



Reflection paper

Ceuta, the EU's migration governance vulnerability and what to do next

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The recent crisis in Ceuta provides an important opportunity to reflect on some of the structural tensions in European migration policy. While the immediate challenge concerns the management of a sudden increase in arrivals at Spain's external border, the implications extend well beyond Ceuta. The episode highlights the vulnerabilities created by the EU's increasing reliance on migration cooperation with third countries, the persistent difficulty of achieving meaningful solidarity among Member States, the challenges of balancing migration management with protection, and the extent to which the new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum can address these issues.

The timing is particularly significant: the pact came into effect in June 2026, representing the EU's most ambitious attempt to create a common framework for asylum and migration management. One of its central objectives is to address the long-standing imbalance – that Member States at the EU's external borders can face disproportionate pressure because of their geographical position. The Ceuta crisis therefore offers an early test of whether the new system can translate European solidarity from a political principle into an operational reality.

Externalisation and third countries' increasing leverage

Over the past decade, the EU has increasingly externalised migration management. Cooperation with third countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Türkiye and Libya has become a key component of European migration policy, particularly in relation to border management, preventing irregular departures, combating smuggling and facilitating returns.

There are clear reasons for the EU to cooperate with countries of origin and transit. Migration cannot be managed effectively through measures taken solely within EU territory: cooperation can help prevent dangerous journeys, disrupt smuggling networks, support voluntary return and reintegration, and create more predictable channels for legal mobility.

However, externalisation also creates a structural paradox in that the more the EU relies on third countries to manage migration on its behalf, the more important the cooperation of those countries becomes. This creates political and geopolitical leverage for third-country

governments. This is a key lesson for the implementation of the pact and future EU migration policy – externalisation should not mean dependency. The EU needs sufficient internal capacity and contingency planning to ensure that changes in the behaviour or political priorities of a partner country cannot immediately translate into a European migration crisis.

This also suggests that the EU should move from transactional migration deals towards broader and more balanced migration partnerships. Cooperation should not be reduced to an exchange in which the EU provides financial and political incentives in return for border control. Instead, partnerships should encompass a broader range of mutual interests, including legal labour mobility, education, skills partnerships, development, protection, returns and reintegration. Such an approach would also make cooperation more politically sustainable. If migration management is only one element of a much broader relationship, disagreements over migration are less likely to destabilise the entire partnership.

A test for European solidarity

The second major issue exposed by the crisis in Ceuta is the persistent tension between national responsibility and European solidarity. The EU has struggled for years to reconcile the fact that the responsibility for managing the external border is a national one, while migration itself is a European phenomenon. Spain, Italy, Greece, Malta and Cyprus cannot choose their geographical location, and are burdened with disproportionate political, administrative and financial responsibility when pressure increases at their borders.

The pact was intended, in part, to address this problem. It introduces a permanent solidarity framework through which EU countries can contribute through relocation, financial support and other forms of operational assistance, and establishes mechanisms intended to respond to situations of particular migratory pressure. The fact that these mechanisms exist on paper, however, does not mean that Member States will use them. European solidarity is relatively easy to invoke as a principle; it is considerably more difficult when one EU country suddenly faces a large number of new arrivals to its territory while other governments are under domestic political pressure to limit migration.

This is why this crisis should be viewed as an early stress test of the pact, rather than as definitive evidence that the pact has already failed. The new system has only just entered into application: can it prevent EU countries from reverting to unilateral or bilateral responses when faced with sudden pressure? Will lessons be learned from Ceuta?

Instrumentalisation and protection

The crisis also raises questions about how the EU responds to the potential instrumentalization of migration.

The EU increasingly recognises that migration movements can become part of broader geopolitical strategies, with governments or other actors potentially seeking to exploit Europe's political sensitivities around migration by influencing movements across borders. In such situations, the EU needs to be able to respond. At the same time, the concept of instrumentalization needs to be applied carefully. Describing migration as a geopolitical instrument should not obscure the fact that the people moving are individuals with different motivations, vulnerabilities and legal claims. Some may be seeking employment; others – family reunification; thirds may be fleeing conflict or persecution. The wider geopolitical context does not remove their right to have their protection claims assessed fairly.

This distinction is particularly important because it highlights one of the central implementation challenges of the pact. Stronger border management and cooperation with third countries must not become substitutes for access to asylum and effective protection procedures. External cooperation can help manage migration, but it cannot outsource the EU's legal and humanitarian responsibilities.

Lessons for the future of EU cooperation and the pact

Several broader lessons for the future implementation of the pact emerge from Ceuta. First, **externalisation should complement rather than replace European capacity**. The EU needs comprehensive, resilient reception, asylum processing, border management, return and contingency capacity within its own territory.

Second, **solidarity needs to become operational**. The pact's credibility will depend on whether EU countries are willing to act collectively when frontline states face sudden pressure.

Third, **partnerships with third countries need to be broader and more balanced**. Border management and returns remain important, but should form part of broader partnerships that also encompass legal pathways, labour mobility, skills cooperation, development and protection. **Border management is one component of this broader system, not a substitute for it.**

Research by the Migration Policy Group (MPG) as part of the [Finding Agreement in Return \(FAiR\) project](#) highlights some of the limitations of the EU's externalisation approach. Bilateral return agreements – the main instruments of externalisation – are often narrow in scope and insufficiently reflect the interests of partner countries. The EU and Member States should therefore prioritise more balanced partnerships that foster sustained cooperation. The pact's external dimension and initiatives such as [the Migration Partnership Facility \(MPF\)](#) provide important frameworks for this approach.

Fourth, **EU resilience requires preparation for non-cooperation**. Every major migration partnership should include contingency planning for political change, diplomatic tensions and sudden increases in arrivals. The EU should also be prepared for large-scale border crossings and related disinformation campaigns. Because migration is often instrumentalised to exploit divisions within the EU, Member States should respond with solidarity and coordinated, humane border management rather than domestic political competition.

Finally, **lessons learnt from Ceuta extend beyond border management to integration**. The success of European migration policy cannot be measured solely by the number of people prevented from entering the territory irregularly. It also depends on outcomes for those who remain in Europe, including access to employment, education, healthcare, housing, family life and long-term participation in society. Managing migration therefore means not only controlling borders, but also ensuring that those who remain in Europe can participate fully in society.

The latest findings of MPG's flagship [Migration Policy Index \(MIPEX\)](#) point to stagnation in [integration policies across much of the EU](#), which comes as an unfortunate byproduct of the current narrow and securitised border management approach. **These findings reinforce a broader lesson from Ceuta: migration governance cannot be reduced to border management alone.**

Conclusion

The Ceuta crisis illustrates the limits of a migration strategy that relies heavily on managing migration outside European territory while failing to resolve migration policy tensions within the EU itself.

The answer is not to abandon cooperation with third countries, nor is it to assume that stronger border controls alone can resolve the structural drivers of migration. Instead, the EU needs a more resilient model of migration governance. This means combining effective external borders with genuine internal solidarity, developing broader partnerships with countries of origin and transit, maintaining and improving access to protection, expanding predictable legal pathways and investing sufficiently in integration.

Ultimately, the EU cannot prevent every large border crossing or “crisis”. What it *can* do is develop a system resilient enough to manage sudden pressure without leaving individual Member States exposed, without becoming excessively dependent on third-country cooperation, and without allowing migration to become a recurring source of internal division. **The events in Ceuta should therefore be seen not simply as a border crisis, but as a test of whether the EU can move from crisis-driven migration management towards a truly common migration governance system that upholds its own principles.**

Migration Policy Group (MPG)

MPG is an independent Brussels-based think-and-do tank. We conduct evidence-based projects, research and campaigns in the areas of integration, migration and anti-discrimination.

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