

STG Policy Papers
POLICY BRIEF

**A MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVE
ON CURRENT MIGRATION
GOVERNANCE**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migration governance in the Mediterranean is increasingly shaped by short-term control measures, fragmented partnerships, and administrative strain. Current approaches often prioritise deterrence over protection, sidelining development cooperation, rights safeguards, and long-term sustainability. This policy brief draws on insights from a high-level policy dialogue held in Florence in May 2025 and identifies three critical areas for reform: rethinking migration cooperation and partnerships, enhancing labour mobility, and strengthening administrative governance. Key recommendations include aligning cooperation frameworks with shared development goals, streamlining labour mobility procedures, and empowering local authorities and civil society in policy design. The brief calls for a shift from transactional arrangements to strategic partnerships; from fragmented national systems to coordinated governance; and from reactive enforcement to proactive, inclusive policymaking. Addressing these challenges is vital for ensuring credible, coherent, and sustainable migration governance in the Mediterranean region.

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This policy brief is the outcome of the High-Level Policy Dialogue titled 'A Mediterranean Perspective on Current Migration Governance: Challenges and Prospects,' organised by the European University Institute's Florence School of Transnational Governance in partnership with the Mediterranean Migration and Asylum Policy Hub (MedMA), an Agency of the European Public Law Organization (EPLO) (22 May 2025).

Views expressed in this publication reflect insights from the High-Level Policy Dialogue and do not necessarily represent the positions of the European University Institute or the European Public Law Organization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean has long stood at the forefront of Europe's efforts to manage migration. As a region, it plays multiple roles in public discourses: a route of passage, a fortified border, a site of humanitarian urgency, and a space of strategic cooperation. Yet, migration is only one dimension of a broader web of regional challenges that includes conflicts, economic disparity, climate change, and evolving geopolitical alliances. These challenges make the Mediterranean not just a transit zone but a critical place for shaping the future of migration governance.

In recent years, political and policy shifts at the European level have intensified the urgency of Mediterranean cooperation. The adoption of the new [Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) has launched EU member states into an implementation phase that demands substantial administrative reform and changes to national legal frameworks and procedures. Simultaneously, broader regional initiatives seek to foster renewed political commitment around shared priorities. These developments create the opportunity to reflect on current strategies, assess the state of partnerships and institutional capacity, and identify new governance approaches.

In this context, the High-Level Policy Dialogue titled '[A Mediterranean Perspective on Current Migration Governance: Challenges and Prospects](#)' took place in Florence on 22 May 2025. Organised by the [Mediterranean Migration and Asylum Policy Hub](#) (MedMA), an Agency of the European Public Law Organization (EPLO), in partnership with the European University Institute's [Florence School of Transnational Governance](#), the event brought together senior policymakers, migration scholars, legal experts, and representatives from international organisations and civil society. The dialogue featured representatives from the European Public Law Organization (EPLO); the European Stability Initiative (ESI); the European University Institute (EUI), including its Florence School of Transnational Governance and Migration Policy Centre; the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD); the International Labour Organization (ILO); the International

Organization for Migration (IOM); ODI Europe; the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO); Pairity; Center for Legal Aid – Voice in Bulgaria; Tilburg University; University of Tuscia; and The New School for Social Research.

The conversation was structured around three interlinked themes. The first focused on cooperative migration management, examining the landscape of bilateral and multilateral partnerships between EU states and Southern Mediterranean states. It assessed the effectiveness of these arrangements and their broader implications across areas such as trade, development, and human rights. The second session explored labour mobility and development, evaluating initiatives such as EU Talent Partnerships as tools for legal migration and economic cooperation. The third session addressed administrative governance, asking whether existing bureaucratic systems are capable of delivering on the legal and operational demands introduced by the EU Pact and related frameworks. A final session provided space for reflection across the discussed themes, highlighting cross-cutting tensions, implementation gaps, and future possibilities for more coherent and effective migration governance.

This policy brief presents the key insights that emerged from the dialogue. It outlines core challenges and corresponding policy options under each of the three thematic pillars, while the concluding section synthesises the discussions and identifies overarching issues that must be addressed to advance an effective governance model for migration in the Mediterranean.

2. RETHINKING MIGRATION PARTNERSHIPS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

2.1 Current dynamics in EU-Southern Mediterranean cooperation

Migration cooperation in the Mediterranean has long operated on a transactional logic reflecting asymmetrical dynamics. Agreements between the EU and Southern Mediterranean states prioritise operational objectives such

as border control, return procedures, and the prevention of irregular migration. These arrangements are often designed on an ad hoc basis rather than as strategic partnerships.

In this context, the current dominance of an externalisation model (which prioritises control over co-development and rights safeguards) can sideline mutual interests in development and rights protection. This dominance also generates a certain path dependency. Funding, monitoring, and technical assistance concentrate on interception, returns, and containment. Consequently, as administrations invest in infrastructure, staff, and training, changing course becomes more costly and difficult. Bilateral approaches thereby become standard, reinforcing a security-first framework, even if the effectiveness of such a framework is contested.

2.2 Metrics, narratives, and political drivers

While such arrangements are intended to address irregular migration, there is limited empirical evidence that they are effective in combatting human smuggling or reducing irregular arrivals. Instead, they may give an ‘illusion of control,’ outsourcing responsibility without addressing root causes.

This dynamic is reinforced by a mismatch between policy metrics and strategic needs. Cooperation is evaluated primarily through short-term indicators, such as return numbers or border apprehensions, rather than long-term outcomes such as labour market integration, development gains, or the protection of rights. These metrics are frequently shaped by political considerations, often reinforcing restrictive narratives.

“Narratives are driving policies instead of being driven by them.”¹

In parallel, public and political discourses have increasingly framed migration in terms of ‘securitisation.’ These framings of migration have increasingly entered the mainstream, driving the agenda away from rights and cooperation. This shift comes despite polling data showing that both European and African

publics favour migration governance that ensures protection alongside control.

“The public wants a degree of control. But it is also true that the public also wants basic migrant rights protection. The political challenge is: How do you deliver both?”

While the issue of continuing irregular arrivals dominates media and political discourse within the European Union, migration to the EU is overwhelmingly regular. In 2023 alone, over 4.3 million people entered the EU through legal channels, while the irregular border crossing in the same year amounted to 380,000. However, security-focused narratives continue to define migration policy, equating migration with illegality.

2.3 Fragmentation risk

The EU’s new Pact on Migration and Asylum establishes a mandatory mechanism of flexible solidarity. Amongst the types of solidarity measures, contributing states may choose to provide financial contributions to or in relation to third states, at the request of EU member states under pressure. This aspect of the solidarity mechanism appears to incentivise ‘bilateralisation’ rather than multilateral engagement, thus creating a risk of fragmentation of EU migration governance.

To promote more coherent and mutually beneficial cooperation frameworks in the region, the following policy options can be considered:

- **Rebalance cooperation frameworks:** Redesign migration partnerships to support mutual priorities and align evaluation metrics with long-term outcomes such as integration, rights, and institutional capacity.
- **Promote evidence-based public narratives:** Reflect demographic realities and regular migration data in public communication to better align with public support.
- **Strengthen multilateral coordination:** Reinforce the role of regional mechanisms,

¹ This quote and the following ones are from participants in the High-Level Policy Dialogue. Chatham House rules prohibit linking quotes to individual participants.

such as the [Union for the Mediterranean](#) and the [Rabat Process](#), to reduce fragmentation and maintain space for structured, collective, and multi-level governance.

3. LABOUR MOBILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Current state of labour mobility systems

Labour mobility is widely recognised as a source of mutual benefit for origin and destination countries, but it remains underfunded. It is increasingly positioned as a tool to address destination countries' labour market needs while supporting economic development in countries of origin. Yet, current systems are unable to deliver on this promise. Limited coordination and administrative bottlenecks hinder the effectiveness and fairness of mobility schemes.

Such barriers are particularly pronounced for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which often lack the resources to navigate multi-agency procedures. Larger companies are more likely to access these programmes, creating asymmetries in access and benefit.

"So part of the challenge here is really procedural as well. And how can we de-risk employers from actually hiring people?"

3.2 Labour demand and structural conditions

Labour migration is treated in isolation from structural issues in host economies, such as low wages, limited job protections, and workforce shortages in less attractive sectors. This leads to a reliance on migrant labour and, without broader reforms in employment standards, may entrench dependency and reduce incentives to improve conditions.

Additionally, many programmes lack inclusiveness. Local communities, migrants and gender perspectives are not examined during design and evaluation. Municipal and civil society actors (key to legitimacy and practical delivery) and migrants themselves are often

not consulted.

Circularity, or lack thereof, is also an aggravating factor. Sending countries such as Morocco have voiced concerns about brain drain, especially when mid-skilled workers leave without reintegration pathways or mechanisms to transfer knowledge back home. While some programmes avoid targeting highly educated professionals, the absence of mechanisms for sustainable return, knowledge transfer, or reinvestment remains a concern. Without broader changes, the status quo becomes self-reinforcing.

"Migration is increasingly circular, is no longer prevailing like a lifetime project, a one-way ticket. People see migration as a temporary experience to bring back their resources and also their skills and expertise in the countries of origin."

Adding to these challenges are technological and ecosystem gaps. Many origin countries lack digital labour registries or centralised recruitment channels, making it difficult to connect employers with available talent. A further challenge relates to re-entry rules and retention mechanisms. The inability to rehire workers in future cycles disrupts continuity for employers and limits incentives to invest in training or onboarding.

To bridge the gap between ambition and operational delivery in labour mobility schemes, the following policy options can be considered:

- **Improve system efficiency and access:** Streamline procedures through interoperable digital tools, simplify administrative steps for SMEs, and enable repeat hiring mechanisms to cultivate trust and to support workforce continuity.
- **Link mobility to structural development goals:** Connect migration schemes with labour market reforms and circular migration frameworks, including reintegration, and portable social benefits, to ensure shared benefits for origin and destination countries.
- **Invest in infrastructure:** Support the development of digital labour registries and training ecosystems in origin countries to align supply with demand and reduce

administrative barriers.

4. ADMINISTRATIVE GOVERNANCE

4.1 Current state of administrative governance

As in every public policy issue, a central question is whether national administrations in their current bureaucratic form are fit to deliver solutions, and migration is no exception. The refugee 'crisis' of 2015 exposed many vulnerabilities in national administrations, making it not only a humanitarian crisis but an administrative one as well, with countries facing delays in asylum decision-making, judicial backlogs, and poor procedural models that led to ineffective governance. Impending EU Pact on Migration and Asylum frameworks mark an effort to harmonise EU administrative governance procedures but will undoubtedly place new pressures on national administrations.

4.2 Procedural overload and capacity gaps

Procedural complexity and overload are a major source of administrative strain in migration governance. The 2015 'crisis' exposed the limits of national systems to manage high volumes of cases, especially under pressure. Delays, rigid processes, and insufficient staffing led to governance failures, showcasing that procedures alone cannot guarantee effective management without sufficient capacity. Lessons learned from the 2015 'crisis' were used in the Ukrainian displacement response after the outbreak of the Ukraine-Russia war in 2022. In this case, the temporary protection mechanism demonstrated that flexible and simplified approaches can allow for faster action and reduced strain on public systems.

4.3 Fragmented governance and resistance to change

Further challenges stem from deep institutional fragmentation and resistance to change. Relevant ministries in receiving countries, like the Ministries of the Interior, Migration, Labour, and others, often operate in isolation with their own disconnected strategies, sending inconsistent messages across policy domains

and international fora. Efforts to modernise administrative functions have often stalled due to political rivalry, inter-ministerial competition, and divergent institutional preferences. In some cases, migration authorities have resisted reform, reinforcing structural inefficiencies and preventing needed changes.

"But what's clear is even at a national administrative level, governments are not coherent in how they are responding . . . You might have an immigration ministry who's saying one thing. You'll have the foreign affairs ministry saying another thing."

4.4 The potential of technology and of cooperation with non-state actors

Available tools and partnerships remain underexploited. Remote interviews, multilingual digital platforms, and automated workflows have been used in some contexts but rarely scaled. Civil society and private actors have played critical roles in responding to displacement, often compensating for administrative shortcomings. The Ukrainian response demonstrated that the early involvement of these actors can optimise outcomes. However, their contributions remain largely informal, and their expertise is not systematically integrated. Local governments, too, are rarely consulted in national migration strategies, despite being central to reception and integration. Cities are assigned quotas without input or support. In contrast, models that use digital service mapping on the local level and match newcomers with available services, piloted in Germany and elsewhere, show that when municipalities are empowered, outcomes improve for both migrants and host communities.

"Working with cities, you can understand what their needs are. Because cities and local municipalities are never asked and told what they have to do. They get a quota."

4.5 Returns

Return procedures remain a weak point in migration governance in the Mediterranean,

with widespread recognition that current procedures are largely ineffective. Despite the centrality of return procedures in EU policymaking and narratives, such as the EU Returns Directive, legal uncertainty and inconsistencies in their application are the most problematic issues. Return mechanisms have shown little impact in practice, while their implementation requirements risk overburdening already limited administrative and human rights safeguards in member states, and particularly in frontline states. The shift toward coercive approaches such as detention expansion, safe country clauses to facilitate returns, externalisation trends, and the inclusion of return clauses in trade agreements has not led to measurable improvements in return rates. At the same time, countries in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, aware that they retain effective control over the volume of movements, have gained significant leverage. As a result, engagements with the EU have become transactional in nature, with negotiations primarily focused on financial compensation rather than shared, long-term objectives that are collectively beneficial for regional development.

To bridge the gap between procedural ambition and operational delivery, the following policy options can be considered.

- **Simplify where outcomes are predictable:** In situations where recognition rates are consistently high, as is the case for certain nationalities, simplified or *prima facie* approaches have been considered to reduce strain on asylum systems and shorten processing times.
- **Strengthen coordination across government levels and functions:** Effective migration governance requires both horizontal coordination among national ministries and vertical collaboration with regional and local authorities. Structured inter-ministerial cooperation, supported by common data systems and shared access, must be complemented by the active involvement of municipalities, which play a central role in reception and integration. Local engagement through tools like service mapping and matching systems enables more efficient responses aligned with the

actual needs on the ground.

- **Integrate civil society and private actors into system design:** Non-state actors have delivered essential services during displacement crises, yet their roles remain mainly informal. Public-private partnerships and structural engagement with NGOs, diaspora networks, and the private sector should be built into migration strategies.
- **Incorporate digital tools with attention to access and equity:** AI and digital systems are increasingly used in migration governance for case processing, biometric data collection, surveillance at borders, and data management. While they offer efficiency gains, concerns over privacy, access, and loss of human oversight highlight the need for clearer safeguards so that they can serve a useful administrative tool without introducing unnecessary risks.
- **Avoid centring migration policy on forced returns:** Returns are a necessary component for system credibility. Nevertheless, large-scale return policies and strategies are resource-intensive, politically fragile, and have shown limited effectiveness in practice. Centring migration governance around return enforcement distorts policy priorities and undermines long-term sustainability.

5. FINAL REFLECTIONS

Migration governance in the Mediterranean sits at the intersection of political urgency, administrative complexity, and structural interdependence. As this policy brief shows, efforts to govern migration are shaped by legal and operational tools but also by deeper tensions around power, perception, and institutional capacity.

Across the three pillars — partnerships, labour mobility, and administrative governance — common patterns emerge. Systems designed for control are often misaligned with long-term objectives of cooperation, rights protection, and development. Migration partnerships have shifted toward transactional arrangements. Labour mobility is undermined by administrative bottlenecks, lack of inclusion, and insufficient attention to circularity. Meanwhile, national

bureaucracies continue to face challenges of fragmentation, under-capacity, and limited integration of non-state and local actors.

If the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum is to succeed in revitalising migration governance, it must address not only procedural reforms but also the deeper structural and political drivers shaping current outcomes. Simplification alone is not enough without coordinated inter-ministerial action, empowered local authorities, and the structured inclusion of civil society and private actors. Similarly, public discourse needs to be steered towards a more evidence-based foundation that highlights the realities of legal migration, labour needs, and shared interests.

The Mediterranean is not just a space of passage but also a proving ground for the credibility, cohesion, and sustainability of Europe's migration policies. Addressing its challenges requires strategic clarity, institutional agility, and genuine cooperation. The policy options outlined in this brief provide a pathway forward, but their effectiveness will depend on political will, operational alignment, and a renewed commitment to shared responsibility.

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