



Debate for the future of Europe
Migration policies and human rights

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Introduction

On June 12th, 2026, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum entered into force. This pact aims to offer a comprehensive approach and strengthen four key policy areas: migration, asylum, border management, and integration. While its foundation comprises previous reform proposals, the document additionally includes a number of novelties, like the solidarity mechanism and the integrated border procedure.

Even though migration has been a topic of discussion for decades, its salience has particularly increased since the 2015 Asylum crisis. The debate has drastically shifted rightward over the past ten years, with far-right narratives becoming mainstreamed into centre-right policy and human rights perspectives increasingly confined to the left. This is reflected in the New Pact, where returns serve as political performance rather than functional tools, and the solidarity mechanism remains hollow, with several states pledging zero contributions. Furthermore, despite entering into force in June 2026, the Pact still faces widespread unpreparedness across legislation, capacity, and rights protections and its inherent flexibility permits financial opt-outs over relocations perpetuating the same structural asymmetry that plagued Dublin.

At the outset, the new pact demonstrates the EU's internal contradictions. As an aging union in need of population and labor force, it allocates more resources to coercive tools than to integration support and human rights, opting for securitization and political expediency.

SECTION I. Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference in Migration

Core finding: European migration policy has become trapped in a dangerous cycle.

I. How are these narratives created and manipulated?

While migration has been on the European agenda for several decades, its salience has particularly increased since the 2015 Crisis. Migration became more present in the public debate, and all approaches, as much sovereignist as humanitarian ones, gained supporters. Lucarelli and D'Amato (2019) note that media shape popular perception and social reality by presenting topics related to migration in a certain way. The authors also found out by analysing press releases from different countries that the increase of populist and anti-immigrants claims was favored by the lack of counter "pro-migrant" narratives, except the humanitarian one which tends to depict migrants as victims.

Beyond the role of traditional media in shaping migration perspectives, the role of digital ones and of social media deeply transformed the building of migration's perception. Komendantova, Erokhin, and Albano (2023) point out that misinformation dramatically increased during crises such as Covid-19 or the 2015 migration crisis, partly because new technologies and social media make the dissemination of misinformation easier, faster, and

harder to counter. This globally reinforced the “us” versus “them” narratives toward immigrants and had an impact on community cohesion and the global perception of migrants. Similarly, Conrad studied how social media could politicize certain issues that would otherwise have been less salient. He shows that without mobilization of far-right actors on social media, that flooded those spaces with disinformation, the Global Compact for Migration would have never taken an important political dimension and became a major debate in the public sphere (Conrad 2021). The topic of migration is particularly polarized and traditional media struggle to give a positive aspect of migrants. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the new digital era, in which disinformation spreads faster.

II. The Shift From Narrative to Policy

The political Overton window on migration has shifted so far that positions considered extreme in 2015, such as mass deportations, offshore processing, the suspension of family reunification, now constitute mainstream policy debate within the European People’s Party and across the political centre. Content analysis of EP plenary debates demonstrates that migration discourse has been sharply and durably polarised along the left-right axis, with far-right MEPs framing arrivals as invasion and demographic substitution while humanitarian framing has remained confined to the left and Greens (Krotký & Kaniok, 2021). A quasi-quantitative analysis of EP securitising narratives confirms that crisis-and-security vocabulary has dominated over rights-based framing (Stivas, 2024). The structural shift became unambiguous in June 2024: populist radical right forces secured approximately 25% of all EP seats, and the EPP’s own pre-election manifesto (pledging deportations to “safe” third countries) signalled that hardline positions had moved from fringe to mainstream centre-right policy. By early 2026, this entrenchment had extended beyond irregular migration into debates over skilled workers and settled communities (Mixed Migration Centre, 2026).

This dynamic did not emerge spontaneously. Far-right actors invested early and heavily in social media infrastructure, normalising extreme positions through repetition and emotional activation. Centre-right parties, facing electoral pressure, accommodated the framing rather than contesting it; a pattern visible in the EPP’s current positioning, which would have been unrecognisable to the party’s mainstream a decade ago. The progressive minority in the Parliament (namely Socialists & Democrats, Greens, The Left) has sought to hold the line on fundamental rights, but the arithmetic of the current chamber has constrained its influence, including on the ongoing Return Directive revision¹.

¹ The revised Return Directive is currently moving through the legislative process. It proposes expanded detention grounds, shortened procedural safeguards, and enhanced enforcement. Whether the progressive bloc can secure meaningful human rights amendments to the final text remains uncertain.

III. The Geopolitical Weaponisation of Return Policy

Return has been elevated from a routine administrative procedure to the defining symbol of European migration policy ambition. Return rates are the primary metric of success; political capital is invested in announcing new deals regardless of operational effectiveness.

The Italy-Albania agreement exemplifies the pattern. The deal politically serves as a signal of governmental control which far exceeds its practical impact: the number of individuals actually processed through the mechanism has been minimal, and legal challenges have exposed its fragile foundations. Yet it has successfully mainstreamed the concept of “remigration”: a term originating in far-right ethno-nationalist vocabulary, into the language of EU-level policy debate.

EU readmission agreements with Tunisia, Egypt, and Mauritania function less as migration management tools than as instruments of leverage, which increasingly flows in both directions. Third countries have monetised their cooperation, extracting substantial financial transfers, trade concessions, and visa liberalisation in exchange for accepting deportees. Turkey’s 2016 EU-Turkey Statement set the template; subsequent agreements have deepened the EU’s structural dependency on partners whose rule-of-law standards raise serious concerns about the fate of returnees.

Proposals for “return hubs”² represent the logical extension of this externalisation logic. Germany’s advocacy for this model at the 2025 Cyprus migration talks signals that the concept has moved from fringe proposal to mainstream EU debate. Its compatibility with the Refugee Convention and the ECHR has not been established.

IV. The Integration Paradox

European demographic projections consistently show aging populations, labour force contractions, and critical shortages in healthcare, construction, and agriculture; precisely these sectors are where managed migration could provide relief. The evidence on this is not contested in the academic literature. Yet EU funding mechanisms tell a different story: the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund allocations for 2021–2027 dedicate substantially more to border management and return procedures than to integration support.

This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. Inadequate integration investment produces weaker integration outcomes, which are then cited as evidence that certain populations are “unintegratable”, justifying further reductions in integration funding and further increases in enforcement spending. The proposed solidarity conditionality mechanism aims at linking EU structural funds to relocation cooperation; this has been effectively neutered by the financial opt-out, allowing wealthier Member States to purchase exemption from responsibility-sharing. The New Pact, rather than breaking this cycle, largely codifies it.

² Offshore facilities in third countries to which rejected asylum seekers would be transferred pending removal

V. Recommendations

Recognizing the fact that narratives matter, the EU should:

- Cultivate and finance evidence-centric counter-narratives that transcend the limited humanitarian framework, framing migrants as economic agents, rights-holders, and demographic assets rather than mere passive victims.
- Classify migration as a high-priority sector within EEAS FIMI monitoring to map the specific networks that convert state-sponsored disinformation into domestic political mobilization.
- Expedite the enforcement of the Digital Services Act on major platforms, prioritizing migration-related misinformation and mandated algorithmic audits during sensitive electoral and migratory periods.
- Mandate human rights impact assessments and European Parliament oversight for all migration agreements with third countries, terminate the trend of informal arrangements that bypass institutional scrutiny.
- Restructure AMIF allocations in the upcoming MFF to guarantee integration funding constitutes at least 40% of migration spending, while removing the financial opt-out from the solidarity mechanism.
- Apply rigorous legal evaluation to return hub proposals against the Refugee Convention and ECHR, maintaining a presumption against any model where practical human rights compliance remains unproven.

SECTION II. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum

Core finding: The new Pact exemplifies the shift from narratives formerly dismissed as extreme that now have been normalized in concrete and current policies.

I. The officials' side: How does the Pact work?

One of the few issues regarding the close implementation of the pact on migration and asylum refers to differences amongst EU Member-States when it comes to migration. First taking the side of EU officials into account, several points highlight differences between Member States on how exposed to migration one can be compared to another one. It also shows what the institutions and their framework aim to do and what could be discussed and be leading to some recommendations later in the brief.

Through the pact on migration and asylum, especially related to the implementation, there are several legal instruments such as the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR). This new instrument, which updates the Dublin rule, aims to determine which Member State is responsible for examining applications for international protection, but with a “fairer sharing of responsibility among the Member States through a mandatory but flexible solidarity mechanism” - meaning that while participation is required, states can choose from different options to fulfill their obligations. This instrument sets an annual minimum

solidarity commitment of 30 000 relocations and 600 million euros in financial contributions. To notably determine the states under migratory pressure, the Commission adopts a report each year. Furthermore, this part underlines a point of institutional friction. While the Commission is legally obligated to propose these figures, the Council is not obligated to enforce them and negotiated the actual numbers down under the guise of mid-year implementation. The final numbers of 21 000 relocations and 420 million euros in financial contributions for 2026 form a compromise that already shows an implementation deficit (Milazzo, 2026).

The first report was released by the Commission in November 2025. It analysed the asylum, migration and reception in the EU and in the Member States in the last 12 months and established a projection for the future of migratory situation for the upcoming year. The Commission found that Greece and Cyprus are under migratory pressure as well as Spain and Italy with high numbers of arrivals and applications. They will be able to benefit from the solidarity mechanism. Twelve other Member States are at risk of migratory pressure according to the report such as Belgium, France, Poland and Finland. They will get access to the EU Migration support toolbox while still contributing to the solidarity mechanism.

The first report led to the proposal of the establishment of the first Solidarity pool by the Commission. The Council gave its decision back in December 2025. In a nutshell, four countries will benefit from the pool, with a significant part going to Spain and Italy due to the Mediterranean border burden. To highlight key points from the annex of the implementing decision from the Council, a few countries pledged 0 allocation and 0 euro contribution as explained by recital 15: *“In order to ensure an appropriate balance between solidarity and responsibility in that context, particularly in relation to the situation of those Member States that are identified [...] as facing a significant migratory situation, it should exceptionally be acknowledged that those Member States’ pledges may be adjusted accordingly”*. Two other Member States, Hungary and Slovakia, made no pledge while not being concerned by recital 15.

II. The Progress Report on the Migration and Asylum Pact: Outline and Critique

In the recent progress report on the implementation of the migration and asylum pact published on 8. May 2026 by the Commission, the Commission highlights that while many Member States are on track with their legislative reforms, this is not the case for all of them.

The report outlines issues on three levels.

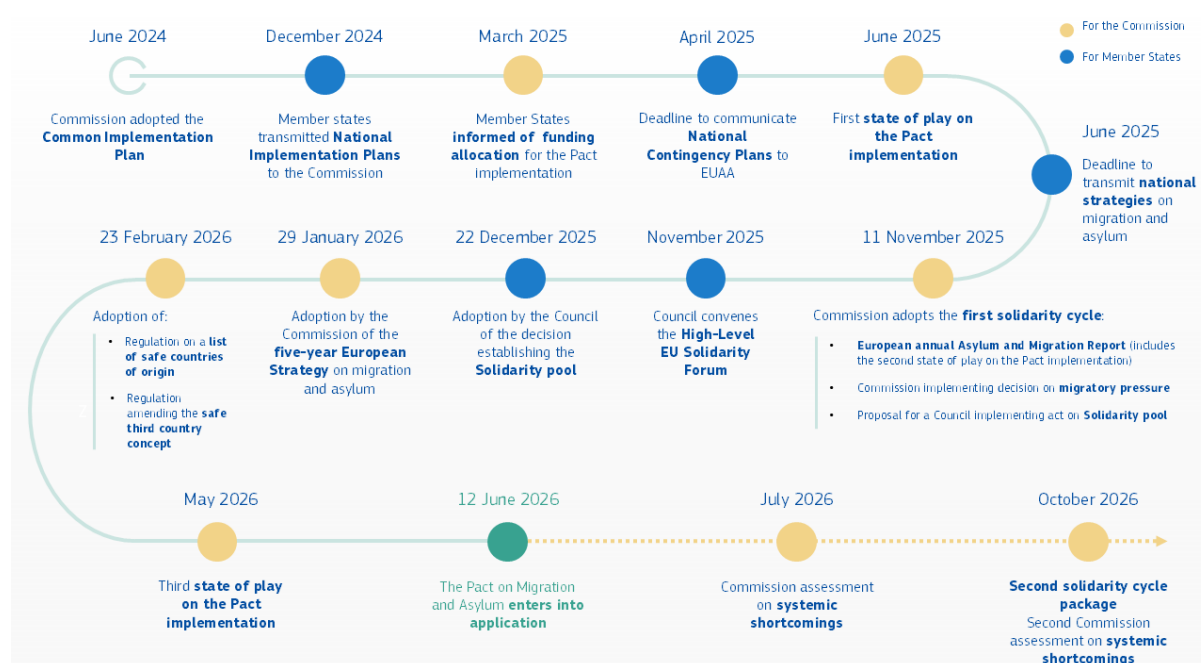
First, the adaptation of national laws is not yet completed, with only five Member States having fully adopted the necessary national legislations (European Commission, 2026). Additionally, operational capacity is lacking in some states, which need to accelerate construction and procurement regarding screening and border procedure facilities. On Eurodac, some Member States have missed milestones for technical compliance testing and need to invest in adequate training to ensure operations start successfully. This equally applies to procure IT solutions and related hardware (European Commission, 2026).

Additionally, this is critical since the new system redefines how secondary movements are tracked. Rather than forcing returns, destination countries like Germany or Belgium will absorb the migrants into their system, counting them as part of their mandatory solidarity quotas. This means that these Member States can simply count as they seem fit and avoid participating in physical relocations while profiting from responsibility offsets.

Furthermore, the transition from the Dublin system to the responsibility rules is slow as well. Several countries face staffing shortages in their Dublin units, which are responsible for managing responsibility transfers. All Member States had to notify their designated locations for responsibility transfers by mid-April 2026, which all Member States did, Hungary remaining the exception.

Thirdly, about a third of Member States still need to finalize legislation to ensure free legal counseling and implement independent fundamental rights monitoring mechanisms. Additionally, the guardianship systems for unaccompanied minors need to be reinforced across several Member States.

In light of these implementation issues, the Commission itself concludes that to fully operationalize the system, sustained efforts are necessary well beyond June 2026, even though the pact entered into application on 12 June 2026. In conclusion, these factors risk that implementation will be achieved on paper only, mirroring the Dublin framework.



European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs. (2025, June 11). *State of play on the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum*.

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/report-state-play-implementation-pact-migration-and-asylum_en

III. Insights from several actors: Non-compliance and Asymmetry between states

With the implementation of the pact which is expected by the 12th of June 2026, several aspects arose, putting forward some warnings provided by different actors. Non-compliance and asymmetry between states in spite of the pact are the main aspects.

Non-compliance is the first aspect showing up when it comes to implementation. Usually, if a Member State fails to apply a legislation entered into force or doesn't want to, it might face an infringement procedure. If some states simply choose the option to pay other states under pressure in order to get away from those migratory issues as the pact proposes to do as a pledge, others refuse to do so. But what happens to those refusing the enforcement? How to make sure Member States actually pay?

To answer this question it is essential to first take a look at Hungary. Back in 2020, Hungary was already pointed out for non-compliance with a mechanism for the relocation of applicants for international protection because of the 2015 refugee crisis. Hungary had to declare how many applicants it could relocate at regular intervals but ended up not declaring anything, leaving the burden to frontline states: Italy and Greece. This led to a judgement with no sanction due to the expiration of the mechanism.

On the same matter, the think-tank European Policy Centre (EPC) made a publication related to Hungary and its refusal to implement the pact. Even though the last national elections could maybe enable a reversal of situation, the EPC contributed to show several points: infringement proceedings are slow compared to the sole effect of officially declaring its non-compliance. Furthermore, this procedure only works if the said Member State intends to go back on the path of compliance. This raises a concern: Hungary resisting the implementation, as seen with the report of the Commission, could make non-compliance acceptable, suggesting other states could also officially refuse to implement it. This could put the balance the Commission is looking for between the states on migration and asylum in danger.

Related to the asymmetry between states in spite of the pact, it appears frontline states will still have a significant burden even after the actual implementation of the legislation. First of all, in its policy note, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) underlined the fact that the AMMR would still place high responsibilities on states on external borders. It will most likely reproduce the shortcomings of what the regulation intended to update by replacing the Dublin rules. It might just add layers on the Dublin logic. An uneven implementation could lead to divergent approaches in the EU, creating even more disparities that could reinforce already existing issues. ECRE recommends that solidarity should first focus on relocations, rather than on financial contributions. The flexibility with the choice of financial contributions or relocations doesn't fully solve the problem. Karageorgiou and Noll argue on that. Indeed, by letting inland states actually choose how they want to contribute, the solidarity mechanism allows them at some point to avoid taking direct responsibility for this.

They depict the pact as an “asymmetric solidarity” with a system “responsive by design”, meaning it will rely on the Commission deciding what is proportional in terms of solidarity. It remains vague in order to get a political consensus amongst states, which threatens border states with uncertainty towards what will be done to actually help them with migratory pressure. Additionally, this risks inciting what experts call a “race to the bottom”, meaning that Member States try to be the least welcoming possible and degrade local receptions to make themselves less attractive to asylum seekers (Thielemann, 2004).

Beyond the asymmetry between Member States, the externalization of border controls raises a human rights concern which worsens this burden. By funding third countries to prevent departures, the EU risks violating the right to leave one's country, according to Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 2(2) of Protocol No. 4 to the ECHR. Persons blocked in transit countries which are prevented from leaving, might make them look for more dangerous alternative options, increasing irregular arrivals and therefore put more pressure specifically on border states such as Italy, Spain and Cyprus.

IV. Recommendations

The EU should:

- Consider the fact that if inland states often choose financial contributions in funding migration projects or helping border states without taking the relocation option, border states won't get relief in the migratory pressure they are facing. A solution could be to set a minimum of relocations for inland states.
- Take into account that border states can be overwhelmed by arrivals, making it difficult for them to comply with the rules required to benefit from the solidarity pool. These conditions should be relaxed so that border states do not risk losing their funding while already struggling to handle the situation
- Discuss alternative mechanisms to address Member States that fail to contribute to the solidarity pact. Since infringement proceedings can take time and leave border states vulnerable, faster solutions are needed. For instance: if a Member State repeatedly fails to contribute despite warnings, the commission should deduct the equivalent amount directly from the EU funds allocated to that state.
- Explore regularisation ways for undocumented migrants already present in EU territory. Undocumented migrants consume public services without contributing to the tax base or social security systems. Finding a regulatory pathway would help to bring them into the economy, so that it would be able to generate income tax and social security contributions, to reduce pressure on informal labour markets and to help address labour shortages in EU societies. In the end, exploring this would help reduce the fiscal burden that currently falls on border states hosting the largest undocumented populations.

SECTION III. The way ahead: opportunities for a rights-based approach

Core finding: the migration policy prioritises securitization and political expediency over humanitarian commitments and economic realities, perpetuating a structural challenge as a permanent crisis.

I. The good and bad practices of the European Union

The current trajectory of European Union migration policy reveals a stark contradiction between internal integration objectives and an increasing reliance on externalisation and securitisation, deeply exacerbated by the profound politicisation of human mobility. While internal frameworks like the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion emphasise long-term socio-economic participation, the operational reality is dominated by a securitised narrative driven by far-right influence and digital disinformation. This framing completely overlooks the necessary economic positive contributions of migrants; as economists highlight, legal immigration does not lower domestic wages. Although the picture is not entirely uniform, a consensus among scholars suggests that immigration exerts minimal to no influence on domestic wages and may even yield positive long-term economic outcomes (Caselli, Lin, Toscani & Yao, 2024). The systemic failure of the hotspot approach was exemplified by the disastrous conditions in the Moria camp, which ended up holding over 20,000 people when it was initially designed to host only 3,000 (Refugee Support Aegean, 2020). It demonstrates how blocking asylum seekers in frontline states - which face disproportionate pressure due to the asymmetry of the Dublin system - creates legal limbos, humanitarian crises, and illegally violates migrants' fundamental "right to leave" while waiting to be relocated.

In stark contrast, the successful activation of the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainian refugees providing immediate protection to 4 million refugees (European Commission, 2024), alongside past national regularisation efforts, such as the Belgium's 2019 regularisation that garnered right-wing support, demonstrates that the EU can manage large influxes effectively when the political will exists to bypass complex asylum bottlenecks. However, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum entrenches a restrictive paradigm by prioritising accelerated border procedures, detention, and a flexible solidarity mechanism that allows Member States to evade relocation responsibilities through financial contributions. This framework lacks adequate monitoring for fundamental rights violations and risks fragmented implementation, as evident in the uneven preparedness among Member States to deploy necessary infrastructure and IT systems like Eurodac.

Furthermore, the expansion of the "Safe Third Country" concept effectively uses candidate and neighboring states as buffer zones, allowing Member States to dismiss applications without individual merit reviews. This is compounded by a transactional externalization trend, visible in the opaque EU-Turkey Statement (Ulusoy, 2025), the Italy-Libya Memorandum which circumvents the principle of non-refoulement through delegated pull-backs (De Leo, 2025), and the use of Common Security and Defence Policy missions to curb migration under stability mandates. The EU also leverages talent and anti-smuggling

partnerships alongside strict development aid conditionality, as seen with Niger's Law 2015-36, which actively destroyed local economies and forced migrants onto deadlier routes. This transactional logic is being further codified: the June 16, 2026 EU Council partial mandate for the Global Europe 2028-2034 external financing instrument explicitly links cooperation to migration control, introducing a funding suspension mechanism if partner countries fail to comply with readmission obligations. Through these practices, the EU treats human rights as a negotiable currency rather than a minimum standard to be respected. Ultimately, the concept of vulnerability within these frameworks remains a non-legally binding political buzzword, leading to arbitrary assessments that address only sanitised, immediate needs while ignoring the multi-layered, socially embedded realities of asylum seekers, thus perpetuating a cycle where migration is permanently managed as a crisis rather than governed as a structural reality.

II. Policy recommendations

To address the systemic deficiencies inherent in the current European Union migration framework and to align policy with fundamental human rights standards, a comprehensive paradigm shift is required across both legislative design and practical implementation. Therefore, the EU should:

- Strengthen procedural safeguards by guaranteeing suspensive appeals in integrated border and asylum procedures, ensuring that no individual is deported prior to a final judicial decision and preventing chain refoulement, particularly concerning the contentious safe third country designations.
- Transform vulnerability from a buzzword into a concrete legally binding concept relying on empirical knowledge, and systematically integrate the voices and lived experiences of migrants themselves into the policy-making process to avoid disconnected recommendations.
- Decouple development aid from migration-control conditionality in third countries, explicitly ensuring that human rights are never used as a negotiable currency for geopolitical leverage.
- Ensure that solidarity is grounded in realistic and enforceable mechanisms transcending symbolic financial pledges. The EU must precisely define *how* the exact execution of solidarity percentages and quotas will be examined and monitored to mitigate the risk of uneven national compliance.
- Reassess the heavily interlinked Common Implementation Plan to establish contingency mechanisms in order to mitigate administrative bottlenecks.
- Address the massive gaps between different national realities by using the European Semester and Country-Specific Recommendations to monitor social inclusion. This structural framework should be leveraged to scale up existing integration models - such as the community sponsorship schemes and humanitarian corridors successfully

implemented in Italy and Belgium - so they become systemic solutions rather than isolated, small-scale projects.

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