Migrants at the Gate: Europe Tries to Curb Undocumented Migration

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Introduction

In a 2022 address to the European Diplomatic Academy, European Union (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell contrasted Europe, which he described as an idyllic garden of political freedom and economic prosperity where "everything works," with the rest of the world, which he called "a jungle" that might "invade the garden." No wall, warned Borrell, is "high enough to protect the garden." Borrell's remarks exemplify an increasingly popular narrative that frames undocumented/irregular migration as a threat to Europe's stability and well-being.

This is problematic not merely because it reinforces hoary colonial stereotypes. It also cements the idea that border areas are best continuously securitized, with little consideration for the livelihoods of migrants or members of local communities in transit

countries. The rhetoric also overlooks an increasingly widespread implication of such a dichotomy, namely the outsourcing of responsibility for migration management and curtailment to transit countries. The latter, with the encouragement of European states, enact harsh measures—ranging from detention to deportation—without ensuring adequate legal safeguards for human rights. Finally, securitization ignores or even obscures the political and social factors that drive mass migration in the first place, meaning that little is done to stem the phenomenon.

Migrants have become pawns in European countries' domestic political struggles, as center-right parties attempt to appease growing anti-migrant sentiment by adopting the rhetoric and policies of national-conservative and even far-right parties. Across the twenty-seven member states of the EU, national-conservative and far-right parties have made headway in gaining power. Six currently have far-right leaders at

their helm: Italy, Finland, Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, and the Czech Republic. Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD), the far-right party co-chaired by Alice Weidel, has experienced significant electoral success in the eastern part of the country. In a speech delivered in January 2025, Weidel announced that, should the AfD gain power nationally, Germany would engage in mass deportation, which she termed "remigration." This came amid a decision by the country's governing coalition (which does not include the AfD) to tighten controls at Germany's land borders in an effort to stop migration and "protect against the acute dangers posed by Islamist terrorism and serious crime." Germany is but one example of an increasingly harsh approach to undocumented migration across Europe.

Transit Countries: From Partners to Gatekeepers

EU agreements with transit countries over the issue of undocumented migration emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2004, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) became the framework for EU interaction with its non-European Mediterranean neighbors—and a pillar of its foreign policy. The ENP, which built on earlier agreements, focused on strengthening bilateral relations based on shared interests in the realm of migration, security, and economic development. Its approach to foreign policy was based on long-term engagement. Through financial support, trade agreements, and visa facilitations, the ENP sought to foster structural reforms, mostly democratic governance and institutional strengthening, in neighboring countries.

Though ENP-informed foreign policy was broader than migration management, it nonetheless set the stage for both securitization and externalization. Securitization refers to the treatment of migration as a security issue, as encapsulated in Borrell's aforementioned infamous

statement. Externalization seeks to outsource such securitization, principally in the form of border management. Its core aim is to prevent migrants from reaching Europe's shores. In return for their cooperation and effectiveness, countries through which migrants transit are given financial incentives and political support. Early, albeit not full-fledged, examples of this approach include Italy's signing of a 2008 Friendship Treaty with Libya, through which the latter received $5 billion in return for preventing migrant boats setting off from the Libyan coast from reaching Italian shores. Since then, the EU has entered into similar or more far-reaching agreements with Libya itself, Türkiye, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, among other countries.

Externalization would grow following the Mediterranean crisis of 2015, when nearly one million migrants, many of whom were refugees from the civil war in Syria, reached Europe. This led many in policy and academic spheres to call for creating "Fortress Europe"—making the European continent virtually impenetrable—to curb the migratory phenomenon or even halt it entirely. Indeed, that year, the EU established the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) to tackle migration challenges. This marked a narrowing of the EU's approach. Aside from addressing issues beyond that of migration, the ENP had looked at relations with the Balkans and Türkiye alongside African countries. The EUTF, by contrast, placed all its emphasis on migration and was geared toward Africa. Designed as an emergency instrument, its funding structure was meant to allow greater flexibility in managing migration. In many ways, it accelerated externalization.

In 2021, the Neighborhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) was introduced, further solidifying the EU's approach to externalizing migration management. The NDICI focused on enhancing non-EU countries' border-control capacities and cementing coordination over the issue of stemming migration. It combined multiple

EU financing instruments for foreign policy initiatives, including those focused on migration management and forced displacement, into a single financing tool. In North Africa, many of the NDICI-funded projects were a direct continuation of the EUTF, but served to strengthen the conditionality framework—whereby aid to transit countries depends on their willingness to cooperate with EU migration management.

Yet undocumented migration continued and grew increasingly dangerous. In 2023, the Mediterranean witnessed the highest recorded number of migrant deaths since 2017. In 2024, the European Parliament adopted the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which sought to present a "European solution" to migration challenges. The EU Pact, which will go into effect in 2026, aims to further enhance border-control procedures within the EU, streamline asylum applications, and implement a return process for "those not eligible for international protection." It imposes conformity on signatory states, so that any country failing to comply with the established rules and regulations could face legal action.

There is little reason to believe that the EU Pact will stem migration. Thus far, the most notable impact of the Pact's precursors has been an increase in the value of smugglers' services as well as the risks to migrants. Civil society organizations working for the protection of migrants have been particularly active in highlighting how these deals have led to human rights abuses and increasingly perilous migratory routes. More such travesties can be expected. The lack of transparency in deal-making between the EU and third countries, combined with inadequate oversight of migrant-reception conditions and lack of adherence to legal guidelines in host and especially transit countries, poses major safety risks for people on the move.

The Stability Bargain: Granting Benefits to Those Who Corral Migrants

Border securitization has significantly reshaped the relationship between the EU and its southern neighbors. This shift has led to the expansion of surveillance infrastructure, the proliferation of detention centers for migrants, and the growing role of private security and military companies in migration control. European funding has facilitated the deployment of biometric systems, drones, and border-monitoring technologies. This outsourcing of security has also contributed to an increasing militarization of borders between the Maghreb states. Indeed, in recent years, walls, fences, and surveillance technology have been deployed to secure the countries' borders, often with European funding. This has exacerbated the fragmentation of an already divided region.

Detention centers, where migrants are kept in large numbers, have become controversial due to widely documented human rights abuses. Arguably the worst offender is Libya, where migrants intercepted by the country's quasi-official coastguard and returned to Libyan disembarkation zones are placed in detention facilities under particularly trying circumstances. Libya has been a hotspot for human trafficking in the years following the toppling of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011; militias have filled the security vacuum, with reports of migrants being sold at slave markets and subjected to extreme and inhumane exploitation. In May 2024, the number of people held in detention centers across Libya was estimated at 5,554.

The EU has tasked Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, with implementing an integrated border-management strategy focusing on monitoring, risk analysis, operational responses, and return operations through cooperation with non-EU countries. As part of this undertaking, Frontex has equipped Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Libya with a host of

surveillance tools and has provided training to security forces on border management and migration control. For the 2021–2027 period, the EU contribution to the agency is projected to reach up to $11.5 billion.

The global rise in migration control has in certain places also led to its privatization. A lack of technical capacity on the part of transit states has led to their partial reliance on private companies for matters such as surveillance, border control, detention, and incarceration. Essentially, European countries have outsourced migration management and curtailment to transit countries, which have in turn outsourced the responsibility for such matters, at least in part, to private security firms. The latter have become deeply involved in the management of offshore detention centers for migrants, and obtain means and matériel from companies—some with a distinct military focus—that specialize in surveillance technology, facilitate the collection and processing of biometric data, and manufacture drones. The border security market, of which large corporations such as the aerospace giant Airbus are a part, has an estimated annual growth of between 7.2 and 8.6 percent, and will reach a total of $65–66 billion in 2025. In short, vested interests have created an intricate web of political and economic entanglement between governments (both in transit countries and EU member states), private security firms, and surveillance- and military-oriented technology companies.

The incentives given to transit countries' regimes to comply with EU border-management priorities are leveraged by those regimes themselves to secure (further) economic aid and political concessions from European countries—or to punish them. For example, in 2021, Madrid accused Rabat of allowing approximately 8,000 migrants to enter the Morocco-adjacent Spanish territory of Ceuta following Spain's decision to provide medical treatment to Brahim Ghali, leader of the separatist Polisario Front, which seeks independence for the Western Sahara. The most striking case has been

that of Türkiye. Hosting more refugees—most of them Syrian—than any other country, Türkiye has leveraged its curbing of migration to bring about the 2016 EU-Türkiye Statement. The latter secured for Ankara nearly $6.3 billion in financial assistance, boosted visa liberalization prospects for its citizens, and restarted long-stalled EU accession talks.

Similar rent-seeking practices are pursued by various non- or quasi-state actors in Libya. Assuming control over detention centers and in some cases vital migratory corridors following Qaddafi's ouster, certain Libyan militias began taking an active role in border management, integrating and bolstering their presence in official regional and domestic structures and at the same time benefiting from EU funding. In June 2023, an anti-migration campaign orchestrated by the Libyan National Army (LNA), a militia under the command of warlord-cum-politician Khalifa Haftar, forced Egyptian migrants to walk from eastern Libya to the Egyptian border. Also in 2023, the Tariq Ben Zeyad Brigade, a militia closely tied to the LNA, used GPS coordinates made public by Frontex to intercept refugee boats, and proceeded to return them to eastern Libya and subject their occupants to physical abuse.

Digital intelligence gathering and investigative tools raise concerns over the misuse of data and infringements on privacy in transit countries—and not only for migrants. In 2023, it was reported that EUTF for Africa had allocated $16.5 million in funding to Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia to train a group of budding "cyber specialists" in online surveillance and data extraction from smart devices. According to reports, these countries subsequently used equipment and training against their own citizens. It is increasingly becoming apparent that advanced surveillance techniques, such as spyware and social media monitoring tools, can contribute to political repression. Restive minorities and political dissidents are particularly vulnerable.

The shifting role of Maghrebi states such as Morocco and Tunisia from transit to destination countries has led to increasing discontent among local populations and rising anti-migrant sentiment. Political rhetoric in transit countries now often mirrors far-right discourse in Europe. Anti-migrant and anti-Black campaigns have erupted with increasing frequency throughout the Maghreb, where most migrants are of Sub-Saharan origin. Officialdom has often played a role in fanning the flames. In a speech delivered in March 2023, Tunisian President Saeid Kais tapped into the "Great Replacement" theory, the idea that migration stems from a conspiracy to change a country's demographics. Aside from prompting employers to terminate irregular migrants' contracts, this clear racial incitement caused a surge in physical attacks against many Sub-Saharans in Tunisia. In Morocco, following calls in 2024 by a non-governmental organization for the government to reform immigration and asylum laws, anti-Black racism and incitement proliferated across social media platforms.

Framing migrants as a threat to national security or, worse yet, a country's national identity legitimizes violence against them and enables their exploitation. The securitization of migration, and its subsequent externalization to "partner" countries, has fueled this phenomenon. Anti-migrant sentiment is increasingly leveraged by various parties for political gain. This hinders any potential for formulating a comprehensive approach to migration, one that transcends security concerns.

Working with local actors to resolve armed conflicts in the African countries from which so many refugees/migrants are fleeing and launching nation-building programs to help make such states more stable in the long term would bypass the securitization/externalization model. However, the notion that European countries can be persuaded to pursue such a strategy, which would address some of the root causes of mass migration, is a fanciful one. There is little to no appetite on the political

or popular level for a hands-on approach to Africa's myriad problems, even those that have an impact on Europe itself. Therein lies the tragedy.

Beyond war and conflict, however, migration is driven by a complex interplay of factors. These range from the economic, such as lack of employment and limited life opportunities, to the political, such as weak governance and marginalization. Here, perhaps, is where the EU could become involved. For example, fostering private sector engagement and directing investments into key economic sectors, as seen in Morocco's automotive industry, can create local employment opportunities, particularly in marginalized regions, and helping to stem capital flight. This should go hand-in-hand with strengthening vocational training and educational programs that are tailored to local markets' needs. Ensuring that these investments and training initiatives are not concentrated in urban centers—as is too often the case—is important for countering the economic disparities that drive migration. Additionally, EU educational institutions can play a pivotal role in facilitating specialized knowledge exchanges and technology transfers between Europe and African countries. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, European-sponsored development in Africa must include programs for improving both infrastructure and governance, thereby enhancing the livability of countries across the continent.

In adopting such a tack, European countries could conceivably attenuate some of the drivers of migration—and simultaneously benefit African countries. Moreover, they would do so without over-extending themselves financially or otherwise. Most important of all, the strategy in question would fulfill the EU's ultimate aim: reducing the number of migrants reaching European shores. Without such an approach, it is difficult to imagine any significant easing of the migratory waves reaching Europe.

Conclusion

European countries continue to strike securitization-focused border-management deals with their non-European neighbors, from North Africa to Türkiye. This cash-in-hand approach to controlling migration enables strategically positioned states to present themselves as "reliable partners" while deflecting international scrutiny from their domestic issues, however pressing they may be. It also leads transit states (as well as non- or quasi-state actors in Libya) to engage in rent-seeking practices and to inject their disparate and even competing interests into EU institutional structures.

Moreover, stringent regulations and inhumane treatment in transit countries do not necessarily deter people wishing to move. Instead, such measures are likely to lead migrants and human traffickers to use riskier migration routes in order to evade surveillance regimes. Without the emergence of a more flexible approach to migration, the EU will find itself relying more and more on transit countries to enforce increasingly stringent and arguably counterproductive security measures. In such a scenario, the future for both migrants and citizens under the authoritarian governments so prevalent across transit countries would be bleak, and Europe would continue to experience an influx of unwanted people.

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