, Tunisia and Egypt – pushing people to migrate in search of safety and opportunity elsewhere. If anything, the drivers of movement have only deepened since 2023 onwards. There has been increased authoritarianism and ongoing failures to deliver reforms in governance in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Algeria;⁹⁶ security has deteriorated in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, generating new and growing

⁹⁶ LSE IDEAS, “[After the Arab Spring Power Shift in the Middle East?](#)”, 2012.

complex emergencies;⁹⁷ despite the positive developments in Syria, growing tension and conflicts in the Middle East have continued to leave many displaced, unable to return to their homes.⁹⁸ In this context, Europe needs to have a more realistic understanding of the impact that it does and can have on migrant decision-making.

Has the supply of irregular journeys been disrupted?

No. Smuggling networks remain highly adaptive and resilient. Across all four routes discussed here, smuggling networks continue to flourish in the face of restrictions, responding to demand from migrants and evading interception. Smuggling organisations have proven to be remarkably creative and entrepreneurial, adapting quickly to changing conditions in different countries, and far more resilient than the deterrence-based narrative would suggest. This is in large part because smugglers are operating on the ground in real time, with the capacity to respond swiftly to rising or frustrated demand: if migrants are unable to reach an established route due to restrictions, smugglers are incentivised to develop new routes to accommodate them instead, particularly as they are increasingly insulated from the potential risks of these journeys themselves. Smugglers will use a route and modus operandi until they see it is not working; even once interceptions increase, if migrants are still seeking their services and able to pay higher fees, they will continue to offer the route.⁹⁹ This indicates that adaptation by smugglers depends more on changes in source countries and the local operating environment where smugglers are based than changes in the destination country.

⁹⁷ LSE, "The political and security problems in the Horn of Africa have implications for global security", 23 August 2024.

⁹⁸ Amnesty, "Middle East and North Africa Regional Overview", 2023.

⁹⁹ KII, on-line, September 2024.

By contrast, the EU and member states are locked into much slower and reactive decision-making processes that are liable to enter crisis mode when new routes inevitably emerge. Besides the inherent constraints they face as political entities compared to criminal businesses, the predominant emphasis on supply-led solutions – the disruption of illicit service providers, rather than addressing the drivers of the demand to migrate – means that the impact on smuggling markets is likely to be short-lived. Indeed, the significant flows of funding channelled by the EU towards anti-smuggling efforts, instead of repressing illicit activity, are feeding into a broader political economy where corrupt officials are acting in collusion with criminal organisations. It is also the case that smuggling networks are sustained or even boosted, rather than disrupted, by restrictive policies. This is why MMC has previously argued that the Temporary Protection Directive implemented in the wake of Russia's invasion in 2022, offering displaced Ukrainians protection status and free movement across the EU, could be seen as an example of how to disrupt business opportunities for smugglers; if Ukrainian refugees would not have been allowed legal entry into the EU, many would have turned to smugglers, creating a multi-billion-euro business opportunity.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ R. Forin, "[How to break the business model of smugglers](#)", Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 2024 .

COMPARISON AND LESSONS LEARNED: THE WAR ON DRUGS AND THE WAR ON SMUGGLING

MMC has compared the long-running "war on drugs" in the Americas with the EU's emerging "war on smuggling." Both focus on disrupting supply networks while neglecting the structural factors driving demand. These parallels highlight the limitations and risks of current anti-smuggling strategies.¹⁰¹

- **Prohibition as a market driver.** In drugs, prohibition has sustained high prices and profits despite crowded prisons and tighter controls, while consumption has grown. Smuggling reflects the same logic: enforcement has not curtailed irregular journeys. Instead, restrictions raise profits, making illegality an incentive rather than a deterrent.

- **The limits of interdiction.** Drug interdiction achieved local successes but never stopped global production or demand, while costs were heavy. In smuggling, interdiction drives adaptation: routes shift, methods evolve, and arrivals may fall in one place only to rise elsewhere. Migration is displaced rather than stopped, with higher risks for migrants.

- **The use of force.** The drug war shows militarisation worsens violence involving traffickers, authorities, and civilians. In smuggling, lethal force is ethically and legally problematic, as smugglers operate beside their clients. Although migrant abuse is frequent, armed clashes are rare. Militarised crackdowns risk endangering migrants without reducing the trade.

- **The persistence of demand.** Drug demand remains inelastic, with higher costs passed on, profits growing, and new methods emerging. Smuggling shows similar resilience: shrinking legal mobility expands the underground market. Without credible legal pathways and efforts to reduce reliance on smugglers, enforcement risks reproducing the entrenched, adaptive nature of drug economies.

The drug war illustrates how prohibition has generated violence while failing to reduce supply or demand. The EU's deterrence-based migration policies risk a similar legacy: securitised borders that do not stop smuggling but instead increase migrant deaths and erode fundamental protections.

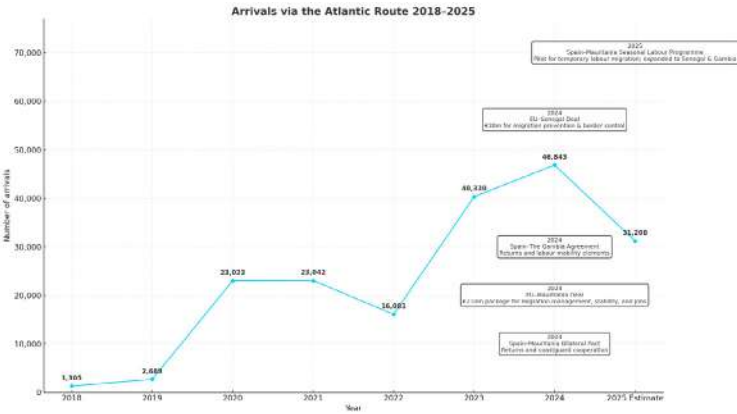
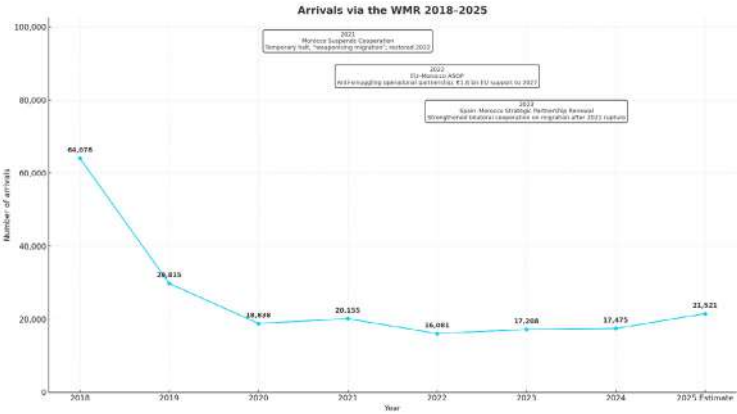
¹⁰¹ C. Horwood, "The new 'public enemy number one'- comparing and contrasting the war on drugs and the emerging war on migrant smugglers", Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 2019.

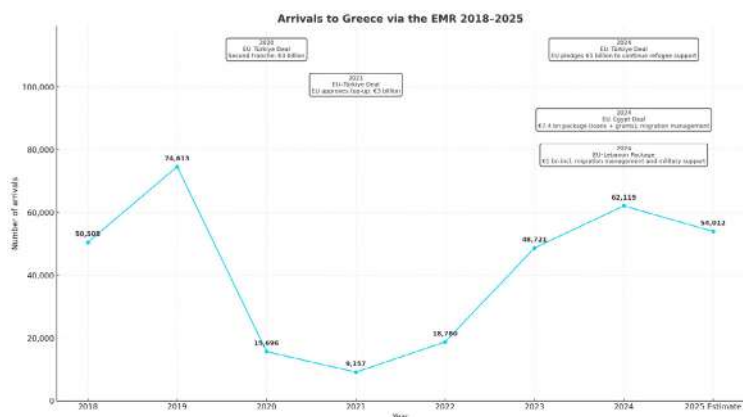
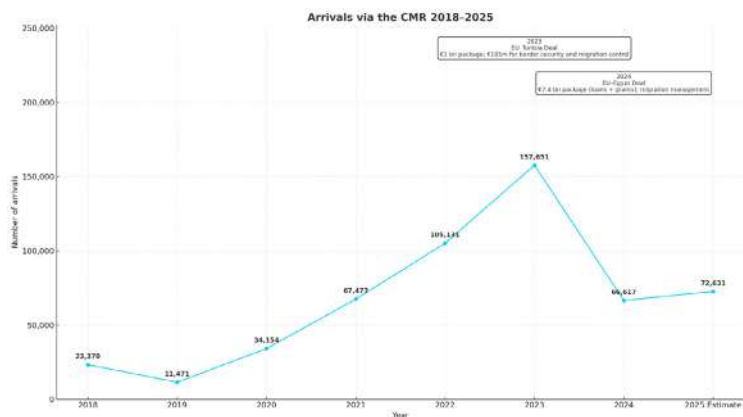
Is the current migration partnership model working?

Yes, it has contributed to reduce departures toward Europe – but is becoming increasingly costly, unsustainable and ethically unacceptable. Despite the hundreds of millions of Euros that have been invested in them, the flammability of the EU's growing array of agreements with countries in North Africa, West Africa and the Middle East has become increasingly evident in recent years. While the partnership-based externalisation model has been criticised as exploitative and rooted in colonial power imbalances between Europe and the Global South,¹⁰² it is also the case that imbalances are increasingly emerging on both sides. As their dependence on these agreements grows, the EU and its member states have been repeatedly manipulated as a result: countries such as Morocco, Libya and Tunisia are increasingly able to use the threat of irregular migration to pressure Europe. In addition, as smuggling networks evolve and expand, the current model requires the development of more agreements to hold the line – something that may not be possible in future, particularly in an increasingly combustible geopolitical context. As the emergence of the route from eastern Libya to Crete demonstrates, curbing irregular migration is akin to fire-fighting: as soon as one migratory flashpoint is temporarily extinguished, another one may emerge elsewhere.

¹⁰² T. Cappiali and A. Pacciardi, “Reorienting EU border externalization studies: A decolonial intersectional approach”, *Geopolitics*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2024, pp. 300-24.

ARRIVALS BY ROUTE ALONG WITH KEY POLICY EVENTS





Furthermore, these partnerships – often brokered with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states – undermine good governance and human rights by prioritising migration control over migrant protection. Civil society and experts have widely criticised them as short-term, fragile alliances driven by political expediency, with little long-term structural impact.¹⁰³ As seen

¹⁰³ Clingendael Spectator 4, “Between sticks and carrots: The future of EU

in Libya, Tunisia, Mauritania, Morocco and elsewhere, such "migration diplomacy" has fuelled violations against migrants while contradicting the EU's stated commitment to democratic reform and human rights.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, these deals grant repressive governments greater legitimacy and exert a corrosive effect on the EU's own political fabric.

Most critically, for migrants the partnership model is having a severe human impact: deterrence is costing lives, not saving them. While migration policy has a limited impact on whether people choose to migrate, what it does have an impact on is the levels of risk that migrants face. More restrictive policies have led to longer sea crossings, more circuitous journeys to avoid interception, and larger numbers crammed into boats lacking adequate safety equipment. In addition to the risks at sea, many migrants fail to make it to the coast or face additional risks on arrival in the intended destination country. This contradicts the humanitarian justification that frequently accompanies the implementation of preventative policies such as surveillance and interceptions – the argument that cracking down on smuggling will help save lives by stopping migrants from attempting the journey. In practice, in most cases this is only driving smugglers to operate in more remote, dangerous areas to evade detection. Migrants therefore bear the brunt

Conclusion

Migration remains an intensely political issue. Policymakers face growing pressure to appear tough, especially amid rightward political shifts across Europe. Yet, this has led to short-sighted responses that may temporarily reduce numbers, but fail to address the structural drivers of irregular migration. The current approach, though it may bring short-term reductions along certain routes, often comes at a high financial, human and

migration deals", April 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Vallentine, Frouws, and Forin (2024).

ethical cost. Furthermore, these policies, while overly focused on containment, externalization and anti-smuggling, have given far too little attention to migration drivers or meeting the demand for legal avenues.

But smuggling networks adapt – and even thrive – when restrictions are imposed. As long as demand for migration exists, suppliers (smugglers) will adapt by facilitating irregular migration. This is not to say enforcement or the prosecution of criminals – especially violent smugglers and human traffickers – should be abandoned. On the contrary, targeting those responsible for aggravated smuggling, extreme violence against migrants and loss of life is essential. However, simplistic narratives about “disrupting the business model of smugglers” or “smashing the gangs” fail to account for the supply-and-demand dynamics driving the smuggling market, particularly when it is migrants themselves and humanitarian workers who are disproportionately targeted for prosecution.

Thus, enforcement must be part of a broader, more comprehensive approach to irregular migration, combining multiple elements. **On the demand side**, greater investment is needed in measures that reduce reliance on irregular migration and smuggling networks by expanding safe, legal, and timely alternatives:

- **Implement a whole-of-route strategy** along key migration corridors, supported by centres that provide not only assistance and protection but also direct access to, or at minimum reliable information on, regular migration opportunities, as well as return counselling and assistance. Models such as the Safe Mobility Offices deployed in the Americas could be expanded and adapted to other contexts.¹⁰⁵
- **Ensure fair, fast, and efficient asylum processing** at Europe’s external borders, coupled with an equitable

¹⁰⁵ Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), *The influence of Safe Mobility Offices (SMO) on mixed migration in Latin America*, 2024.

relocation mechanism among EU Member States for those granted protection.

- **Strengthen resettlement programmes** to move beyond token numbers and make them a genuinely viable solution for those in need of protection.
- Substantially expand regular labour migration pathways **beyond small-scale pilots**, aligning them with identified labour shortages in destination countries and ensuring accessibility for a broader range of skill levels.

On the supply side, anti-smuggling efforts should focus on areas that are currently neglected but critical for meaningful disruption of the market:

- **Confront corruption and collusion among state officials**, which play a pivotal role in enabling irregular migration. Without tackling this structural enabler, enforcement will continue to target symptoms rather than the root of the supply chain.
- **Provide alternative livelihoods in border and transit communities**, where smuggling often represents one of the few viable income sources. Well-designed, locally adapted income-generating programmes can reduce economic dependence on the smuggling economy, particularly when coupled with broader development investments and governance reforms.
- **Target high-level organisers and profiteers rather than low-ranking facilitators**, migrants themselves, or humanitarian actors engaged in protection and search-and-rescue activities. Current practices too often focus on the most visible or accessible actors, while leaving core networks intact. Strategic intelligence-led operations should dismantle the upper tiers of smuggling structures, where financial and logistical control is concentrated.
- In parallel to the above intervention on the demand and supply sides of irregular migration, **timely, efficient,**

scalable but also fair and dignified return processes for those without a legal right to stay (including migrants with unsuccessful asylum claims or those ineligible for special or complementary protections) – ensuring proper reintegration support – should be strengthened.

If genuine, accessible legal alternatives exist and swift returns for those without the right to stay are a realistic prospect, fewer people will risk their lives or pay thousands of dollars to smugglers. Expanding regular migration channels could also unlock cooperation from origin countries on returns, improving Europe's ability to facilitate faster repatriations for those without valid protection concerns. **Crucially, these measures must be implemented in parallel – not sequentially.** A common belief among European leaders is that irregular migration must first be controlled before expanding regular migration. This approach is flawed, as these strategies are interdependent and cannot be pursued in isolation.

Additionally, a comprehensive migration strategy must align with policies on trade, development, subsidies, and visas. This would reduce Europe's vulnerability in migration deals with third countries and help uphold human rights standards. Currently, political fear of increased arrivals has shifted the balance of power in these deals toward transit countries, despite Europe's far greater economic leverage. **Demanding non-negotiable adherence to human rights should be central to any migration governance partnership.** Though politically challenging – particularly in a divided Europe – this comprehensive approach is ultimately necessary to reduce irregular migration and disrupt smuggling networks on a meaningful scale.

5. Securitisation, Resistance and the Future of EU-Africa Migration Cooperation: Towards a Rights Based Approach

Amanda Bisong

Migration is today one of the most salient and contested dimensions of relations between the European and African countries. For Europe, irregular migration from Africa is often portrayed as a pressing security, political, and societal challenge, dominating public debates and shaping electoral outcomes. European policymakers increasingly frame migration through the lens of security, territorial sovereignty and border management, often glossing over the labour market dynamics and demographic changes contributing to migration towards Europe. For most African countries, mobility has historically been, and remains, a vital source of economic resilience, social transformation, and regional integration. African policymakers, while also concerned with state sovereignty and security, emphasise the role of migration as a driver of development and a key pillar of continental integration.

This divergence in framing has produced persistent tensions in policy and practice.¹ While the European Union (EU) has increasingly sought to externalise its migration control measures by involving African states, African actors and institutions

¹ F. Zanker, “[Managing or restricting movement? Diverging approaches of African and European migration governance](#)”, *CMS* 7, 17, 2019.

emphasise the developmental, structural, and intra-continental dimensions of mobility.² But, more African states are complying with this externalisation agenda.

EU initiatives have tended to prioritise short-term containment measures – returns, deportations, and the externalisation of border controls – while African actors and institutions have highlighted the need to expand livelihood opportunities, promote integration, and invest in development. The result has been a series of migration frameworks skewed toward European priorities, often at the expense of African perspectives. Such asymmetry has eroded trust, fuelled critiques of neo-colonial dynamics, and risked lowering standards on the protection of migrants' rights.³

In recent years, migration governance has also been shaped by rising anti-immigration protests within Europe, which have intensified political pressure on EU institutions and member states to prioritise restrictive measures.⁴ This has translated into a proliferation of deals with African countries centred on return, readmission, and reintegration policies, often overshadowing broader developmental or mobility-oriented approaches. For example, the joint declaration on the strategic and comprehensive partnership with Egypt and migration partnership Mauritania, both concluded in March 2024, the ongoing discussions with Rwanda and the bilateral agreements between Germany and Kenya; Netherlands and Uganda also reflect the same principles.

² A. Bisong, "The Failure of European Policy on Africa and Migratory Movements. Migration and Mobility. External Borders of the EU", in IEMed, *Mediterranean Yearbook* 2023.

³ J.-P. Cassarino and M. Giuffré, "Finding its place in Africa: Why has the EU opted for flexible arrangements on readmission", *FMU Policy Brief*, no. 01, 2017, pp. 1-5.

⁴ K.M. Skibia, "Anti-immigration demonstrations take place in more than 80 cities across Poland", *Euro News*, 19 July 2025; *France* 24, "Up to 150,000 people attend massive anti-immigration march in London, police say", 13 September 2025.

Similar dynamics are evident in cooperation with the United States (US), where deportations to African countries have become a central feature of immigration policy, reinforcing a global trend toward securitised management of African mobility.⁵ At the same time, some African governments have strategically leveraged their acceptance of returnees to gain political and financial concessions from European and US counterparts. This instrumentalization underscores how deportations have become both a site of geopolitical bargaining and a symbol of the asymmetries embedded in global migration governance.⁶

This chapter calls for a paradigm shift in EU-Africa cooperation on migration: moving away from narrow control mechanisms and toward inclusive partnerships that centre African voices. The chapter argues that for migration governance between Europe and Africa to be sustainable, legitimate, and effective, African voices must be placed at the forefront of policymaking. Current approaches not only marginalise African perspectives but also threaten the legitimacy and effectiveness of cooperation. By contrast, placing African agency at the core of policymaking is both a normative imperative and a pragmatic necessity. This is particularly important as African countries assert greater influence and new players such as China reshape the geopolitical landscape.⁷ And as the EU continues to shape its geopolitical role in an increasingly competitive world order.⁸

⁵ M. Bigg, “Why African Countries Keep Making Deals to Accept U.S. Deportees”, *New York Times*, 23 September 2025.

⁶ L. Kandilige and G. Adiku, “The Quagmire of Return and Reintegration: Challenges to Multi-Stakeholder Co-Ordination of Involuntary Returns”, *International Migration*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2019 pp. 37-53; F. Zanker, “A typology of resistance: the ‘hot potato’ of European return in West Africa”, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2013, pp. 241-60.

⁷ T. Haastrup, N. Duggan, and L. Mah, “Navigating ontological (in)security in EU–Africa relations”, *Global Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2021, pp. 541-57.

⁸ G. Carbone, L. Ragazzi, and L. Saviolo, “Recasting Europe-Africa Relations: Which Way? In the aftermath of an EU election that sent shockwaves in Brussels, how will ‘geopolitical Europe’ develop its relations with Africa?”, ISPI

The chapter equally highlights the diversity of African priorities on migration, noting the challenges in adopting “an African voice” on migration cooperation given the diversity of interests within the continent. It examines how these interests may align with current European priorities and the implications of these for migration cooperation.

Drawing from the academic and policy literature, the chapter develops a framework for reorienting EU policy toward genuine partnership. It offers actionable policy recommendations for a balanced and forward-looking EU-Africa migration agenda.

The chapter proposes centring African voices through four pathways to build sustainable cooperation: (1) reframing migration beyond “root causes” toward opportunity; (2) aligning EU policy with African integration agendas; (3) expanding legal mobility schemes; and (4) enhancing mutual accountability through co-designed mechanisms. The chapter concludes with actionable recommendations, including the strengthening of EU-AU joint dialogue processes such as the migration and mobility dialogue (MMD), rebalancing security and development priorities, supporting intra-African mobility, expanding legal pathways, strengthening civil society participation, and investing in African-led research.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. Section 2 traces the evolution of EU migration policy toward Africa, focusing on turning points such as the Cotonou Agreement, and the post-2015 crisis shift, and the new migration and asylum pact. It also outlines African perspectives on migration through continental frameworks and regional priorities. Section 3 explores key tensions in EU-Africa migration relations, with attention to issues such as returns and deportations. Section 4 explores the plurality of African voices and actions in migration policy and practice and how these align with the EU’s approach to migration cooperation. Section 5 concludes by arguing

for a paradigm shift from control to partnership and sets out concrete policy recommendations.

The Evolution of EU-Africa Cooperation Migration

EU cooperation on migration with African countries

The institutionalisation of migration within EU-Africa relations began with the 2000 Cotonou Agreement, which replaced the Lomé Conventions as the basis for EU-ACP (African, Caribbean, Pacific) relations. Article 13 introduced provisions on readmission of irregular migrants, effectively linking development cooperation with migration control.⁹ For the first time, development aid became explicitly tied to cooperation on return, setting the stage for conditionality in EU external migration policy.¹⁰

In the 2023 new partnership agreement between the European Union and the members of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (Post Cotonou agreement), migration is included in the Africa regional protocol of the agreement.¹¹ Migration was one of the initially contentious issues.¹² The agreement focuses on return of migrants, creating the obligation of countries to readmit own nationals.¹³ Although

⁹ S. Lavenex and R. Kunz, "The migration–development nexus in EU external relations", *European Integration*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2008, pp. 439–57.

¹⁰ Article 13 Cotonou agreement was based on the 'Joint declaration on ACP migrant workers and ACP students in the Community' of Annex V of the 1985 Lomé III Convention; J. Mangala, "Africa-EU Partnership on migration, mobility, and employment", in J. Mangala (Ed.), *Africa and the European union*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 195–222.

¹¹ See arts. 73 - 79 [Partnership Agreement Between \[The European Union / The European Union And Its Member States\], of the one Part, and Members of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States, of the Other Part](#).

¹² C. Babièrè, "Negotiations on the post-Cotonou Agreement stumble on migration", *EURACTIV*, 28 May 2018.

¹³ J. Cassarino, [Symposium on Reconceptualizing IEL for Migration: Framing](#)

the ACP negotiators had hoped for greater account to be taken of migration between African, Caribbean and Pacific states (intra-ACP migration), a focus only on voluntary returns to countries of origin and a ban on using development aid as a means of negotiating border controls, this was not included.¹⁴ On the European side some countries were of the opinion that the provisions of the agreement were not 'binding' enough and does not compel African countries to readmit own nationals in European countries.¹⁵ This remains a point of contention between policy makers and government authorities of both sides.¹⁶

The "refugee crisis" of 2015 marked a turning point. Facing a policy crisis in responding to the arrivals of asylum seekers and migrants, EU institutions and member states escalated their externalisation agenda.¹⁷ The Valletta Summit in November 2015 gathered EU and African leaders, resulting in a Joint Action Plan and the establishment of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF). With over €5 billion in funding, the EUTF sought to address the "root causes" of migration and support border management in Africa. The Valletta Action Plan had five pillars of cooperation: addressing the root causes of irregular migration and developing the benefits of migration; promoting legal migration and mobility; reinforcing protection

Migration in the Post-Cotonou Agreement: Priorities and Challenges, 2022.

¹⁴ E. Pishon, "After Cotonou: Towards a new agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific states", EPRS, 2023.

¹⁵ M. Carbone, "Double two-level games and international negotiations: making sense of migration governance in EU-Africa relations", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2022, pp. 750-62, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2022.2106954.

¹⁶ A. Medinilla, "New beginnings or a last hurrah? The OACPS-EU partnership in 2021-2041", ECDPM Briefing note 130, Maastricht, European Centre for Development Policy Management, April 2021; E. Morgan, "OACPS/EU Post Cotonou Agreement – Obstacles in the path to signature", CARICOM Today, 8 June 2021.

¹⁷ K. Krampe, *You can't build on that: Externalisation as the cornerstone of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum*, Commentary, Henrich Böll Stiftung, 2020.

and asylum policies; fighting against human trafficking and migrant smuggling; and strengthening cooperation to facilitate return and reintegration of irregular migrants. Yet analyses indicate that the EUTF largely reflected European security concerns, with a disproportionate share of resources directed toward containment measures rather than development priorities.¹⁸ Critics argue that the EUTF treated African partners as subcontractors in Europe's migration control strategy, while the promotion of legal migration and mobility through creating legal pathways remained marginal.¹⁹

Analysis show that a significant amount of the EUTF funds was spent on border management projects, thus contributing to the paradigm on control and containment. See the graph below which shows the data on project type per country for the spending on migration on the EUTF.

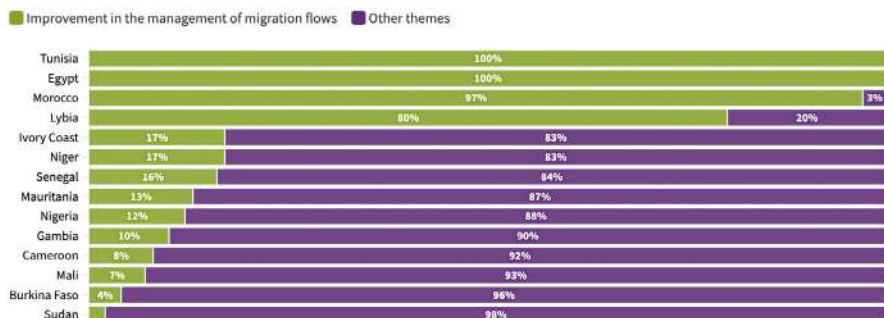
In 2020, the European Commission launched discussions on the "Pact on Migration and Asylum".²⁰ The Pact reaffirmed externalisation as a cornerstone of EU migration policy, calling for comprehensive partnerships with countries of origin and transit. Returns of third country nationals are another area that have been included in the pact with a specific directive on returns. The pact proposed to combine development aid, trade incentives, and visa facilitation with expectations of cooperation on readmission and border management. Although this approach was criticised by academics and policymakers from the Global south, the pact was adopted in 2024, with minimal changes to these external dimensions.²¹

¹⁸ C. Castillejo, "The European Union Trust Fund for Africa: a glimpse of the future for EU development cooperation", IDOS Discussion Papers 22/2016, German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).

¹⁹ European Court of Auditors, "Auditors step up criticism of EU migration fund for Africa", 2024; T. Ratyand and R. Shilhav, "The EU Trust Fund for Africa: Trapped between aid policy and migration politics", OXFAM Briefing Paper, 30 January 2020.

²⁰ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.

²¹ ASILE, ODYSSEUS NETWORK Compendium.



Source: Openpolis elaboration of Edjnet data • Only projects carried out in single countries are considered, excluding those involving several countries at once, and only in countries where a portion of the funds is earmarked for this purpose.

* A Flourish chart

Source: [Openpolis elaboration of Edjnet data](#).

Only projects carried out in single countries are considered. Excluding those involving several countries at once, and only in countries where a portion of the funds is earmarked for this purpose.

Furthermore, the EU has developed negative incentives to ensure cooperation on migration issues. An example is the revised visa code from 2020.²² This allows the EU to visa access as leverage with third countries, including restrictive measures related to processing and fees if a country is not cooperating. Countries like Ethiopia and the Gambia have been penalised for non-cooperation on issues of return through either suspension of visas or lengthening of visa wait times.²³

While the Pact acknowledged the need for “mutually beneficial” cooperation, its operational emphasis remains on preventing irregular arrivals through border management and externalised controls in third countries. This has reinforced the perception that EU migration policy is reactive, crisis-driven, and heavily securitised.²⁴

²² Bisong 2019 Visa Code ECDPM.

²³ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-15216-2022-INIT/en/pdf>; <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8312-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

²⁴ A. Abderrahim, “The Securitisation Of The EU’s Migration Policies: What

Africa remained central in this framework, with countries such as Niger, Libya, and Morocco serving as strategic partners.

African perspectives on migration

African perspectives often highlight migration as an engine of development. Migration supports livelihoods, generates remittances, and facilitates knowledge transfer. In 2022, remittance flows to sub-Saharan Africa reached approximately \$53 billion, surpassing official development assistance in many countries.²⁵ This perspective co-exists alongside the securitised framing of migration on the continent. Thus, the development and opportunities provided by migration are often a ground of tension and contestation between different groups – particularly between migrants/ refugees and host communities.²⁶

Migration is also deeply embedded in African social and cultural life. Historically, mobility has been a survival strategy in contexts of climate variability, conflict, and economic hardship. It is seen less as a problem to be solved and more as a reality to be managed constructively.²⁷ The majority of African migration takes place within the continent. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nearly 80% of African migrants move within Africa, often to neighbouring countries.²⁸ This reality contrasts sharply with EU narratives that focus on “south-north” flows.

Intra-African migration plays a crucial role in regional economies, supporting labour markets in agriculture, construction, and services. For example, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) has long championed free movement of people as integral to regional integration. Similarly, the East African Community (EAC), through its common

Consequences For Southern Mediterranean Countries and Their Relations With The EU?”, IEMED EUROMED Survey.

²⁵ World Bank (2023).

²⁶ Zanker and Bisong (2023).

²⁷ Bakewell (2008).

²⁸ IOM Africa report.

market protocol has facilitated labour migration within its subregion.²⁹ At the continental level, the African Union has developed several frameworks to guide migration governance. The Migration Policy Framework for Africa (2006, revised in 2018) reinforces migration as a catalyst for development and regional integration. Agenda 2063, the AU's strategic vision, highlights mobility as central to achieving continental unity and prosperity. In the same vein, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), launched in 2019, implicitly requires mobility for its success. Free movement of goods and services is inseparable from labour mobility, and the AU's Protocol on Free Movement of Persons (2018) aims to institutionalise this reality.³⁰

These frameworks underline the divergent priorities across African countries between facilitating and restricting mobility. While regional and continental frameworks prioritise development and integration, national frameworks tend to adopt a more restrictive approach towards migration, emphasising sovereignty of national borders and often times, framing migration as a security threat. These regional frameworks co-exist within national frameworks that seek to prioritise the sovereignty of the state in controlling entry and stay within its territory, while often having weak regulatory frameworks, porous borders and limited infrastructure to ensure control. This is the paradox of most African migration governance structures.

Until recently, migration governance across African countries received little attention beyond diaspora engagement, with South Africa a notable exception. A 2018 survey found that most states viewed diaspora relations, labour emigration, and remittances as their primary migration challenges. The increased focus in migration governance evidenced in the adoption of national migration policies and governance

²⁹ Bisong labour mobility and the AfCFTA ECDPM.

³⁰ Ibid.

structures can be linked to the funding of the EUTF and donor driven strategies to improve migration governance on the continent. By 2018, 46% of African states had such policies, enabling more balanced dialogue with the EU. “According to some, one important successful outcome of the effort to draft migration policies is that ‘now a real dialogue is possible’ with EU countries, compared to ten years ago, when only one party to the discussion had policies in place”. However, migration policies alone are insufficient, as the term covers diverse issues – such as diaspora engagement and forced displacement – that often require distinct approaches.³¹

Furthermore, most migration governance frameworks remain weakly implemented, with limited integration into sectoral policies, poor coordination, donor-driven agendas, and low institutional capacity undermining their effectiveness.³²

A benefit of this focus on migration governance structures within the continent has been the emergence of inclusive policy making process in migration. Consequently, there is an increasing role of civil society actors and other stakeholders in migration policy structures on the continent. African civil society organizations and youth movements increasingly call for migration narratives that reflect dignity, opportunity, and human rights. They reject depictions of African migrants as threats to Europe and emphasise instead the contributions of mobility to resilience and innovation.³³

Key tensions in EU-Africa migration cooperation

As noted above, with the implementation of the EUTF, EU–Africa migration cooperation has expanded in recent years. But this cooperation is marked by persistent tensions that reflect diverging priorities, interests and unequal bargaining power.

³¹ [Learning Lessons from the EUTF - Phase 2 - Paving the way for future programming on migration](#), mobility and forced displacement, Altai Consulting for the European Union – February 2021.

³² Ibid.

³³ Tall (2020).

These conflicting agendas shape the dynamics of dialogue and policy implementation, producing friction across several dimensions outlined below.

At the core of the EU – Africa migration partnership lies a persistent clash between the EU's securitised orientation and Africa's institutional commitments to intra-regional mobility. On paper, African states – particularly within ECOWAS and EAC – have long embraced protocols for free movement, including visa-free entry, rights of residence, and establishment (though full implementation has lagged). But EU policies and funding largely support containment, external border strengthening, and control, especially when compared to the funding available to promote mobility within the continent and sub-regions. (include figures from EUTF reports).

This tension is not merely rhetorical. EU investments in border control infrastructure, surveillance, and biometric systems in Africa (e.g. biometric entry/exit systems across several West African countries) have been critiqued for inhibiting regional movement and undermining local mobility norms.³⁴ For instance, European-funded border checkpoints in West Africa have disrupted cross-border circulation among ECOWAS nationals, even where movement is legally protected through visa-free regimes.³⁵ In some cases, migrants with ECOWAS free movement rights have been involuntarily returned under smuggling or irregular migration crackdowns driven by EU pressures.³⁶

National governments find themselves caught between external leverage and regional commitments. Under EU migration cooperation frameworks (e.g. via the EU Trust Fund for Africa), African states are often pressured to act as "gatekeepers", policing mobility corridors in ways that conflict

³⁴ N. Uzomah, <https://externalizingasylum.info/technological-interventions-in-eu-border-management-impacts-on-migrant-mobility-and-rights-in-africa>

³⁵ Z. Perko, *Free movement in the Global South: beyond the border line*, *The Loop*, 2025.

³⁶ migrationpolicy.org

with regional protocols.³⁷ These dynamic breeds mistrust. African states are compelled to choose between retaining regional credibility and securing external funding or cooperation.

The tension is further magnified by the EU's securitising discourse of irregular migration. African mobility is frequently framed as a "risk" or "threat" to European stability, with migration being constituted as a security problem rather than a development or integration issue.³⁸ This framing helps justify stronger external control measures, even when they directly conflict with regional integration goals. This framing of migration as a security threat, is narrow, short termed and emphasises containment measures while overlooking its wider links to development, education, and livelihoods. But research shows migration is driven by complex, interconnected factors.³⁹

Securitised rhetoric and border closures are among the contemporary practices in Africa. Across African states, security dimensions have increasingly become prominent in policy debates and public discourse when referring to migrants with terms such as "irregular", "illegal" or "undocumented".⁴⁰ Security issues, in particular those linked to terrorism, have led to border closures, deportations of migrants, and groups of migrants and refugees being treated as a security threat.⁴¹ Security reasons are also often cited by states as the reason for

³⁷ C. Kihato, *The 'Containment Compact': The EU Migration 'Crisis' and African Complicity in Migration Management* (Occasional Paper No. 228), Johannesburg, South African Institute of International Affairs, 2018.

³⁸ O. Oluyemi, "A Critical Analysis of the European Union (EU) Securitization of African Migration as Societal Insecurity", *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, vol. 7, no. 6, 2024, pp. 14-27.

³⁹ J. Hagen-Zanker and J. Carling, *Should we tackle the 'root causes' of migration? Likely no*, Migration to Research Policy Short. Florence: Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, 2025.

⁴⁰ Zanker and Bisong (2023); E. Warn and S. Abi, "Reorganizing Borders in the Age of Free Movement", *Africa Migration Report*, 2020; T.T. Abebe and J. Mugabo, "Migration and Security in Africa", *Africa Migration Report*, 2020.

⁴¹ F. Zanker and A. Bisong, "Contested Mobility Norms in Africa: Reconciling Visions, Policies and Practice. Report", HBS, 2024.

not implementing the free movement protocols or regional agreements aiming to facilitate mobility of persons.

African states are increasingly recognising that border closures and expulsions alone cannot address their security challenges. In the Sahel, where terrorist activity is widespread, countries are turning to community-based cross-border strategies that foster development and resilience.⁴²

Another source of tension in EU-Africa migration cooperation stems from the way development aid has been instrumentalised to advance European priorities on migration. Rather than being deployed primarily to support poverty reduction, governance reforms, or long-term structural transformation, aid has frequently been tied to cooperation on border control and return agreements. This conditionality has reduced African ownership of migration governance, while creating perceptions of coercion and dependency.⁴³ There are even ongoing discussions of linking the EU’s preferential trade agreements with migration cooperation.⁴⁴ In effect, policies meant to foster development have too often been subordinated to Europe’s immediate interest in containment, weakening their credibility and undermining broader developmental objectives.

These challenges are compounded by the structural asymmetries in power and resources that characterise EU-Africa relations. As the continent’s largest donor and trading partner, the EU wields considerable leverage in negotiations. Yet African actors are increasingly unwilling to accept the role of passive policy “takers”. For example, the African Union’s rejection of EU proposals for “regional disembarkation platforms” in 2018 was a clear demonstration of this pushback, signalling a growing insistence on sovereignty, dignity, and co-ownership in migration governance.⁴⁵ This was further restated in 2021. Such

⁴² A. Bisong, “Centering African Voices: Why EU migration policy should include African Perspectives”, ISPI Commentary, 14 July 2025.

⁴³ Zanker (2019).

⁴⁴ Bisong and LinkedIn (2023).

⁴⁵ El Qadim (2020).

acts of resistance highlight the mismatch between European expectations and African demands for equitable partnership.

Finally, the EU's crisis-driven approach has entrenched short-termism in policy design. Migration initiatives often emerge in response to immediate political pressures within Europe, such as the surge in arrivals in 2015, rather than being aligned with Africa's longer-term development and integration agendas. As a result, projects tend to produce short-lived fixes that may temporarily reduce irregular flows but fail to address the structural drivers of migration. This not only undermines sustainability but also risks further eroding mutual trust between the two regions.

These tensions illustrate some of the reasons why EU-Africa migration cooperation continues to struggle with legitimacy and effectiveness. Unless addressed, they will perpetuate a cycle of mistrust and missed opportunities for building a balanced, durable partnership. However, these tensions are being ignored and further focus is placed on the externalisation with a new wave of externalisation agreements being concluded between the EU (and its member states) with several countries, including African countries.

Externalisation 2.0: Return Hubs and Outsourced Asylum Procedures

In recent years, externalisation has become a central pillar of EU migration policy. The EU has negotiated and initiated a growing number of deals with African and transit countries to shift parts of migration control, asylum processing, and return procedures outside its own territory. These externalisation deals involve cooperation, incentives, and legal reforms in partner countries, and raise significant legal, ethical, and political questions. This section examines key components of those deals: the expanding use of "safe country" concepts, bilateral and multilateral return agreements, and proposed/ongoing external asylum processing. It also considers implications and critiques from human rights, sovereignty, and effectiveness perspectives.

Safe countries, safe third countries, and safe countries of origin

One of the main tools in recent EU externalisation is the expansion of "safe country" designations, including:

- Safe third country: third countries considered sufficiently safe to receive asylum seekers such that they can be transferred there instead of processing their claim in the EU.
- Safe country of origin: country of origin considered generally safe so that asylum claims from its nationals may be subject to accelerated procedures or presumed inadmissible.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum (adopted in December 2023) significantly fast-tracks reforms under the Asylum Procedure Regulation (APR) that broaden these safe country categories. Among the proposed changes are amendments that relax or remove requirements such as a meaningful connection between the asylum seeker and the third country, thus making it easier to transfer asylum applicants based on merely the existence of an agreement or transit status rather than personal ties.⁴⁶

Recently, the Commission issued a list of countries considered safe for returns (safe countries of origin or origin / transit) that includes Egypt and Tunisia.⁴⁷ This list is designed to support faster processing and return of asylum seekers from these countries. The move has been criticized by human rights organizations, particularly given concerns about the human rights situation in those countries (particularly for vulnerable profiles such as political dissidents, LGBTI+ persons, journalists).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ E. Milazzo, "EU Migration Policy: Externalisation on the Fast-Track?", ISPI Commentary, 2025.

⁴⁷ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025PC0186>

⁴⁸ A. Ismail, "EU issues list of 'safe countries' for migrant returns that includes Egypt, Tunisia", *Reuters*, 16 April 2025.

Return / Readmission agreements and mechanisms

Another major aspect of externalisation is the strengthening of return and readmission mechanisms. The EU is pushing for:

- A common EU return system, as proposed in 2025, which would standardise return decisions, mutual recognition of those decisions across Member States, and faster processing of returns.⁴⁹
- Use of financial, diplomatic, or trade incentives in bilateral arrangements with African and transit countries, in exchange for cooperation in absorbing returns, facilitating readmission, and tightening border control. For example, deals with Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, and other African countries often include aid or infrastructure funding tied to cooperation on returns.⁵⁰

These return agreements frequently include clauses that encourage or require partner countries to accept migrants from EU states (their nationals or sometimes third-country nationals who passed through). The EU has increased pressure on transit countries to capture or detain irregular migrants or intercept movement to limit onward migration to Europe.⁵¹

Externalised asylum processing or “Third-Country processing”

Perhaps the most controversial dimension is the establishment of hubs for outsourcing asylum processing:

- While EU law does *not yet* provide a legal basis for fully extraterritorial asylum processing, proposals and negotiations are underway. The New Pact envisions

⁴⁹ Milazzo (2025).

⁵⁰ T. Pinto, “Between a rock and a hard place: the EU’s transactional approach to migration”, *Mixedmigration.org*, 2024; Z. Sahin-Mencütek, *Spillovers of EU externalization policies on coerced returns from transit countries*, 2014.

⁵¹ Sahin-Mencütek (2024).

expanding “safe third country” and “safe origin” rules in the Asylum Procedures Regulation, which, in effect, may allow some asylum requests to be processed outside the EU or in transit countries under bilateral or multilateral arrangements.⁵²

- There are discussions among EU Member States about setting up “return hubs” or processing centres in partner countries. For example, proposals or exploratory talks in Denmark, Italy, and others have considered transferring asylum applicants or failed claimants to third countries or having partner countries host asylum seekers pending decisions.
- The EU-Turkey Statement (2016) remains a flagship example of an externalisation model: migrants reaching Greek islands from Turkey are “returned” under the assumption of “safe third country”. Although not strictly outsourced processing, the deal externalises part of border control and return measures.⁵³

Using the free movement protocol as a tool for asylum hubs. Sending the returnees to the region of origin, free movement, being a possibility for people to be deported or returned to the countries of origin.

Legal, ethical, and human rights implications

These externalised arrangements carry multiple risks and challenges:

1. Access to Protection: When asylum processing is externalised, individuals may lose access to fair and individualized adjudication. Safe third country or safe origin regimes risk presuming claims to be invalid

⁵² G. Leclerc and M. Mentzelopoulou, “Extraterritorial processing of asylum claims”, EPRS, 2025.

⁵³ Z. Sahin-Mencütek, *Spillovers of EU externalization policies on coerced returns from transit countries*, 2024.

- without proper investigation, violating international refugee law and non-refoulement obligations.⁵⁴
2. **Accountability:** Partner countries may not have the same legal obligations or capacities as EU Member States. Monitoring standards for detention, reception conditions, legal aid, or protection from abuse may be weaker. The EU's leveraging of transit countries may lead to pushbacks, detention, or other human rights violations outside formal legal oversight.⁵⁵
 3. **Risk of Coercion and Power Imbalance:** Since many partner countries depend on EU funding or other incentives, there is a risk that agreements are skewed in favour of EU priorities (containment, deterrence, returns) rather than local priorities of mobility, human rights, and regional integration. This dynamic may reduce partner countries to "gatekeepers" enforcing external demands.⁵⁶
 4. **Erosion of the Principle of International Protection:** As externalisation becomes more normalised, there is concern that the refugee protection regime (1951 Geneva Convention etc.) may be undermined if states are able to shift responsibility for protection elsewhere. The concept of extraterritorial processing or returning people to countries deemed "safe" without proper individual assessment can risk violations of the principle of non-refoulement.⁵⁷
 5. **Effectiveness and Unintended Consequences:** It is not clear that externalisation effectively deters irregular migration in the long term. Alternatives to irregular migration may be limited, so migrants may take more dangerous routes. Externalisation may fragment

⁵⁴ Leclerc and Mentzelopoulou (2025).

⁵⁵ Sahin-Mencütek (2024).

⁵⁶ HBS, *Migration Policy: European Union Increasingly Outsources Responsibility for Asylum*, 2024.

⁵⁷ Leclerc and Mentzelopoulou (2025).

protection systems and generate irregular flows elsewhere rather than reduce them. Some evidence suggests "spillovers", increased coercion, detention, even forced returns in transit states, in deals with Tunisia or others, under pressure from EU funding.⁵⁸

Critiques and counterarguments on the externalisation

Proponents of externalisation contend that such arrangements are necessary to manage irregular migration, relieve pressure on EU border states, and improve the efficiency of returns. Yet a growing body of evidence and advocacy highlights serious concerns that challenge this logic.

From a legal perspective, many externalisation initiatives risk conflicting with obligations under EU law, the European Convention on Human Rights, and international refugee law. In particular, they may infringe on the principle of non-refoulement, restrict access to effective asylum procedures, and undermine the right of individuals to remain in territory while their claims are assessed.

There are also some ethical and human rights concerns. Externalised systems often expose migrants and asylum seekers to environments where abuse is widespread, detention is arbitrary, reception conditions are poor, and legal assistance is scarce. Vulnerable groups, such as women, children, and LGBTI persons, are likely to suffer disproportionately under these arrangements.

In terms of sovereignty and trust, externalisation can be perceived within African countries as the imposition of European priorities. This not only undermines the legitimacy of cooperation but can also provoke resistance or backlash, deepening mistrust between the EU and its African partners.

Finally, the effectiveness of externalisation is doubtful. Empirical research offers little evidence that such policies sustainably reduce irregular migration or prevent deaths at

⁵⁸ Sahin-Mencütek (2024).

sea. Instead, they often displace flows toward more dangerous routes, exacerbating risks rather than addressing underlying drivers of migration.⁵⁹

Deportation Agreements and Dual Motives in African Migration Cooperation

African states respond to the EU's externalisation agenda in varied ways: some engage in full collaboration, others signal partial cooperation, expressing willingness but showing little commitment to implementation, while still others choose to disregard the agenda altogether.⁶⁰

Most African countries agree to externalisation for different reasons, broadly ranging from political motivations based on power dynamics with the EU and European countries to an increasing domestic importance of migration in African states.⁶¹ Economic motivations are largely linked to available funds from development cooperation that are increasingly diverted to migration management.

Diplomacy is equally important, as migration increasingly shapes the foreign policy interests of African countries, which are closely linked to security challenges.

Trade-offs between internal security priorities and external funding often motivate African states to adopt ambivalent positions on migration cooperation. On the one hand, governments seek to preserve sovereignty and protect domestic stability; on the other, substantial financial and diplomatic incentives encourage them to collaborate with the EU (and increasingly the United States). This produces what can be

⁵⁹ L. Martiniand T. Megeresi, "The road to nowhere: Why Europe's border externalisation is a dead end", ECFR, 2023.

⁶⁰ F. Zanker, "African agency in response to EU externalization efforts, Public Anthropologist", CMI, 21 March 2025; Bisong (2019).

⁶¹ M. Mouthaan, "Unpacking domestic preferences in the policy-'receiving' state: the EU's migration cooperation with Senegal and Ghana", *Comparative Migration Studies*, Vol. 7, no. 35, 2019.

described as dual intentions: states formally cooperate on deportations and border management, while simultaneously navigating the political and social tensions such cooperation creates at home.

Since 2025, cooperation with the United States has expanded, with several African governments entering into bilateral agreements to accept deportees. Rwanda, South Sudan, Eswatini, Ghana, and Uganda are among the countries that have agreed to host deported migrants, sometimes including third-country nationals with no citizenship ties to the receiving state.⁶² These deals typically involve US financial or logistical support, covering areas such as workforce training, healthcare, and temporary housing for deportees. Uganda, for instance, signed a temporary agreement to receive migrants deported from the US, though it excluded individuals with criminal records and unaccompanied minors.⁶³ Ghana similarly accepted deportees, justifying its decision partly on humanitarian grounds and partly on the principle of regional solidarity under ECOWAS.⁶⁴ Rwanda has been a particularly notable partner, having accepted deportees in multiple arrangements backed by US funding.⁶⁵

Such agreements, however, have sparked serious legal and human rights concerns. Deportees are sometimes transferred under conditions that deny them adequate legal recourse, while the practice of accepting third-country nationals raises questions about international responsibility and sovereignty. In Eswatini, for example, challenges have emerged around the detention and treatment of deportees, while in Ghana

⁶² "Why African Countries Keep Making Deals to Accept U.S. Deportees", *New York Times*, 23 September 2025; "What to know about the Trump administration's plan to deport migrants to Africa", PBS News, 28 August 2015.

⁶³ "Africa's largest refugee-hosting country is facing backlash over US migrant deal", CNN, 28 August 2025.

⁶⁴ M. Schwikowski, "Is Africa becoming the US dumping ground for migrants?", DW, 22 August 2025.

⁶⁵ I. Al-Shaarawy, "Understanding African Nations' Acceptance of Migrant Deportations from the United States", *Future*, 18 September 2025.

and Uganda the legitimacy of accepting non-citizens has been publicly debated.⁶⁶

These arrangements reflect a broader pattern: African states weigh the benefits of funding, diplomatic ties, and international visibility against domestic political risks and humanitarian obligations. Yet the growing reliance on deportation agreements – especially those involving third-country nationals – reveals the fragility of this balance and the need for greater scrutiny of the rights implications.

Refusals, reluctance, and diplomatic responses in third-country deportations

Third-country deportations, where migrants are expelled to a state other than their own, have become an increasingly contested practice in recent years. While some African states have entered into agreements to receive such deportees, many others have refused or shown reluctance to do so, particularly under US-led initiatives. The reasons for resistance are varied: weak or absent diplomatic ties, concerns about human rights, and the practical difficulties of hosting individuals with no legal or citizenship connection to the receiving country.

First, countries of origin have often refused to accept their nationals back, prompting the US to pursue third-country arrangements instead. Several West African States including Nigeria have been particularly unwilling to facilitate returns of their own citizens, creating significant bottlenecks for US deportation policy. States, for instance, have been slow to respond or have declined outright, citing humanitarian and legal concerns about receiving non-citizens.

These refusals reveal the geopolitical and human rights complexities surrounding third-country deportations. They underscore the risks of outsourcing migration management to states with limited capacity or interest, while raising questions

⁶⁶ “Rights advocates accuse Eswatini of stalling case weighing US deportations”, *Al-Jazeera*, 25 September 2025.

about international responsibility, sovereignty, and the protection of migrants' rights.

In response to such resistance, sending states – particularly the US – have deployed a range of diplomatic tools and enforcement measures. One common approach has been the imposition of visa sanctions, as in the cases of Eritrea, Guinea, and Sierra Leone, where restrictions were introduced to penalise non-cooperation.⁶⁷ Beyond sanctions, governments have also relied on diplomatic pressure and formal warnings, threatening reduced aid or cooperation in other areas unless agreements are reached. Conversely, cooperation has been encouraged through financial subsidies and incentives, with deportation agreements often accompanied by funding for reception centers, housing, or reintegration programs.⁶⁸

Yet even when agreements are signed, legal and political pushback can derail them. The UK-Rwanda plan and the Italy-Albania deal are emblematic: although negotiated at the highest levels, they faced repeated court challenges and mounting public criticism, eventually leading to its suspension.⁶⁹ In other contexts, the secrecy of negotiations has also been striking. Much of the diplomacy surrounding third-country deportations takes place behind closed doors, with governments engaging in quiet, ongoing talks to secure cooperation while avoiding public scrutiny that might fuel domestic opposition.

Although financial incentives and diplomatic pressure can sometimes produce short-term agreements, the recurring refusals and delays underscore the contested legitimacy of third-country deportations. The reluctance of many African governments shows that such practices are not only operationally difficult

⁶⁷ D. Shortell "US to sanction 4 countries for refusing deportations", CNN, 23 August 2017.

⁶⁸ P. Caro, "The US drive to find third countries to deport migrants is gaining momentum", *El País*, 7 August 2015.

⁶⁹ "Over 200 organisations call for rejection of EU inhumane deportation laws", ENAR; J. Metzler, "What Are Third-Country Deportations, and Why Is Trump Using Them?", CFR, 3 September 2025.

but also politically and ethically contentious. Nevertheless, the United States' success in executing several deportations to African countries may encourage the European Union to intensify its own efforts to raise the current deportation rate of 19%, even if this means pursuing strategies that are legally or ethically disputed.

The Way Forward: A Rights Centred Approach in EU-AU Relations

Current EU-Africa migration cooperation is trapped in a cycle where securitisation, and externalisation reinforce one another. When European funding rewards practices that block asylum access or tolerate discriminatory treatment of migrants, the result is a structurally inhospitable migration space. To break this trend towards more externalisation, cooperation must be firmly anchored in rights-based principles. This means making funding conditional on clear benchmarks for rights protection and anti-discrimination safeguards, with transparent monitoring and consequences for violations.

A rights-centred approach as a bridge
in EU-AU relations

The persistent tensions in EU-AU migration relations stem from starkly divergent priorities. A rights-centred approach offers a way to reconcile these differences, shifting the debate from one of “control versus mobility” toward shared commitments rooted in international and regional human rights frameworks.

Reframing legitimacy and trust is the first step. Anchoring cooperation in rights, particularly the principles of non-refoulement, dignity, and freedom from discrimination, provides a neutral normative ground. Both the EU and AU are already parties to key international conventions that ensure the protection of the human rights of migrants, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the African Charter on Human

and Peoples' Rights, and the Kampala Convention on IDPs. By aligning with these frameworks, cooperation can gain legitimacy and reduce perceptions of asymmetry or coercion.

Second, a rights-based lens can help balance security and mobility. Security concerns, such as managing returns or strengthening border controls, are legitimate, but they must be accompanied by guarantees of due process, non-discrimination, and access to protection. For instance, joint EU–AU monitoring mechanisms could ensure that returns are voluntary, dignified, and subject to fair hearings, allowing security imperatives to be addressed without undermining Africa's free-movement agendas, either through ECOWAS, EAC and the AU Free Movement Protocol.

Third, a rights-centred approach provides tools to address xenophobia and racism. Both Europe and Africa have witnessed racially motivated violence and xenophobic policing, which undermine migrant safety and poison the atmosphere of cooperation. Embedding anti-discrimination standards into EU–AU agreements would create shared accountability. Redirecting funding toward anti-xenophobia campaigns, local integration programs, and protection systems would not only improve conditions on the ground but also demonstrate that cooperation is about safeguarding people, not just controlling flows.

Fourth, rights-centred cooperation would help make development meaningful. EU aid has too often been instrumentalised to serve migration control, undermining African ownership and distorting development priorities. Instead, access to livelihoods, social protection, and legal mobility should be treated as integral elements of development. This requires shifting aid away from transactional deals and toward structural investments in resilience, including education, labour mobility, and diaspora engagement. Such measures would allow the AU to view cooperation as reinforcing its Agenda 2063 goals, rather than compromising them.

Finally, shared monitoring and accountability are critical. Current deals frequently lack transparency, fuelling mistrust.

Establishing joint EU-AU monitoring bodies with meaningful civil society participation would ensure oversight of returns, detention conditions, and asylum procedures. By making rights protection a joint responsibility, both sides could share credit for successes and accountability for failures, reducing the perception that the EU is offloading its obligations onto African partners.

Policy Recommendations

By grounding cooperation in rights, EU and AU actors can transcend the current zero-sum framing of migration governance. A rights-centred approach does not deny the EU's concerns about irregular migration, nor Africa's priorities around mobility and development. Instead, it redefines the partnership in terms of shared obligations: to protect life, dignity, and freedom of movement under agreed frameworks. This common language can help de-escalate tensions, strengthen mutual trust, and provide the basis for durable, legitimate, and balanced migration governance between the two continents.

Any migration cooperation arrangement must include strict guarantees of due process and independent monitoring to ensure asylum rights are not eroded. The "safe country" concept should be applied narrowly, with robust safeguards and transparent assessments, particularly when countries with questionable human rights records, such as Tunisia or Egypt, are included.

Return arrangements must also be equitable and, wherever possible, voluntary, offering incentives aligned with the development and mobility goals of partner countries rather than reducing them to the role of Europe's gatekeepers. Proposals for external or transit processing centres demand careful legal scrutiny and thorough cost-benefit analysis, accounting not only for efficiency but also for human rights standards, political sustainability, and the likelihood of local resistance.

Finally, the EU must balance its focus on externalisation with the expansion of legal mobility pathways. Broader opportunities for labour migration, student exchanges, and family reunification would not only address European labour market needs but also provide credible alternatives to irregular migration. By embedding these measures within cooperation, the EU could signal a genuine commitment to partnership that extends beyond containment.

Building on the analysis above, this section outlines actionable recommendations for policymakers.

1. To strengthen legitimacy and balance in migration governance, the EU and AU should institutionalise co-design mechanisms through the existing AU-EU Migration and Mobility Dialogue, creating joint committees that design and oversee migration frameworks without privileging EU priorities alone. This would ensure that African perspectives help shape the agenda from the outset. At the same time, both sides should invest in African data and research institutions to build locally led evidence on migration, thereby grounding policymaking in shared knowledge and regional realities.
2. The EU Commission, supported by EU member states should shift resources away from an overemphasis on border enforcement and instead channel funding toward initiatives that strengthen livelihoods, expand social protection, and create safe and accessible mobility opportunities.
3. The EU Commission and its member states should invest in infrastructure, capacity-building, and governance mechanisms that make free movement across Africa a practical reality, thereby reinforcing continental integration efforts. This requires meaningful support for the implementation of the AU Free Movement Protocol (FMP) as well as regional free movement frameworks developed by RECs such as ECOWAS, IGAD, and

EAC. At the same time, bilateral migration agreements between the EU and individual African states must be carefully aligned so they do not undermine or contradict regional integration policies, but rather complement Africa's own mobility agendas. In this way, cooperation can enhance intra-African mobility while strengthening the broader project of continental integration.

4. EU-Africa cooperation should move beyond its predominant focus on containment by significantly scaling up investments in mobility schemes such as labour migration partnerships, youth exchanges, and the mutual recognition of qualifications. While several initiatives in these areas already exist, they remain underfunded and overshadowed by security-driven measures. To create credible alternatives to irregular migration and demonstrate genuine partnership, the budget allocation for legal pathways must be substantially increased, and this dimension of cooperation should be treated as a strategic priority rather than a secondary add-on. These mobility schemes can be driven through member state initiatives to promote labour mobility in specific sectors. The EU talent partnership can also be used as a means to scale up the promotion of mobility schemes.
5. To build trust and bring rights back to the center of migration governance, the EU and AU should strengthen civil society participation by ensuring that African civil society, diaspora organizations, and youth- and migrant-led groups are fully included in policy discussions, while also enhancing mutual accountability through joint monitoring mechanisms that track both EU and African commitments with transparent reporting, enabling civil society actors to play an active role in oversight and in promoting a rights-based approach.

About the Authors

Amanda Bisong, independent researcher. She has been Policy Officer in the migration and mobility team, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) until June 2025.

Roberto Forin, Deputy Director & Head, Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) Europe, has over a decade of expertise in refugee protection, humanitarian response, and migration research across multiple regions.

Bram Frouws, Director, Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), has extensive experience in migration policy and research across Africa, Europe, and international organizations.

Peter Grant, Senior Research Consultant at the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC): researcher, writer and editor specialising in migration, urban development, and climate change.

Gaia Mastrosanti, Editorial Trainee, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). She holds a Master's degree in International Politics from Trinity College Dublin, where she also worked as a Teaching Assistant in the Department of Political Science.

Eleonora Milazzo, Research Fellow, Migration Policy Centre (MPC) of the European University Institute (EUI). She is

also Senior Adviser at the European Policy Centre (EPC) and Associate Fellow at the Egmont Institute in Brussels. She is the author of *Refugee Protection and Solidarity. The Duties of EU Member States* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

Matteo Villa, Senior Research Fellow, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). He is co-head of the ISPI Data Lab, monitoring geopolitical and geo-economic trends (with a particular focus on migration trends between Europe and Africa). He has been Co-Chair of the T20 Task Force on Migration.

