Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Bijlage 10

Literature review on the impact of interventions aimed at preventing irregular migration towards Europe

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July 2025

Content

1. Introduction

Although irregular migrants comprise only a small fraction of Europe's foreign-born population, public perception often treats irregular migration as an acute "crisis" or even an "invasion." Such narratives overlook the complexity of the phenomenon. Irregular migrants are a heterogeneous group ranging from economic migrants to people fleeing conflict, and many who arrive without papers later seek asylum, which is a legal right. Nevertheless, political pressures have driven a forceful policy response. European governments now prioritize efforts to curb unauthorized, migration through control, detention and deportation. The EU and its member states have invested in fortified borders, surveillance technology, and expedited return procedures to "regain control" of migration. However, irregular migration specifically presents complex challenges due to its hidden nature and the diverse responses it generates from governments and international bodies. The following report is a literature review on the impact of interventions aimed at curbing irregular migration towards Europe, in partnership with non-European countries. The report is structured into four main sections. Following this introduction, the first section discusses the challenges of measuring irregular migration, due to the fluidity of legal statuses across Europe and the limitations of data. The second section examines the impacts of interventions on regional and international migration patterns, focusing on route shifts and volume changes. The third section explores the broader consequences of these interventions on political cooperation, security, human rights, and local livelihoods in non-European partner countries. The conclusion synthesizes key insights and reflects on the long-term implications of externalized migration control. A scoping review methodology was employed to provide a comprehensive overview of existing scholarly literature concerning these interventions and their impact. Given the inherent complexity of irregular migration phenomena and the diversity of policy responses, the review adopted a broad approach. Strategic decisions guided the literature search and review process. For once, the scope included studies examining direct interventions designed to limit irregular migration towards Europe implemented in non-European origin and transit countries. Moreover, a critical review of selected literature was conducted to identify common themes, outcomes, and gaps.

The relevant literature was identified through searches in key academic databases, primarily Web of Science, EBSCO, and Google Scholar, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, policy papers, and research reports published in English between 2005 and 2025. This timeframe captures the heightened political focus on irregular migration while acknowledging the historical trajectory of European countries and the EU regarding policies targeting irregular migration, which can be traced back to the late 1990s and early 2000s. Search terms were developed by reviewing seminal studies centering on three broad categories: irregular migration, migration control interventions, and a geographical focus on Non-European countries. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were employed to refine search strings and ensure a comprehensive coverage. After a screening process, 127 articles were retained as relevant for the final analysis.

This review is not a systematic analysis; thus, it carries certain limitations. The selection and interpretation of the literature relied on qualitative appraisal and the researcher judgment, which may introduce biases or overlook relevant studies. Furthermore, the review emphasizes interventions directly linked to irregular migration towards Europe, which might limit insights into broader regional or global migration dynamics.

Existing literature provides longstanding and rich evidence confirming that interventions aimed at curbing irregular migration through control, detention and deportation (as opposed to regularisation processes) have significantly increased in scale and resources (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023b; Zardo, 2025). These interventions have often led to temporary reductions in irregular entries, albeit with spatial displacement effects as migration routes shift to less regulated paths. However, these measures frequently come with high costs in terms of compliance with international human rights standards (Amnesty International, 2017; Frelick et al., 2016b; Oette & Babiker, 2017). Establishing a direct causal relationship between specific interventions and reductions in irregular migration remains challenging due to the complexity and multiplicity of contextual factors involved. Additionally, the inherent flexibility of the concept of "irregularity," which varies according to the legal frameworks of destination countries, complicates quantitative assessments of interventions' effectiveness (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023b; MIRREM, 2025). Moreover, extensive research indicates

that migration control partnerships with third countries have increasingly transformed diplomatic relations into transactional engagements, exposing the EU and European countries to risks of instrumentalisation if reciprocity in these relationships is not adequately maintained (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023; Lixi, 2017).

Defining and measuring irregularity

No universally accepted definition of irregular migration exists, but the term generally denotes movement outside the regulatory norms of origin, transit, or destination countries. In practice, "irregular" status covers various situations: unauthorized entry (e.g. clandestine border crossings or use of false documents), visa overstays and other status violations, or simply lacking legal permission to reside or work. What counts as irregular is ultimately determined by states' laws and policies. As Ambrosini and Hajer (2023) observe, a migrant "exists" as irregular only by virtue of being defined as such by immigration law. Irregularity can concern entry, stay, or employment and often lies on a spectrum rather than a strict legal/illegal dichotomy. Moreover, an individual's status may shift over time: for instance, a person might enter legally and become undocumented later, or vice versa through regularisation.

Data from the MIrreM project indicate that approximately 2.6 to 3.2 million irregular migrants resided in 12 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the UK) between 2016 and 2023. Although this figure represents less than 1% of the total population, it constitutes about 8% to 10% of the non-European foreign-born population within these nations (MIRREM, 2025). Yet, the reality behind these numbers is extremely complex. The clandestine character of irregular migration makes data inherently uncertain (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023b; Czaika et al., 2024), reliant largely on indirect measures such as border apprehensions, asylum claims, and deportations. Furthermore, inconsistencies in methods across countries often lead to underreporting, overestimation, or duplication, making precise comparisons difficult (Bartels, 2024). Some countries with significant irregular migrant populations, such as the UK and Germany, still rely on outdated estimates, highlighting substantial gaps in current knowledge and data collection practices (MIrreM, 2024).

Understanding the impact of interventions aimed at curbing irregular migration is equally challenging. Migration is influenced by many factors that are linked to each other and include economic conditions, conflicts, environmental disasters, and policy changes, complicating the task of isolating the effects of specific interventions (Czaika et al., 2023; Infantino & Sredanovic, 2022). Moreover, the lag time between policy implementation and observable impacts on migration makes it even more difficult to identify clear causal relationships. The complexity and fluidity of international migration patterns mean that the effectiveness of specific policy interventions can be obscured by other concurrent factors such as economic crises or geopolitical shifts.

Patterns of irregular migration vary significantly across European countries and reflect differences in policy approaches and geopolitical contexts. For instance, Austria, Germany, and Spain have seen increases in estimated irregular migration driven by labor market needs and regional instability, whereas Finland, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, and Poland have witnessed reductions. These data (Kierans et al., 2024), which are the most recent available from the EU funded project "MIRREM" (Measuring Irregular Migration) have their limitations. All of the estimates contain a significant amount of uncertainty, with several of the estimates that form the basis of this comparison with baseline data of 2008 through the EU funded "Clandestino" project (Clandestino Project, 2021). European countries attribute these variations to the activities targeting irregular migration, like changes in requirements to carry identification documents in the Netherlands (Siruno & Leerkes, 2024) or strengthening of rules on marriages of convenience in Ireland that led to more deportations (Desmond & Heylin, 2024). The causal evidence between these interventions and the quantitative reduction in numbers remains, however, weak (Kierans et al., 2024).

Overall, in the absence of a formal global regime, states have relied on a combination of tools to prevent irregular arrivals in Europe, which can be national (within the European country concerned), but also international, through bilateral, regional and trans-regional arrangements with non-European countries.

Cooperation with third countries: typology of interventions

The range of cooperative interventions with third countries to curb irregular migration includes:

- Border security assistance: this means providing funding, training, and equipment to bolster border enforcement in origin and transit countries, so that migrants are intercepted before reaching Europe. This group often includes also pushbacks and pullbacks practices that specifically involve third countries actively preventing migrants from leaving or intercepting migrants at sea and returning them to the point of departure.
- Readmission agreements: these are bilateral deals committing countries of origin (or transit) to take back migrants who have no legal right to remain in Europe, typically in exchange for financial or diplomatic incentives.
- Offshore processing and "safe third country" deals are arrangements to keep asylum seekers and other migrants outside EU territory while their claims or status are resolved.
- Information and awareness campaigns: these interventions involve conducting targeted outreach and media campaigns to inform potential migrants in origin countries about the risks associated with irregular migration.
- Development assistance aimed at root causes: these include projects addressing poverty, unemployment, governance deficits, which are underlying drivers of migration.
- Anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking operations are coordinated law enforcement and judicial cooperation to disrupt criminal networks involved in human smuggling and trafficking.

In order to enable these interventions, research has shown how the EU and European states have increasingly included the principle of conditionality in partnership agreements, whereby aid, trade benefits, or visa facilitation are used as leverage to secure cooperation on migration control (Cassarino, 2025; Kunz & Maisenbacher, 2013). Assistance is therefore conditioned on tangible efforts to reduce irregular migration and accept migrant returns.

Going forward, the review examines the impacts of these measures. It draws on the existing literature to evaluate what works, what does not, and the remaining challenges in efforts to curb irregular migration through international cooperation.

2. Interventions to curb irregular migration: impacts on regional and international migration patterns

Impact on the distribution and volume along migration routes

Ambrosini and Hajer note that in 2015, over one million irregular arrivals were recorded, primarily refugees fleeing Syria via the Eastern Mediterranean route into Greece (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023a). To address this unprecedented influx, the EU and its member states implemented various cooperation agreements with third countries. Interventions included the March 2016 EU–Turkey Statement (to stem the Eastern Mediterranean route), Italy's 2017 agreement with Libya (targeting the Central Mediterranean route), and reinforced bilateral partnerships with Morocco (affecting Western Mediterranean routes). As discussed in the paragraphs that follow, research agrees on the fact that these policies have measurably altered the route distribution and volume of irregular entries across routes.

Eastern Mediterranean Route: the EU–Turkey deal of 2016 had a partial effect on the Eastern Mediterranean corridor. Irregular sea arrivals to Greece plummeted: in the six months after the deal, arrivals on the Eastern Med route fell from roughly 126,600 to just 3,200, a >97% drop compared to the six months before. Annual detections in Greece dropped from nearly 885,000 in 2015 to about 173,000 in 2016 and under 30,000 by 2017. This sharp decline reflected the deal's core bargain: Turkey intensified controls and accepted return of migrants from Greek islands, dramatically reducing boat crossings (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023b; İşleyen, 2018b). By paying this price, specifically a 9 billion Euros support package and political concessions to Turkey, the EU effectively "closed" the Aegean Sea route, contributing to a broader decline in asylum applications (416,000 in 2020, about one-third the 2015 peak). Spijkerboer (2016) and Tantardini and Tolay (2020) argue, however, that the direct impact of the EU–Turkey deal is difficult to measure precisely because the decline in arrivals had already begun in October 2015, prior to the implementation of the agreement (Spijkerboer, 2016; Tantardini & Tolay, 2020). Researchers, including Spijkerboer (2016), highlight the significant impact of tightened border controls along the Western Balkans corridor. By late 2015, countries such as Hungary, Croatia, and North Macedonia had begun implementing stricter border enforcement and physical barriers, dramatically limiting migrants' transit through these countries (Human Rights Watch, 2016). This effectively reduced the incentive for migrants to embark from Turkey to Greece, knowing their onward path to northern Europe was increasingly uncertain or closed. Migrants continued to cross in smaller numbers and via alternative paths (e.g. the Greek–Turkish land border at the Evros, or from Turkey to Cyprus). The Eastern route stabilized at a low level through 2019–2021, accounting for roughly 10% of EU irregular entries in 2021 (Frontex, 2022), before rising again amid new pressures (e.g. Afghans and Syrians moving post-2020). Thus, as the decline in migrant crossings from Turkey to Greece began prior to the implementation of the EU–Turkey Agreement, research overall claims that there is no clear causal link between the agreement and the reduction in arrivals across the Aegean. While there may have been a brief uptick in crossings just before the deal was finalized, overall trends suggest the drop cannot be directly attributed to the agreement (Spijkerboer, 2016).

Central Mediterranean Route: as the Eastern route dropped, migrants and smugglers diverted activity to the Central Mediterranean. Immediately after March 2016, crossings from North Africa to Italy surged and the relative number of detections on the Central route increased significantly (Mesnard et al., 2024). 2016 saw a record 181,000 arrivals in Italy (Frontex, 2024). To address this, Italy struck a Memorandum of Understanding with Libya in early 2017, bolstered by EU support for the Libyan Coast Guard. This externalization effort (essentially outsourcing the interception of migrant boats to Libya) yielded a dramatic short-term drop (Loschi & Russo, 2020; Mesnard et al., 2024; Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Arrivals to Italy fell by over 80%: from 119,000 in 2017 to just 23,000 in 2018, the lowest in years. By intercepting boats near Libyan shores ("pull-backs") and increasing Libyan coastal patrols, the Italy–Libya cooperation effectively collapsed the Central Med migration in 2018. Migratory pressure was temporarily relieved; indeed, the Central route went from the primary gateway in 2016 to a secondary route by 2018. However, this trend did not last permanently (as discussed below). By 2021 the Central Mediterranean was again the most-used

migratory route into Europe, accounting for one-third of irregular entries (Frontex, 2022). Approximately 65,000 people arrived via Libya, Tunisia, or adjacent routes in 2021 – an 83% increase from the prior year. The resurgence was fuelled by ongoing conflicts and economic crises (Mixed Migration Centre, 2022) in departure countries (Libya, Tunisia, Egypt) and perhaps by smuggler adaptation once initial Italian-led enforcement pressure slightly eased after the peak of political salience (Pham & Komiyama, 2024). Thus, the Central route's volume has seesawed in response to interventions: a sharp collapse after 2017 followed by a rebound to pre-2015 levels by the early 2020s.

Western Mediterranean and Atlantic Routes: As pressure shifted away from Italy, Spain experienced a surge in irregular migration via Morocco and West Africa (Mesnard et al., 2024). Spain became the EU's main irregular entry point in 2018, when arrivals doubled to approximately 57,000 (mostly via the Western Med route from Morocco) (Frontex, 2018). This represented roughly half of all Mediterranean irregular arrivals that year, up from only approximately 22,000 in 2017. The spike was driven by migrants from Morocco, West Africa, and Algeria choosing routes to mainland Spain or Spain's enclaves (Ceuta and Melilla) amid tighter controls elsewhere. In response, Spain and the EU boosted cooperation with Morocco, providing funding, equipment, and diplomatic support for Moroccan border enforcement. This yielded a marked drop in the Western Mediterranean migratory movement by 2019. Irregular entries to Spain fell to ~26,000 in 2019 (a 50% reduction from 2018) and held around 18,000 in 2020–2021 (Frontex, 2018). However, as the Morocco–Spain corridor was policed more heavily, alternative routes proliferated. Migrants increasingly embarked from West African coasts (Mauritania, Senegal, Western Sahara) on longer sea journeys to the Spanish Canary Islands, thus resurrecting the "Western African" route (ECRE, 2024). Arrivals in the Canaries exploded from just 2,700 in 2019 to approximately 23,000 in 2020, a level sustained into 2021 (22,500 detections). The timing suggests displacement: when one Western Mediterranean pathway closed, another (more dangerous) path opened. By late 2022, with Morocco containing crossings to mainland Spain, the Atlantic route had become the primary source of Spain's irregular migrants. Moreover, the Atlantic migration route from West Africa to Spain's Canary Islands has become one of the deadliest pathways toward Europe. Irregular crossings on this route have surged, with the Canary Islands recording roughly 46,800 arrivals in 2024, an 18% increase over the previous year and the highest annual total ever registered (Arfaoui, 2025; ECRE, 2024; Prieto-Flores, 2025). The spike in movement has been accompanied by a devastating rise in fatalities and disappearances. A Spanish NGO report documented approximately 10,000 migrants dead or missing on sea routes to Spain in 2024 (a 58% increase from 2023), with about 9,757 of those lives lost on the Atlantic route alone – accounting for 93% of all migrant deaths on routes to Spain that year (Caminando Fronteras, as cited in ECRE, 2025). The Atlantic crossing has thus been described as "the most lethal in the world" (ECRE, 2024). Even more conservative estimates underscore the danger: the UN's IOM recorded over 1,000 deaths or disappearances on this route in 2024 (Arfaoui, 2025).

Temporary versus durable reductions in, migratory movements?

A core question for both researchers and policymakers is whether the observed reductions in irregular migration are temporary or lasting and whether they are confined to specific routes. Evidence to date suggests that most declines achieved via externalization have been temporary in nature or limited in scope. The initial success of an intervention often gives way to partial rebounds or shifting of migration movements elsewhere.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, research from İşleyen and Spijkerboer indicates how the closure of borders by Balkan countries and the political impact of the the EU-Turkey deal (in terms of Turkish commitment to secure the border) have been relatively enduring on that particular route since there has been no return to the massive 2015 volumes through the Aegean (İşleyen, 2018b; Spijkerboer, 2016). Even five years on, annual irregular arrivals via Turkey-to-Greece remained only a fraction of the pre-deal level. Frontex calculations show that, for example, Greece reported roughly 10–20 thousand sea arrivals per year from 2017 to 2021, far below the peak (Frontex, 2022). This indicates a sustained suppression attributed to continued Turkish compliance in containing departures (İşleyen, 2018b). However, even here the reduction cannot be deemed completely

permanent. Geopolitical fluctuations and aggressive migration diplomacy have threatened the deal's stability (e.g. Turkey's brief 2020 move to let migrants cross its land border (Aras & Ela, 2019). And by 2022, Eastern Mediterranean detections were rising again, including a 123% jump in Cyprus as migrants found new avenues via the divided island. Thus, the EU–Turkey accord delivered a multi-year downturn, but one vulnerable to reversal if the partnership falters or new migratory surges occur (Dimitriadi, 2023).

On the Central route, researchers and IOM/UN studies agree on the reductions being clearly temporary. The Italy–Libya cooperation achieved a steep drop in 2017–2018, but this was not a stable new normal. Migrant crossings in the Central Mediterranean crept upward again from 2019 onward. By 2021, as noted, the route was busier than it had been since 2016. The drivers of this rebound were both supply-side and demand-side: renewed conflict and economic hardship in Libya and neighbouring states, shifts in smuggling networks, and perhaps the waning marginal effect of interdiction efforts over time (IOM, 2016; United Nations, ESCWA, 2014). In short, the Central Mediterranean reduction was not permanent. It functioned more as a pause or displacement, with the number of migrants surging back once would-be migrants adjusted or alternative launch points (e.g. Tunisia) grew in prominence. This pattern raises doubts about the long-term efficacy of one-off deals in the absence of continuous enforcement and broader regional stability (Infantino, 2019; Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2014; Tantardini & Tolay, 2020).

The Western Mediterranean saw a mix of temporary and route-specific effects. Spain's cooperation with Morocco did achieve a sustained lowering of entries via the Strait of Gibraltar and land enclave routes after 2018. Those specific routes have not returned to their prior highs; in that sense, the reduction on the primary Western Med route has (so far) held. But it is a route-specific success. Overall pressure in the *Iberian corridor* simply shifted westwards. The Canary Islands route's resurgence effectively nullified Spain's aggregate reduction by 2020 (ECRE, 2024), suggesting that without a comprehensive approach, migration finds the path of least resistance. Indeed, Spanish authorities now face nearly the same total number of irregular arrivals, just arriving in different locations. The temporality of impact is also evident in the Western Balkans (Abikova & Piotrowicz, 2021; Leutloff-Grandits, 2023). The 2016 closure of the Balkan land route (through border fence construction and deals with Balkan states) was initially hailed as "permanent". Yet by 2018–2019, thousands of migrants were again transiting the Western Balkans via new paths (e.g. through Bosnia) en route to EU states. By 2022, Western Balkan crossings hit record highs (a 124% increase from 2020 - (Frontex, 2024), illustrating how a route can reemerge after a lull.

In broad terms, reductions achieved through third-country partnerships often wane over time, especially if underlying migration drivers persist and if enforcement is not continuously adaptive. While European countries increasingly attempt to adapt interventions to "follow the route", this approach may be largely unsustainable in the long term for migration control purposes, given the inherent dynamism of migration and the well-documented tendency of routes to shift in response to controls. Research has noted that irregular migration is dynamic: policies may briefly "dam up" flows, only for the pressure to build and break through elsewhere or later (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023a). As one comprehensive review concluded, efforts to rigidly control migration tend to produce only short-run declines, not lasting solutions (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023a).

Forced displacement in transit and methodological adaptation

A consistent consequence of enforcement-focused interventions is that irregular migration tends to shift geographically or adapt in form, rather than dissipating. This phenomenon, often called the "waterbed effect" or route diversion (Dijstelbloem, 2021), has been observed repeatedly in Europe's recent experience. When one pathway is closed, others often become more active. Likewise, as direct routes are blocked, migrants and smugglers employ more sophisticated or riskier methods to evade controls.

The previous section on migration routes already partly illustrates the diversion across routes. Another impact is, however, forced regional displacement in transit (Brachet, 2012; Pries et al., 2025). Diversion from the Eastern Aegean route to the Central Mediterranean route involved predominantly migrants not in need of refugee protection ("economic" migrants), who had the flexibility to reroute through Libya (Mesnard et al., 2024). In contrast, many refugees (e.g. Syrians) did not simply shift routes; some remained in limbo in Turkey or made repeated attempts to reach Greece despite the deal (İşleyen, 2018b, 2018a). As well described in the ICMPD report "The strength to carry on", interventions can disproportionately redirect more mobile migrants (often single males or those from farther afield) to alternate routes, while even more vulnerable groups stay put or resort to dangerous tactics to try to cross at the same spot (Healy, 2019). Another study of the "Crossing the Med" project shows similar adaptation practices and gendered effects (Squire et al., 2017). The displacement pattern repeated with the Italy–Libya intervention. As the central route from Libya was curtailed in 2017–2018, a larger share of African migrants began traveling westward to Morocco or southward to West Africa to attempt entry via Spain. The Western Mediterranean and West African routes thus spiked in 2018–2020, directly inverse to the central route decline. Yet, another adjustment occurred within the Central Mediterranean itself: Tunisia's coastline and even Turkey's shores emerged as alternative launch points for smugglers when Libyan departures became too difficult (Bonfiglio et al., 2022; Meddeb & Louati, 2024). Smugglers and migrants themselves constantly scout for the "next easiest" route, whether that is a different transit country or a less patrolled segment of border (de Genova, 2017; IOM, 2016).

In addition to changing routes, there is increasing evidence that interventions and partnerships to stop migration can spur changes in methods and smuggling tactics. Studies from Prieto-Flores, Dijstelbloem or Triandafyllidou and Maroukis for example, highlight that, as routes become more difficult, smugglers often innovate to maintain their "service". For instance, greater patrols in the Aegean led to migrants taking more perilous sea journeys (departing at night, in bad weather) or using smugglers to hide in commercial trucks crossing land borders. In the Central Med, after Italy began closely coordinating with the Libyan Coast Guard, smugglers responded by sending out flimsy inflatable dinghies in massive numbers, knowing European rescue assets had been drawn down – effectively overwhelming the limited Libyan patrols. On the Canary route, we have seen use of larger fishing boats and even makeshift compass navigation for longer Atlantic voyages, a grim adaptation to Morocco's coastal crackdowns (ECRE, 2024; Prieto-Flores, 2025). Heightened border controls also tend to drive up the sophistication of smuggling networks (Ambrosini & Hajer, 2023a; Dijstelbloem, 2021; IOM, 2016; Triandafyllidou & Maroukis, 2012). Interceptions and barriers create demand for professional smugglers who can forge documents, plan complex itineraries, or use technology (encrypted communications, GPS waypoints, etc.) to evade authorities. An analysis of the U.S.–Mexico border experience is instructive in this respect: despite a tripling of border enforcement spending since the 1990s, smuggling fees rose only modestly (approximately 30%), with some exceptions (Gathmann, 2008), because migrants avoided costs by switching to more remote and clandestine routes (Cornelius, 2001). Additionally, migrant behaviour adjusts (de Genova, 2017; Mainwaring, 2016): Tunisians and Bangladeshis, for instance, began departing from Tunisia's shores in greater numbers, exploiting a loophole (the Libya deal did not cover Tunisia). Smugglers also began sending boats beyond Libya's claimed search-and-rescue zone, hoping they would evade Libyan interception and trigger European rescue. In fact, migrants incurred greater "avoidance costs" (longer, more dangerous journeys) rather than pay prohibitively higher fees. The market for smuggling proved resilient: demand persisted, and smugglers adjusted routes and prices to keep crossing viable. This mirrors Europe's scenario. Even as EU states pour resources into external enforcement, the unit cost of crossing (in money) hasn't skyrocketed proportionally; instead, the human cost has increased.

Overall, the pattern is clear: externalizing border control displaces irregular migration in space and method. Migrants either find another route, wait for enforcement to ease, or escalate the sophistication of their attempts. These patterns help explain why total irregular entries into Europe remain significant despite route-specific crackdowns, since the flow adapts rather than vanishes.

3. Interventions to curb irregular migration: impact on political sustainability, security, rol, economy and livelihoods

Impact on political cooperation and trust

The salience of migration in the political agenda and the way in which cooperation on migration has been gradually embedded in foreign relations across external policy domains has made them highly transactional (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023). European states exchange aid, trade benefits or political concessions for help containing irregular migrants. While transactionality may yield immediate border-control gains, it tends to undermine long-term trust and stable diplomatic ties (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). Migration and International Relations literature has already highlighted that the EU has pursued such "sticks and carrots" strategies (e.g. development aid, security assistance, visa facilitation) to co-opt transit countries, but these incentives "have not sufficed" and implementation is often poor (Lixi, 2017; Parkes & Schneider, 2010; Schneider, 2010). In practice, relations have become increasingly quid-pro-quo rather than partnership-based. Migration-related agreements end feel opportunistic to partners: Ulusoy (2025), for instance, highlights that the 2016 EU–Turkey Deal clearly shifted the relationship toward a more transactional approach, effectively "Europeanising" and then "de-Europeanising" Turkey's migration policy to focus on short-term border control (Ulusoy, 2025). Over time this has eroded the possibility of deeper cooperation; what began as cooperation on humanitarian grounds became framed as a paid service, sapping the mutual trust that is needed for broader political dialogue.

The asymmetry is stark: the EU gains by outsourcing migration control, but third countries may see that bargains do not guarantee long-term benefits. As the EU shifts enforcement burdens onto origin and transit states, it must apply growing "incentives" or pressure to maintain compliance, in a pure power policy logic (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011; Graae Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2006). In Nye's terms, the EU's growing use of transactional approaches risks undermining its soft power and credibility (Nogueira Pinto, 2024). When migratory deals are driven by expediency, partner countries may perceive the EU as self-interested: mobility partnerships become viewed as tools to "externalize" Europe's borders, not as "reciprocal" cooperative arrangements. As the next section on the instrumentalization of migration shows, this has soured relations as third countries have come to recognize that they are shouldering burdens (patrolling borders, detaining migrants) while internal priorities (development, economic ties) receive only conditional support (Tittel-Mosser, 2018; Tsourdi et al., 2023; Tsourdi & Zardo, 2025). This is particularly true in a context of increasing geopolitical competition among donors (Cassarino, 2025).

Andersson (2014, 2016) describes systematically the EU's border apparatus as a self-perpetuating "industry" that thrives on crises. Each "failure" to stop new arrivals justifies new contracts and money. This cycle, rather than building confidence, breeds cynicism. To many partners, Europe is forging new contracts whenever problems spike, but without investing in stable, long-term mutual security. Adamson and Greenhill (2023) term this dynamic "transactional forced migration": Global North states sign new deals with transit states on migration while labelling them partners, even as those states use migration flows as leverage for other aims. This dynamic symbolises how long-term diplomatic trust is affected by using migration as a bargaining chip that can be renegotiated at will. As Gammeltoft-Hansen (2006) notes, the EU's originally more multilateral approach (following the Tampere Council) has given way to a hierarchical, interest-driven model (Graae Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2006). If future governments change priorities or backlash at home, agreements can be abruptly altered or cancelled. Over time, then, the very framework of trust, that a partner will honour commitments, is significantly undermined. In fact, European governments may become "hostage" to these externalization deals: the EU and European countries risk not only relinquishing some agenda-setting power, but risk being seen as untrustworthy vis-à-vis their constituencies if the number of detections of irregular migrants increases.

Impact on migration diplomacy: the instrumentalisation of migration

Strictly connected to the impact of migration control practices in political relationships is the so-called instrumentalization of migration. Non-EU countries have increasingly leveraged migration cooperation as a strategic tool to gain broader political and economic concessions (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Gkliati, 2023). This instrumentalisation stems from the asymmetrical nature of EU migration deals, which offer third countries significant incentives in return for relatively low-cost commitments, especially in the framework of informal, non-legally binding agreements (Cardwell & and Dickson, 2023; Cassarino, 2007; Seeberg & Zardo, 2020). This dynamic has also been described as "weaponization" of migration (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023), rise of hybrid threat (Gkliati, 2023) or coercive engineered migration (Aras & Ela, 2019; Greenhill, 2008; Hepple, 2024). Transit or origin countries can deliberately allow (or threaten) migrants to depart in order to extract concessions from the EU. A stark example is the 2016 EU–Turkey Deal: Ankara agreed to accept mass returns of irregular migrants in exchange for a €6 billion aid package (managed informally through partly out of EU budget mechanisms such as in the EU facility for Turkey), resettlement guarantees, and revived talks on EU membership and visa liberalization. Since then, however, the Turkish government has at times strategically leveraged its position in relation to the EU; for example, in February 2020, it facilitated the movement of over 13,000 people to the Greek border in an effort to pressure the EU and expedite the disbursement of the second tranche of funding under the agreement (Aras & Ela, 2019; Goldner Lang, 2024). Adamson and Greenhill (2023) note that this arrangement, which they characterize as a classic forced-migration deal, effectively turned migrants into political currency. The same research debate highlights how non-EU countries won such concessions by reminding Europe of the costs of failing to control the flows. In other words, Turkey used its pivotal role to win broad diplomatic and economic benefits.

Similarly, flexible agreements like mobility partnerships and migration compacts are frequently used by third countries to advance domestic or foreign policy goals. Tittel-Mosser shows how Morocco, for instance, participates in EU migration cooperation not only to improve border control but also to support its own national strategy (e.g. gaining technical support for visa facilitation while pressing for agricultural or trade concessions (Tittel-Mosser, 2018). Drawing on Cassarino's notion of "reversed conditionality," she argues that these soft-law instruments give "external support for the development and implementation of [third countries'] national political priorities" (Cassarino, 2007, 2025). As well summarised in a 2024 research report, to advance these objectives, Morocco has strategically and successfully capitalized on its role as a key transit country, using the potential permeability of the Ceuta and Melilla enclaves as leverage to press the EU on broader issues such as visa liberalisation, industrial investments related to the Green Partnership, the relaxation of the investigation on the Qatar/Moroccogate and the European countries´ position on Western Sahara (Fernández-Molina, 2024).

Other cases abound: conflict-torn Libya has extracted European funds for its coast guard by threatening to send more boats across the Mediterranean (Tsourapas, 2017). Some sub-Saharan governments such as Niger and Mauritania have highly politicised cooperation with Europe domestically and sought security or trade aid in return for readmitting their nationals (Arnoux Bellavitis & and Ripoll Servent, 2025). Even outside Europe, states have done the same: the U.S. has given Central American governments security assistance conditional on reducing northward migration (Bredeloup & Pliez, 2011). Adamson and Greenhill catalogued these precedents as part of a long lineage of migration diplomacy, where states bargain over population movements. They describe "state-sanctioned" population transfers and relocations as explicit bargaining tools embedded in many modern migration agreements (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023). The key findings of these analysis point to non-EU countries often exploiting Europe's dependence on them by demanding benefits far beyond migration per se. Europe's externalization of borders has effectively created a market where third-country security forces, smugglers, and militias gain new leverage (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). These actors know that European funding and political support depend on keeping flows in check. Thus, they may periodically "turn the tap" on migrants to remind Europe of their power, or simply refuse cooperation until negotiations on other issues succeed through strategic issue-linkages (Tsourapas, 2017).

Impact on internal security and mobility within non-EU partner states

Policies aimed at curbing irregular migration can deeply reshape internal security dynamics and freedom of movement in partner countries (Carrera & Sagrera, 2011; Ranieri & Rossi, 2017; Seeberg & Zardo, 2020). A common effect is the militarization of borders and migration control within states that previously had open or semi-open frontiers. In his research, Bøås (2021) highlights that EU pressure on Sahelian countries (like Niger) to police migrants has led to rapidly expanded border forces, checkpoints and surveillance in areas where local authorities were once minimal (Gazzotti, 2019; MiDeShare, 2021). This sudden "security architecture" puts new strain on fragile governments and can fuel instability. In Niger, the introduction of foreign-backed patrols around Agadez (a transit hub) did reduce northward flows, but it also increased conflict and radicalization in the region by disrupting pre-existing local agreements and sparking resentment (Donko et al., 2022; MiDeShare, 2021). Such an external, partly controlled "Fortress Europe" risks, indeed, backfiring to the extent that it might degrade local security and even produce more refugees in the long run (Ranieri 2017).

These effects also extend to how migrants are treated domestically. Some countries of origin or along the migration route have intensified crackdowns on migrant communities to demonstrate cooperation. Reports from the Mediterranean and Sahara routes document that migrants in transit countries face harassment, extortion or arbitrary detention as local forces step up patrols backed by EU money (Donko et al., 2022; Pries et al., 2025). This puts those states' internal security apparatus into a policing role over migrants, which can entangle them in human-smuggling networks and breed corruption. In some cases, even public officials have been implicated: in Senegal, for instance, the mayor of Dionewar was prosecuted for participating in a migrant smuggling network, suggest the extent to which the extreme politicisation of (irregular) migration control eventually blurs even more the lines between enforcement and complicity (RFI, 2025). While such entanglement already exists in many contexts, the process of externalisation intensifies these dynamics by channelling additional resources and responsibilities to security actors without adequate oversight (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022; Ranieri & Rossi, 2017). Such changes can spill into broader society, as security forces accustomed to border policing carry out stricter law-and-order practices at home (Mattelaer, 2014; Ranieri & Rossi, 2017). Over time, therefore, migration management policies can reshape the internal security landscape of partner countries, often in ways that undermine regional stability and freedom of movement rather than reinforce it (Bøås, 2021; Mattelaer, 2014; Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022).

Impact on regional trade, cross-border mobility and livelihood

Most African migration occurs regionally, often linked to trade and labour demand. For example, 84% of migration in West Africa is within Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Bisong, 2023). These flows support cross-border markets (migrant traders, seasonal farm workers, pastoralists) and underpin local livelihoods. Therefore, in many African transit regions, informal migration-related industries are vital. For instance, Agadez (Niger) thrived on what one report calls a "transit economy" of migration: transportation companies, hotels, restaurants, water carriers and money-transfer offices all profited from migrants passing through (Schwab, 2023). At least three research reports consulted estimate over one-third of Agadez residents depended on the migration industry (Hoffmann et al., 2017; Schwab, 2023; Stille, 2023). EU migration compacts and partnerships, however, focus on halting irregular migration to Europe and tend to neglect (or even hinder) intra-African mobility and cross-border commerce.

Bisong shows, for instance, how linking migration control to EU aid has undermined ECOWAS' protocol on visa-free travel (Bisong, 2020). She argues that the EU's focus on "return and readmission" of irregular migrants conflicts with ECOWAS' goal of labor mobility (Bisong, 2020). The result, she finds, is a rise in restrictive border practices within the region: countries that once welcomed each other's citizens (within West Africa) are increasingly imposing visa checks and deporting each other's nationals to comply with EU demands. Under EU pressure Niger's 2015 "anti-smuggling" Law 2015 36 banned Nigerien drivers from carrying migrants north out of Agadez (Mueller Funk & Mounkaila, 2021). While the law was repealed in 2023, some studies from the Asile project and the

Forced Migration Review highlight how official tallies show a steep drop in irregular migration after 2016 (IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix recorded roughly 350,000 departures in 2016 versus only 140,000 in 2017), but also how this "success" came at high local cost (Moser, 2020; Stille, 2023). Agadez's economy, which had long relied on migrant transport, tourism, and cross-Sahara trade, slowed sharply as many drivers and small businesses lost income, and people were pushed into longer, clandestine routes (Hoffmann et al., 2017). In West Africa, similar policies have disrupted vital cross-border commerce (Donko et al., 2022). Nigeria's 2019 land-border closure (aimed at halting smuggling with Benin) forced up prices for consumers, by one estimate approximately 2% on staple food baskets, and merely rerouted formal trade inward (modestly boosting customs revenues) while squeezing informal traders who depended on free movement. At a broader scale, there is agreement that 70% of West/Central African migration are temporary or seasonal labor movements; when borders tighten, entire trading communities lose those remittance and market links (Bisong, 2020). In North-East Africa the long-closed Egypt–Sudan border has likewise been militarized despite a 2004 free-movement accord. Analysts warn that Egypt and Sudan "are paying an economic price" for these restrictions, as illicit trade has risen and local livelihoods have suffered (Mohyeldeen, 2020). As discussed in Talleraas´ work, small-scale traders, pastoralists and seasonal migrant workers (the very people migration policies purport to protect) lose markets and jobs, and EU-driven interventions do not succeed in targeting it (Talleraas, 2024).

The African Union's policy frameworks, the Free Movement Protocol, Agenda 2063 and regional labour mobility programmes, regard migration as a development enabler (African Union, 2017). In contrast, migration control initiatives from European countries and the EU initiatives have been criticized for "securitizing and criminalizing migration, including intra-regional mobility" (Bigo, 2014; Fernandez, 2013; Moyo et al., 2021). Research points to the fact that strict control practices have given "very limited" attention to making borders more fluid or fostering intra-African corridors (Bisong, 2023). The evaluation of the European Union Trust Fund for Africa shows that a big percentage of the budget has gone to security and border control, rather than social and economic development, despite the EUTF relying on the EU budget for development cooperation (complemented by the budget for development cooperation of the interested European member states). For example, the Mixed Migration Centre reported that by end-2022 some €2.2 billion had been committed to the Sahel/Lake Chad window of the EUTF (out of a total €5 billion), and 34% of those funds were allocated to "security and governance" (Disch et al., 2020; Mixed Migration Centre, 2024; Zardo, 2022). In Mali, nearly half of EUTF projects fell under security; in Niger 42%, and in Burkina Faso 69%. The limited focus in fostering legal mobility either towards Europe or within Africa is part of a longer trend (Zardo, 2025). Growing amounts have been invested in training local police and coastguards, border fencing and repatriation logistics (Zardo, 2025). Several studies note that Nigerien and Malian officials themselves rank unemployment and local stability far above migration as voter concerns, yet EU-funded programs prioritized rapid returns and military-style solutions (Bisong, 2020).

The intended "alternative livelihoods" programmes have often fallen short. In Agadez, the EU-backed PAIERA initiative was meant to offer economic alternatives, but municipal leaders lament that its budget was insufficient to replace lost incomes (Concord, 2018). EU compacts often fund job-creation schemes in target regions. Niger's EUTF-supported projects explicitly include youth employment in transit areas: the EU financed a €25.3 m "integrating youth into employment" program in Zinder/Agadez and a €30 m "creating jobs" project in Tahoua/Agadez. In Ethiopia (a major EUTF recipient), an EU-backed Jobs Compact and vocational training programs reportedly generated about 16,000 new jobs (Moore et al., 2020). Such programs can provide short-term local employment and skills. This is, however, far below the Ethiopian targets of placing 150,000 workers abroad. Most importantly, they often target specific migration hotspots and may be too small to alter national unemployment or keep pace with rapid labor-force growth. In many places, the scale of financed jobs has fallen short of the number of youths aspiring to migrate. Over time, some workers may find other jobs or return to farming, but research suggests that the social strain remains high and meaningful substitutes are slow to appear (Concord, 2018).

Despite the "pseudo-causality" underlying the root-causes approach to reducing migration (Zaun & Nantermoz, 2022), the creation of employment opportunities remains a common feature of migration management strategies and is often embedded in partner-country development plans

and service delivery, for better or worse. Some governments have adopted explicit migration strategies. For example, Ethiopia created an Overseas Employment Program to channel its growing labor force into foreign jobs, maximize remittances (≈0.5% of GDP), and develop skills (Moore et al., 2020). Mali set up a dedicated Ministry for Malians Abroad and co-development funds to steer diaspora remittances into schools and clinics (Trauner & Deimel, 2013). These illustrate how authorities try to harness migration as a development tool. The same study, however, notices how Mali has overall developed a new, more control-oriented dimension to its domestic migration policies (ibid.). In a broader sense, migration partnerships may skew planning priorities. States may invest more in border security, screening and police (to secure EU funds) even as they cut back on general social spending. Research warns that this reorientation can overshadow other development objectives (Bisong, 2023; Concord, 2018; Norman & Micinski, 2023; Pope & Weisner, 2023).
If partnerships truly focus on "mutual benefits," they could also embed migration into development in positive ways (e.g. funding education that aligns with labour market needs abroad). In practice, evidence is mixed (Gazzotti et al., 2023; Temprano Arroyo, 2019; Zardo, 2025). Short-term infrastructure improvements have been made (e.g. water points built along desert routes), but comprehensive integration of migration into national development plans is still evolving (IOM, 2022; Talleraas, 2024).

At the investment level, the picture is also mixed. The partnerships have mobilized some development projects (infrastructure, training centers, micro-credit schemes) that might indirectly attract private investment in the long run. Yet by tying funds to migration outcomes, there is concern that project selection is driven by short term European priorities, focusing in areas that are key sources of origin or transit (Concord, 2018; Zardo, 2022). So far, there is little evidence that migration deals, by themselves, have triggered significant private investment (foreign or domestic) (Davitti, 2022; Davitti & Vankova, 2025).

Impact on human rights and creation of legal and institutional vulnerabilities

Treating migration control as a transactional service introduces significant risks and vulnerabilities for both Europe and partner states, particularly regarding human rights, legal standards, institutional robustness and the rule of law.

Both the political science and legal studies literature confirm how outsourcing enforcement responsibilities creates a complex "migration industry" composed of public and private actors, including international organizations, private security contractors, and national coast guards, whose operations often lack transparency and oversight (Andersson, 2016; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sorensen, 2012; Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Human rights and legal standards risk falling through the cracks. In Libya, for example, European funds allocated for coast guard training and improvements in detention facilities have been associated with human rights abuses, indicating inadequate monitoring mechanisms (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). This diffusion of authority among numerous intermediaries weakens accountability, resulting in a higher likelihood of resource misuse or corrupt practices, which can undermine both human rights and rule-of-law principles. Such opaque arrangements make it hard for EU governments or courts to enforce compliance (De Leo, 2025; Tsourdi & Zardo, 2025), and can backfire if local actors use resources arbitrarily or corruptly. Moreover, transactional migration control arrangements can lead to significant legal vulnerabilities for EU member states. Frelick et al. (De Leo, 2025; Frelick et al., 2016a) emphasize the legal peril: international law forbids a state from knowingly aiding human-rights violations by another. When Europe directly funds or assists a partner that then abuses migrants (through pushbacks, torture, or refoulement), EU states can be held complicit. In other words, Europe's own commitments (to humanitarian values and rule of law) become vulnerable when implementation is outsourced. European leaders who sign deals risk domestic blowback or legal challenges if migrants suffer abroad as a result of those deals.

Besides the legal risks inherent in control practices or irregular migration, the transactional nature of these agreements creates lasting institutional vulnerabilities. Policies developed through short-term funding arrangements rarely establish robust institutional frameworks. Research on the

EU Trust fund and on development cooperation more broadly has shown how heavy EU funding helped countries like Turkey cope with immediate refugee inflows, but also "hindered the development of long-term structural migration policies" in the country (Ulusoy, 2025). Dependence on EU financial assistance for daily operations can create severe instability if funds are paused or withdrawn, leaving countries ill-equipped to manage subsequent migration challenges and exacerbating vulnerabilities for migrants and local communities. This vulnerability is acutely felt in emergency aid: staff and systems built around one crisis may not survive the next, yet communities and migrants suffer when the funds end (Disch et al., 2020; Maâ, 2024). Over time, Europe's reliance on temporary deals can erode its own interests: if future crises arise and no lasting frameworks were built, both sides are worse off (Zaun & Nantermoz, 2022).

Finally, migration control deals often have profound implications for the rule of law and human rights in both Europe and partner countries. Outsourcing enforcement can violate international obligations and institutional norms (Ardalan, 2020). Frelick, Kysel and Podkul (2016) emphasize that EU externalization measures frequently deprive migrants of basic legal protections (Frelick et al., 2016a). By preventing refugees from reaching Europe, migrants are instead "relegated" to countries with weaker asylum systems (Badalič, 2019; Oette & Babiker, 2017). European states become accountable when interventions make violations "materially easier" through a positive contribution, when they have knowledge or near-certain knowledge of the link between the intervention (funding, training, capacity building) and the violations (Ashraf, 2025). On the ground, migration control practices through offshore patrols, border fences, detention centres in transit countries, and bilateral readmission deals have led to documented rights violations. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch detail instances of "push-backs" (illegal expulsions) financed by EU agreements (Amnesty International, 2017; Strik & Robbesom, 2024). Detainees in sponsored centers often face arbitrary detention, poor conditions or torture with scant oversight (Sunderland, 2019). On land, fortified fences at the EU's African borders have likewise proved deadly: in 2022, Moroccan and Spanish forces used "widespread unlawful force" in mass pushbacks at Melilla, contributing to the death of at least 27 hopeful asylum seekers (Tondo & Jones, 2024).

In his research on securitization practices, Bigo explains how this dynamic is not incidental, but systemic: migration control is increasingly seen as a security imperative implemented through routine surveillance and force (Bigo, 2014). Security practices become normalized, so measures that violate due process (like automatic detention or collective returns) are treated as normal policy. While Europe has improved the human rights monitoring practices and institutional collaborations (Loschi & Slominski, 2021; Mattila, 2001), practices taking place outside of the EU territory are difficult to control and go beyond the legal responsibility and capacity of human rights monitors. These trends weaken the rule of law in many ways. As partly introduced above, in partner states, the influx of conditional funding and new police/military aid can empower weak or ill-trained forces, or create an "industry". Migration control practices have therefore strengthened actors who operate with little legal constraint (Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). Without strict EU oversight, these actors may act with impunity, undermining accountability. One solution identified by De Leo (2025) is the reliance on the principle of administrative accountability, emphasizing the potential role of the European Ombudsman. According to De Leo, the Ombudsman provides an innovative and flexible avenue to scrutinize the administrative practices of EU institutions, particularly regarding the allocation and management of EU funds used in migration control. Although the Ombudsman lacks enforcement powers, its ability to issue recommendations and promote transparency can enhance accountability, notably illustrated by challenging the EU's financial support to the Libyan Coast Guard (De Leo, 2025). Inside Europe, these practices erode principles of shared responsibility. The expansion of "safe third country" rules or expedited deportation agreements means asylum claims may not be heard on their merits. Research has highlighted that Europe's Safe Third Country rules often lack proper safeguards, meaning asylum seekers can be summarily blocked and returned (Frelick et al., 2016b). This violates the right to seek asylum as enshrined in the UDHR and reflected in refugee law.

4. Conclusion

Interventions to cut irregular migrations in cooperation with non-EU countries, often embedded in broader so-called migration partnerships, have impacted irregular migration landscape. Overall irregular entries into the EU dropped from over 1 million in 2015 to around 150,000–200,000 per year in 2017–2019. Yet flows did not disappear, they reallocated to different routes. By 2021, total detections climbed again to approximately 200,000 (highest since 2017, (Frontex, 2022), and 2022 saw about 330,000 irregular crossings, the most since 2016. Re-routing effects are visible in the resurgence of the Western Balkan route (through Southeast Europe) as a major corridor by 2022, accounting for 45% of all irregular EU entries. These patterns suggest that partnership led to short-term and route-specific gains but did not permanently resolve the underlying migratory pressures. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a natural experiment: 2020 saw unusually low irregular entries (due to travel restrictions), but by 2021 numbers rebounded by +57% once mobility reopened. In sum, the evidence tilts toward temporary, route-specific effects rather than permanent suppression of irregular migration. Migration control policies can shift where and when migrants come but, all other circumstances remain stable (e.g. availability of regular pathways) have not eliminated irregular movement in the long term. Irregular migration shifts geographically in response to enforcement. The total volume may only redistribute, as migrants deal with the system by finding new crossing points with less oversight (de Genova, 2017; Liempt & Doomernik, 2006). Moreover, such measures have had an important impact in terms of mortality (Arfaoui, 2025; Cornelius, 2001; Prieto-Flores, 2025) similarly to what has been observed in the past in the US context. Heightened enforcement has made migration journeys significantly riskier, elevating human costs without eliminating demand. For example, intensified patrols on traditional Mediterranean routes have directly contributed to the dramatic increase in deaths at sea, with nearly 10,000 migrants reported missing or deceased on the Atlantic route alone in 2024 (ECRE, 2024).

Moreover, there is great evidence that partnerships to counter irregular migration have profoundly challenged migrants' fundamental rights, including access to asylum and due process. Europe's focus on externalization and control practices has undermined human rights standards and the rule of law (Amnesty International, 2017; Ansems de Vries et al., 2016; Ashraf, 2025; Brachet, 2016; Graae Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2006). These strategies frequently result in severe legal and humanitarian breaches, exemplified by Libyan detention centers funded indirectly by the EU, where systematic abuses and unlawful detention practices have been widely documented (Amnesty International, 2017; Pacciardi & Berndtsson, 2022). The legal implications for EU states are important, potentially implicating them in rights violations under international law.

Beyond the significant human costs, the transactional nature of EU migration deals has facilitated the instrumentalization of migration by third countries, reshaping diplomatic relationships and undermining mutual trust. As Tittel-Mosser (2018) and many others note, non-EU countries, such as Turkey and Morocco, have exploited the European focus on countering irregular migration and adeptly leveraged their migration cooperation to secure broader political and economic concessions (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Aras & Ela, 2019; Tittel-Mosser, 2018). Turkey has repeatedly threatened to reopen migration into Europe as bargaining leverage (Aras & Ela, 2019). This may not have been the EU's intended outcome, but it is a recurring reality: migration deals are quickly folded into broader diplomacy. Third countries learn that migration control is one of the few levers Europe cares about, and they use it accordingly, securing funds, political influence, and security guarantees that they might not have obtained otherwise. Europe's transactional stance thus incentivizes this behaviour, creating a cycle where each side uses the other to achieve political goals at home.

Overall, these negative impacts in terms of human rights and political relations come with mixed and location-specific positive impacts on local economies. While targeted job-creation projects in regions such as Ethiopia provided limited, localized economic benefits, they have failed to address broader structural unemployment issues effectively (Moore et al., 2020). Conversely, in transit hubs like Agadez, Niger, EU-driven migration controls significantly disrupted vital local economies dependent on migration-related services, leading to notable income losses and social strain (Schwab, 2023). At present, analyses urge a cautious view, and calls remain for interventions that genuinely prioritize sustainable local development rather than merely serving short-term migration reduction goals (Bisong, 2023; Concord, 2018; Lixi, 2017).

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