EU Domestic Politics and the Migration Cleavage: How Electoral Cycles and Political Competition Shape Migration Policies

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When the European Union's New Pact on Migration and Asylum entered into application on 12 June 2026, it was presented as the moment a fragmented, crisis-driven system would give way to more common rules. But the Pact is not only a legal or administrative reform. It also reflects a decade in which migration has hardened into a structuring line of conflict in European politics. Understanding why European migration policy has converged on deterrence, externalization and accelerated return requires looking not only at Brussels, but also at the domestic electoral arenas in which these policies are rewarded, punished and contested, while recognizing the institutional and judicial limits this logic repeatedly encounters.

Migration as a Structural Cleavage

Political scientists increasingly describe the conflict over immigration not as a passing controversy but as a transnational cleavage reshaping European party systems. A cleavage is more than disagreement over a single issue: it links social groups, collective identities and party choices in a relatively stable way. According to Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, the new transnational divide pits cosmopolitan, integration-friendly positions against communitarian defences of national community and borders, cutting across the older left-right axis built on class and redistribution. Like earlier cleavages over religion or class, it reflects social differences (for instance education, place and exposure to mobility) that political entrepreneurs mobilize into durable patterns of party competition. It does not dissolve when the boats stop arriving.

This explains why migration has become an identity marker at both poles of the cultural conflict. For green, liberal and many left-wing parties, migration can stand for openness, diversity and international solidarity. For radical-right parties, it is tied to the defence of national community, cultural continuity and democratic control over borders. Yet their electoral reach is uneven. Restrictive messages can be easier to mobilize because they speak to fears of losing control and promise protection against loss. Liberal positions, by contrast, usually require a more complex defence of rights, openness and social change.

A crucial qualification follows. A migration cleavage does not mean that societies as a whole have become steadily more anti-immigration. What often changes is less the distribution of attitudes than their political salience and degree of polarization. Research on western Europe suggests that the rise of anti-immigration parties is more closely associated with the salience of immigration than with immigration levels themselves (Dennison and Geddes, 2019). High salience can also turn disagreement into affective polarization, with opponents seen less as adversaries than as threats. Many European publics do not radically change their views on immigration from one year to the next; what fluctuates is how visibly voters, media and parties treat the issue. Migration is thus a latent cleavage that crises, media attention and campaigns activate rather than create.

Electoral Cycles as Accelerators

Electoral cycles shape the timing and intensity rather than the basic content of migration politics. They determine when the cleavage becomes more visible

and politically pressing: before elections, during campaigns or after results reveal the strength of anti-immigration challengers. At such moments, governments and mainstream parties face pressure to demonstrate control. Migration policy is especially vulnerable because it offers visible and symbolically charged measures: border checks, faster asylum procedures, deportation flights, safe-country lists or agreements with third countries. These can be presented as proof of decisiveness even when their practical effects remain limited or legally contested.

This dynamic is visible in the way campaigns organize party competition. When migration becomes highly salient, parties are pushed to present it as a problem of control and to turn legal-administrative questions into visible promises of action. In Germany's 2025 federal campaign, the AfD won 20.8% of the second vote, and migration became one of the principal issues through which parties positioned themselves. The result was a narrowing of the post-election space for technocratic or expansive approaches, while border control and returns moved higher on the agenda.

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There is also evidence that electoral proximity matters at the subnational level. A study of Italian municipalities finds that the nearer an election, the less willing local authorities are to host refugees, especially where the radical right is strong (Gamalerio and Negri, 2023). This points to a selective ratchet effect: electoral cycles push hardest on the visible side of migration policy (like border checks, returns, safe-country lists and third-country deals) where governments can demonstrate control. Quieter fields such as labour migration, regularization or integration may still allow pragmatic choices when they can be framed as economic management rather than border politics.

One reason is the way migration functions in campaigns. On economic policy, parties often compete over competence: most claim to want growth, jobs and stability, and voters judge who seems able to deliver them. On migration, parties are more often judged by the position they take: more openness or more restriction, more protection or more control. Such position issues reward clarity and toughness, while nuance can easily be portrayed as ambiguity or weakness. This campaign logic favours restrictive signalling.

Political Competition and the Mainstreaming of Restriction

Timing alone, however, does not explain why the pressure usually points in a restrictive direction. That depends on party competition. Radical-right parties have made migration one of their strongest issues. Mainstream parties respond to voters whose concerns these challengers mobilize, but also to the risk that radical-right frames become the benchmark against which all other parties are judged. In this sense, the far right can influence migration policy even without holding office: its issue ownership pushes other parties to adopt tougher language, support stricter procedures or endorse policies they might previously have rejected (van Spanje, 2010).

This pressure does not operate only where radical-right parties govern. In Portugal, Chega's rise to around 23% and 60 seats sharpened pressure on a centre-right minority government from outside, contributing to tighter rules on naturalization and family reunification. The Netherlands shows a more direct variant: Wilders' PVV brought down the Schoof coalition over asylum policy in 2025. Both cases point to a wider pattern: radical-right parties can reshape mainstream incentives without controlling the whole agenda.

A second, related mechanism is policy diffusion: national experiments launched under domestic pressure can become European reference points. After the United Kingdom's Rwanda plan was abandoned, Italy supplied the most prominent illustration. Giorgia Meloni's protocol with Albania, financing offshore detention facilities at Shengjin and Gjadër, furnished a template for externalizing parts of asylum and return management by involving third countries more directly in Europe's migration-control architecture. The Council of Europe's Chisinau Declaration of May 2026 further strengthened the language of third-country cooperation, including as return hubs,

even if its political character and compatibility with human-rights jurisprudence remain contested. The EU's new Returns Regulation moved in the same direction by opening the door to stronger removal procedures and third-country return arrangements.

Yet the Italian scheme itself remains legally fragile. Italian courts have refused to validate detention orders for applicants moved to Albania, and the Court of Justice of the EU has constrained aspects of Italy's safe-country designations. The template, in short, was politically mainstreamed faster than it could be made to work. A national experiment driven by domestic politics thus helped establish a wider vocabulary of externalization. Alongside this, the Council approved the first EU-wide list of safe countries of origin in February 2026 to accelerate rejections. None of this required the radical right to govern in Brussels; it required mainstream actors to anticipate the electoral cost of appearing soft.

Mainstream responses are rarely pure copies of radical-right platforms, however. They are often mixed packages: restrictive border, asylum and return measures coexist with pragmatic or expansive choices in labour migration, regularization or integration. The strategic effects of accommodation are contested; moving towards the radical right can fail to win back voters and may instead legitimize the challenger (Krause, Cohen and Abou-Chadi, 2023). Spain's Socialist-led executive illustrates the remaining space: it has combined restrictive border management with regularization and labour-market policies.

Courts, Counter-Pressures and the Limits of the Electoral Logic

Electoral incentives do not operate in a vacuum. The most immediate constraint is judicial. As the Italian example already suggests, the European Court of Human Rights, the Court of Justice of the EU and national constitutional courts have repeatedly tested pushbacks, detention regimes, safe-country designations and offshore processing. Rights anchored in the Treaties and the Convention exert a lock-in effect, narrowing the policy space available to governments even when electoral pressure points the other way.

Two further qualifications matter. First, sudden shocks can set the agenda independently of elections: the 2015-16 crisis and the 2022 displacement from Ukraine triggered responses driven by the scale and urgency of arrivals. Second, EU migration policy changes slowly. The Pact took six years to move from proposal to application, while agencies such as Frontex give the system momentum beyond any single government.

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These qualifications do not interrupt the electoral logic. Shocks can define the problem, courts can rule out instruments and institutions can slow or reshape reform. Within that frame, electoral competition still shapes the discretionary margin: the timing, the symbolism and the choice between accommodation and resistance. Migration policy is best understood as the interaction of a durable cleavage, an electoral logic that accelerates it, and legal and institutional brakes that periodically check it.

The Mediterranean as Policy Frontier

These dynamics are not unique to the Mediterranean. Electoral pressure and restrictive mainstreaming can be observed across Europe. The Mediterranean matters because this domestic political logic is translated there most directly into border governance, solidarity disputes and agreements with third countries. Italy, Greece, Spain, Malta and Cyprus are frontline states exposed to arrivals, search-and-rescue disputes and maritime border pressure. They are also national democracies whose governments must show electorates that they can control borders while asking the rest of the EU for solidarity.

The Pact's mandatory solidarity mechanism attempts to turn this political conflict into an inter-state bar-

gain. It allows states to host relocated asylum seekers, contribute operationally or pay roughly EUR 20,000 for each person not accepted, against a minimum annual relocation target of 30,000. But solidarity designed by 27 governments, each facing its own electorate, is fragile by construction.

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Externalization is the second translation of domestic pressure into Mediterranean governance. Return hubs, migration partnerships with Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mauritania and Morocco, and safe-country designations push mobility management outward, converting electoral pressure in European capitals into leverage over third countries. This reshapes incentives on the southern shore: partner governments gain bargaining power as gatekeepers, while EU governments deepen reliance on fragile or authoritarian partners and push responsibility for protection further from European courts and publics. The result may buy short-term control, but it increases dependence and blurs accountability for rights failures.

Conclusion: A Cleavage That Will Not Close

It would be a mistake to read the recent restrictive convergence as a temporary spasm that calmer times or lower arrivals will simply reverse. The cleavage is mobilized by actors at both poles, but radical-right issue ownership has made it electorally powerful in a particular way. The salience of migration does not depend mechanically on arrivals; it can be sustained by images, media attention, local conflicts, campaign strategies and a wider sense of loss of control. Issue ownership, once established, casts a long shadow.

For policymakers and observers across the Mediterranean, the lesson of 2025-2026 is that migration governance can no longer be analysed simply as a response to migration. It is, increasingly, also a response to domestic political competition over a durable identity cleavage, accelerated by the electoral cycle and bounded by courts and institutions. The Pact on Migration and Asylum may bring procedural order to Europe's external borders. It will not settle the political conflict that produced it, because that conflict is now woven into European party systems, and structures do not yield to deadlines.

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