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Europe's Toughened Stance on Migration

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On April 10, 2024, the European Parliament passed the EU's new Pact on Asylum and Migration, the first major reform to the entrance procedures for migrants and asylum seekers after a contentious debate of almost a decade. The debate was initiated as a result of the war in Syria and the rising influx of migrants and refugees into Europe since then. In 2023 alone, almost 300,000 people arrived in countries of the EU irregularly, the highest level since 2016, according to the UN International Organization for Migration. In addition, over one million asylum demands were registered. The pact now moves on to the European Council where it is expected to pass by qualified majority vote on April 29.



Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)

Under the new proposed rules, border facilities will be established in the EU to better screen and register asylum seekers with the intention of quickly sending back those applicants deemed ineligible. In addition, a solidarity measure is introduced whereby an EU country facing a crisis can ask to have asylum seekers relocated or receive financial contributions from other EU states. Many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have criticized the measures as undermining European values and human rights, claiming that the pact will

increase illegal pushbacks, arbitrary detention, and discriminatory policing.

An integral part of the push to reduce migration influx are the numerous agreements that the EU has recently signed, primarily with countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The agreements involve significant financial support from the EU to the recipient countries in exchange for better control of migration inflows. The first agreement of this sort was signed with Turkey in 2016 to house Syrian refugees in exchange for €6 billion over several years from the EU. The deal was extended in 2021 with an additional payment of €3 billion. The concept of paying other countries to police Europe's border intensified in 2023. In July 2023, the EU and Tunisia signed a MoU to limit the arrival of irregular migrants to EU territory. President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, labeled the deal as a blueprint for future similar arrangements with other countries. The deal covers five areas, primarily migration and mobility, but also economy and trade, people-to-people contact, macroeconomic stability, and green energy transition. It includes an allocation of €105 million to boost Tunisia's border control capabilities; €112 million to Tunisia to combat illegal migration while also facilitating entry to highly-skilled Tunisians; €150 million in direct budgetary support to reduce the country's soaring inflation; €11 million program to boost exchange students; €73 million to modernize schools; and an extra €900 million in macroeconomic support. It also includes commitments to addressing "the root causes of irregular migration," as well as "combating irregular migration" and "[developing legal pathways for migration.](#)" As such, the agreement has been promoted as a joint effort to invest in both parties' shared prosperity, stability, and future generations.



In February 2024, the EU signed a €210 million migration deal with Mauritania. Similar to the agreement with Tunisia, the deal provides funding to support border control, create economic opportunities, and combat human trafficking. In a broader context, the EU-Mauritania deal is part of the Commission's efforts to fortify collaboration with nations in the Sahel region--a region that has been facing chronic socio-political instability. Mauritania was praised for its “remarkable commitment to saving the lives of migrants,” hence the [EU's need](#) to “step up their cooperation in this area and in the management of borders, returns, and assistance for refugees.” The deal also involves a status agreement that would authorize the deployment of the European border management agency personnel - Frontex - to the country. This clause is unprecedented in the EU's approach to border management where for the first time, Frontex is allowed to exercise executive powers at the borders of a non-EU country.

Most recently in March 2024, the EU signed a €7.4 billion deal with Egypt to help curb irregular migration to Europe. It includes €600 million in grants, including €200 million specifically for migration management, €1.8 billion in investments, and €5 billion in concessional loans. Several EU leaders signed the deal, including the Prime Ministers of Italy, Belgium, Austria, and Cyprus. Earlier attempts at closing the escape gap include the launch of “Enhancing the Response to Migration Challenges in Egypt” in 2016, a program funded through [the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa \(EUTF\)](#). The launch provided €60 million to support Egypt's efforts in addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displaced people in Africa.

A next arrangement could be struck with Morocco. Morocco and the EU have been working together since 2004 on migration issues. With less than 12 km between Morocco

and Spain, the former is a strategic point for migrants trying to reach the EU. In 2013, the collaboration led to the conclusion of a Mobility Partnership Agreement, an agreement that aimed to facilitate legal migration and mobility between the two sides with a focus on addressing irregular migration. The EU also supported the implementation of Morocco's National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (SNIA.)



Source: [VOA Africa](#)

Morocco benefits from the EU's main tool of support: the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF.) With a total of €234 million committed between 2015 and 2021, the EU supports Morocco's fight against smuggling and trafficking, community stabilization and protection, integrated border management, improvement of migration governance, and labor migration support. In 2022, the EU allocated an additional €150 million in the form of the Budget Support program to Morocco with the main objective of strengthening ongoing dialogue on migration cooperation. As such, the EU-Morocco migration deal is yet another part of the EU's broader strategy to externalize its migration management to countries on its periphery through financial incentives.

The rationale behind all of the above agreements is that Europe finds itself in an acute dilemma. On the one hand, increased migration flows have led to a surge in populist and far-right parties throughout Europe which have made the migration topic a key political



issue in elections, including for the upcoming European Parliament elections in June of 2024. Voters are making demands that the politicians cannot ignore. On the other hand, many of the steps being implemented stand in contrast to European standards of human rights and fundamental values thereby undermining the very concepts that Europe claims to identify with.

Nevertheless, the outsourcing of much of Europe's migration dilemma is subject to a great deal of criticism. In essence, the agreements can simply be understood as a cash-for-migrant agreement. In exchange for financial support, the recipient countries commit themselves to cooperate in combating migrant smuggling and trafficking, carry out search and rescue operations within their maritime borders, and readmit their nationals who are irregularly present in the EU. Overall, the policies prioritize border control over human rights and effective policy development.



Source: [RTBF](#)

In addition, other objections have been raised. First, the agreements tend to strengthen authoritarian trends in MENA states without tackling the institutional and structural crisis that these governments find themselves confronted with. Given the fact that much of the disbursement of funds will be left to the recipient governments, there is little assurance that earmarked funds will actually go to supporting much-needed macro-economic reforms. With many of the MENA states facing

levels of political and economic instability, as highlighted by the Arab Spring protests a little more than a decade ago, there is also the risk that the countries will find themselves under additional economic and social pressure by having to host increasing numbers of refugees.

Second, there is no clear differentiation between “migrants” and people in vulnerable situations- asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, etc. As a result, migrants may end up putting their lives at greater risk by taking more dangerous routes to reach their destination. In the case of Tunisia, expulsions have become a growing issue as interceptions by Tunisian authorities doubled to 81,000 in 2023 with reports suggesting that thousands of migrants have been forcibly deported to Algeria and Libya. By focusing mostly on border control, the effectiveness of the [EU's policy is being questioned](#) with the UN IOM arguing that the focus should instead be on the causes of “what's driving people to move” and engaging with the “communities where migrants are coming from.” The EU's policy of designating a country such as Tunisia as a “disembark platform,” a safe third-world country to which those trying to pass could eventually relocate, appears to be short-sighted.

Third, the agreements lack legally binding effects and thus, serve primarily as a policy statement. There is no guarantee that Tunisia or Egypt will meet their commitments, and the EU would therefore require additional measures. This is especially the case since the notion of [“Team Europe spirit”](#) does not hold any formal legal status, despite being mentioned in the signing process. It is also the case given that the EU is not involved in the negotiations of non-binding agreements with non-EU member countries, raising more questions and concerns regarding the parliamentary oversight of the “agreement.”



Fourth, the EU's approach to the migration deals with Middle Eastern states [embeds the carrot-and-stick approach](#): the systematic utilization of external policies of third-world nations to induce them to cooperate.

Yet, while the Turkey deal is generally being hailed for halving irregular migration between 2016 and 2017, migration pressures continue to increase and have simply adjusted to move through different countries. In addition, just because an agreement has been somewhat effective in Turkey does not necessarily mean that it will work in the same manner with other countries. The EU is also subjecting itself to forms of blackmail from the governments with whom these deals are being struck. President Erdogan has already threatened to cancel the arrangements with the EU on numerous occasions when he has disagreed with other aspects of European policy.

The passing of the asylum and migration pact by the EU should therefore be seen as an additional step in the tightening of Europe's borders. Further agreements with third countries will be a continued priority under the new EU Commission, in particular if Commission President von der Leyen is re-elected for a new term following the upcoming European elections.

In addition, the so-called "Rwanda model" propagated by the UK whereby asylum seekers are sent to third-party countries for application processing is also finding an increasing number of proponents in Europe. Italy and Albania have already signed a similar agreement of this nature.

Taken together, the current policy is likely to further exacerbate the existing problems rather than solve them. What is needed instead is a push for more positive agenda-setting on mobility and migration that would enable mobility, facilitate visa processing, foster people-to-people contacts (especially through youth exchange), develop the skills that markets require, and rebuild credibility on human rights. Anything less, and failure would appear to be pre-programmed.

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