

The Resurgence of the Far Right in Europe and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum

- Far-right formations in European countries have successfully exploited growing anti-immigrant public attitudes to achieve political gains.
- The preliminary agreement on *the New Pact on Migration and Asylum* is a significant achievement for the EU, but it raises serious doubts. Its formal adoption before the dissolution of the EP is crucial for the future of European migration policy.
- During the European election campaign, migration will be at the center of the political debate. The political group “Identity and Democracy” is expected to have a high level of electoral support.

Introduction

Finding a common way to regulate and respond to migration processes is an essential part of the European political debate. The 2015 high influx of migrants and refugees highlighted the weaknesses of the Dublin system and the need to reform the current model. Among the major successes of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU is the agreement on the revision of the European migration policy. This marks the end of extensive negotiations between national governments and the European Parliament (EP) that began in September 2020. At that time, the European Commission (EC) presented *the New Pact on Migration and Asylum*, which aims to update and coordinate policies related to migration, border control, and asylum.

The Member States' mutual agreement on *the Pact* is an undoubted success for European

politics, given the strong opposition of some of them. Through the agreed changes, the European institutions are seeking to assist the frontline countries while emphasizing the principle of solidarity. *The Pact* also includes stricter regulations on the entry of migrants into the Union's territory and a simplification of the deportation procedure for people who are unlikely to be granted asylum.

The upcoming European Parliament elections in June provide an incentive for EU lawmakers to finalize the ratification process of *the Pact* in the coming months. However, political disagreements at the national level regarding the issue persist, which are further intensified by growing public concern over increasing irregular migration¹. Certain European countries, such as Italy, Finland, and Sweden, are therefore implementing stricter measures to reduce the flow of arrivals at their borders. A worrying trend is the growth in support for previously marginal far-right political formations. These parties are expected to make significant gains in forthcoming elections, including the European elections, which raises questions about the direction in which the EU will develop. The purpose of this paper is to examine the growing anti-immigration sentiment and the role of *the New Pact on Migration and Asylum*.

Anti-immigration sentiment across Europe

The issue of migration, which dominates the political discourse in various European countries, has proven to have the potential to influence the political balance in Europe. According to a Eurobarometer survey², European citizens identify the war in Ukraine and migration as the most significant issues for the EU. The increasing migrant flows have led to a rise in anti-immigration and anti-refugee narratives at the national level. The perception of migrants as an economic and cultural

¹ According to Frontex data, in 2023 there is a significant increase in the cases of illegal crossings of the EU's external borders. This is the highest increase since 2016 and a 17 % increase compared to 2022; Significant rise in irregular border crossings in 2023, highest since 2016. (2024, January 16). [https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/significant-rise-in-irregular-border-crossings-in-2023-highest-](https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/significant-rise-in-irregular-border-crossings-in-2023-highest-since-2016-C0gGpm?fbclid=IwAR02tNVARkysMMnd-0E6nkjBRW8Ek6dXL.CeruaMEN4XyKaFvjxITzVe7hvs)

[since-2016-C0gGpm?fbclid=IwAR02tNVARkysMMnd-0E6nkjBRW8Ek6dXL.CeruaMEN4XyKaFvjxITzVe7hvs](https://www.frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/significant-rise-in-irregular-border-crossings-in-2023-highest-since-2016-C0gGpm?fbclid=IwAR02tNVARkysMMnd-0E6nkjBRW8Ek6dXL.CeruaMEN4XyKaFvjxITzVe7hvs)

² *Europeans continue to strongly support Ukraine, Eurobarometer shows.* (2023, December 13). European Commission - European Commission.

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6563

threat is the main reason for such sentiments.³ This creates an opportunity for far-right parties to expand their support by capitalising on public concerns and promoting ethno-nationalist rhetoric.

In recent years, the far right has become a leading political force in parliamentary elections or has entered government in several European countries. In November 2023, the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid-PVV) won the election in the Netherlands after focusing its campaign on the issue of rising migration coupled with economic instability in the country. The party's leader, Geert Wilders, has taken a strong anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant stance, which has resonated with a majority of Dutch voters. In the 2022 Italian elections, Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the far-right Italian Brothers (Fratelli d'Italia) party, pledged to halt the illegal flow of migration from the Mediterranean by tightening measures and strengthening border controls. In the Scandinavian countries, which are traditionally more welcoming to immigrants, the same trend is emerging. Migration is a significant dividing line for the Eurosceptic Sweden Democrats, whose support is crucial for the Swedish minority government. The Finns Party, a far-right nationalist group that campaigned against immigration and the European Union, is part of the coalition government in Finland.

The issue of migration is a powerful mobilizing factor of electoral support, which can be used to gain political power. The rise of far-right governments poses a challenge not only to European migration policy but also to the stability of European institutions. The Eurosceptic nature of some of their policies can hinder the ability of the Union to respond quickly and cohesively to current issues. Additionally, they challenge the EU's ability to uphold fundamental European values such as inclusion, human rights, protection of minority

rights and solidarity in the face of diverging national priorities.

Conversely, some centrist governments in power are taking a stricter stance on their migration policies. Guided by the current political climate, they are attempting to address the population's concerns and prevent the growth of more radical political movements. This is a proactive measure aimed at maintaining public trust in the government and expanding its support base. At the end of 2023, Germany adopted more restrictive measures on migration processes, aimed at speeding up asylum procedures, limiting social benefits for migrants, and increasing federal funding for local communities.⁴ Similarly, France has passed a controversial law that introduces migration quotas and tightens migration rules.⁵ However, the empirical evidence suggests that the tougher political stances on migration adopted by the major governing parties have significantly contributed to the rise in popularity of far-right parties.⁶ This further legitimizes anti-migration positions, making such extreme measures more acceptable to the public.

What is *the New Pact*?

The *New Pact on Migration and Asylum* covers all aspects of migration regulation. MEPs aim to establish a more effective framework for a common migration policy while addressing the concerns of European citizens caused by the growth of migration across Europe. The rise of far-right support at the national level has further motivated European institutions to reach a political consensus after years of negotiations. The EU is aiming to demonstrate political will with these actions, in an attempt to counter Eurosceptic claims of ineffectiveness in crises.

There is agreement in principle on five proposals for legislative changes⁷:

³ Tabaud, A.-L. (2020, November 30). *Explaining the main drivers of anti-immigration attitudes in Europe*. Eyes on Europe. <https://www.eyes-on-europe.eu/explaining-the-main-drivers-of-anti-immigration-attitudes-in-europe/>

⁴ Pieper, O. (2024, January 1). *German immigration policy: What's changing in 2024?* dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/german-immigration-policy-whats-changing-in-2024/a-67753472>

⁵ Ciesnik, S. (2024, January 25). *French immigration law: What are the measures deemed unconstitutional?* France 24.

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240125-french-immigration-law-what-are-the-measures-deemed-unconstitutional>

⁶ Krause W, Cohen D, Abou-Chadi T. Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties. *Political Science Research and Methods*. 2023;11(1):172-179. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2022.8>

⁷ *New pact on migration and asylum*. (2023, December 20). Migration and Home Affairs. <https://home->

- ⇒ **Screening Regulation:** Introduces a procedure for verifying the identity, health, and security of persons within 7 days of arrival at a Union border. Member States are required to establish an independent mechanism to monitor compliance with fundamental rights during the check.
- ⇒ **Eurodac Regulation:** All individuals over the age of 6 are to be registered in the Eurodac database with biometric and facial data.
- ⇒ **Asylum Procedures Regulation (APR):** After screening, there are two possible stages for asylum seekers: the accelerated border procedure⁸ and the ordinary asylum procedure, which can take several months before a final decision.
- ⇒ **The Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR):** Establishes a "compulsory solidarity" mechanism to be triggered in cases of disproportionate pressure on a Member State. Each year, an EU solidarity pool will be created, giving member states the option to either commit to accepting migrants or providing financial support.
- ⇒ **Crisis and force majeure regulation:** Emergency rules are foreseen in case of a sudden and crisis increase of irregular migrants or case of force majeure situations (such as the COVID-19 pandemic). In such cases, Member States may use stricter measures to manage migrants and seek solidarity support from other EU countries.

While the agreement reached is a step forward for Europe's common migration policy, it raises substantive concerns that undermine its credibility. The flexible criteria for sharing responsibility in solidarity and the introduction of mandatory border procedures are likely to perpetuate the issue of uneven migration flows in

affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/new-pact-migration-and-asylum_en

⁸ It will apply in cases where there is a security threat or the person comes from a country with a low percentage of approved asylum applications (below 20%). In this situation, they will be placed in special reception centers without official access to EU territory. *Amended proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common procedure for international protection in the Union and repealing Directive 2013/32/EU - General approach* (No. 10444/23). (2023). Council of the European Union. Retrieved January 20, 2024, from <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10444-2023-IN1/en/pdf>

border states, particularly those in southern Europe. Furthermore, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have highlighted the risk of migrants' fundamental rights being violated. These concerns stem from the accelerated screening process, logistical obstacles (such as limited access to legal representation), and the possibility of mass detention, including of vulnerable groups such as children and persons with special needs, in border countries.⁹

The Pact places great emphasis on partnership with 'safe third countries' to prevent migrants from reaching the Union's territory. The EU provides financial assistance in exchange for cooperation in controlling migration processes. However, this approach raises ethical questions about supporting countries with a dubious record in guaranteeing basic human rights, such as Libya, Egypt, or Tunisia. It is possible that migration may be used from third countries as a diplomatic, political, or economic tool to pressure the EU.¹⁰

Discussions on the technical details of *the New Pact on Migration and Asylum* are ongoing. The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU aims to formally approve it before the June elections, prepare an implementation plan, and establish a financial framework.

Concluding comments

The issue of migration is expected to be a key factor strongly influencing the political dynamics during the European elections. Far-right parties throughout Europe are capitalizing on the migration issues to boost their electoral support. According to a forecast by Europe Elects¹¹, Identity and Democracy (ID) is likely to become the third largest party in the European Parliament. The increasing influence of far-right groups is impacting

⁹ Amnesty International. (2023, December 20). EU: Migration Pact agreement will lead to a "surge in suffering." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/eu-migration-pact-agreement-will-lead-to-a-surge-in-suffering/>

¹⁰ Swan, Emily, "EU Migration Policy: Analyzing the Coercive Responses of Transit Countries Within the EU's Framework of Externalization" (2023). Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 3635. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3635

¹¹ Garscha, M. (2023, December 30). *EU parliamentary projection: Le Pen's Right-Wing ID rises to third place*. Europe Elects. <https://europeelects.eu/2023/12/30/december-2023/>

the political agenda, bringing issues of border control, national identity, and migration restrictions to the forefront of the electoral debate. While the far right is unlikely to gain an absolute majority in the EP, its impact on policymaking, particularly in migration-related areas, is becoming more pronounced. This challenges the prevailing centrist consensus and prompts a reassessment of EU priorities.

The finalization and ratification of *the New Pact on Migration and Asylum* will be a crucial task for MEPs in the coming months. Despite its shortcomings, it will demonstrate the unity and determination of European institutions to address the complex dimensions of migration policy. In the context of growing public anxiety about rising migration pressures, the lack of a common strategy at the European level will further fuel Eurosceptic sentiment. The EU will therefore be challenged to address concerns and calm internal tensions while upholding its core values and maintaining a sense of unity among member states.

The outcome of the elections and the new composition of the EP will influence the overall direction of EU policy, shape its response to migration issues, set the stage for future policy debates, and define the nature of the EU for years to come.

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