

EURACTIV

The illusions and perils of restrictive migration policies



The recent condemnations of the number of migrants pushed back at the EU's external borders, the generalisation of migration control within the EU, and the new inflows following the outbreak of war in Ukraine interrogate the suitability of the current restrictive migration policies in Europe, writes Emmanuel Comte.

Comte is a senior researcher at Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), an independent, non-profit Greek institute that conducts policy-oriented research and training. He is also a professorial lecturer at the Vienna School of International Studies (Diplomatische Akademie Wien).

Debunking widespread illusions about what European states can achieve unilaterally in terms of restrictions to immigration, what to expect from neighbouring countries of transit, and how to break the spiral of restrictions on the continent is the key to start thinking about possible solutions, even though it also matters to admit what we still do not know about this problem.

First, it is illusory to believe that the Europeans can achieve restrictions unilaterally. Sovereignists incriminate [EU policies externalising migration control](#) and oppose making concessions to transit countries outside the EU. Some even dispute openness within Europe and advocate for a [return of national border controls](#).

Few are aware that restrictions rely in practice on the cooperative behaviour of neighbouring countries, making the restrictionist country vulnerable to its neighbours. For instance, after France turned to [restrictions in the 1970s](#), it had to recognise that this policy depended on the goodwill of the Spanish police to prevent migrants from reaching the Pyrenees. Albeit a close partner of France, Spain could not resist the temptation to exploit this dependence and extract concessions from France.

In June 1984, French Minister of the Interior Gaston Defferre travelled to Madrid to win the support of Spanish authorities for France's struggle against irregular immigration. In exchange, he promised France would stop what Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez had called 'the French sanctuary for military ETA' (the Basque terrorist organisation).

The transfers of migration control to the external borders of the European Union in a framework of European cooperation, then the enlisting of neighbouring countries in the [externalisation of migration control](#) through various forms of bilateral or multilateral cooperation resulted from the shortcomings of unilateral policies.

EU countries aimed to manage interdependence by substituting cooperation for unilateralism. In addition, EU policies of externalisation have included a vast number of countries in North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. By multiplying the number of partners, those policies have aimed to reduce the vulnerability to the actions of any single one.

However, it is also illusory to believe that cooperation and externalisation can reliably achieve restrictions beyond a certain point because they face

eventually the same problem as unilateral policies. The irregular flows to Europe are autonomous and few migrants consider transit countries as destinations. Rather than investing in restrictive policies, those countries' interest is simply to [let migrants pass](#) – a fortiori if they would have otherwise to host migrants in camps.

In addition, foreign policy benefits can create a strong incentive for transit states to avoid cooperation. When there exist territorial disputes, making pieces of territory vulnerable to irregular migrants' inflows increases the cost of holding onto those territories for restrictionist states.

Both Morocco and Turkey have contested in the past Spanish or Greek sovereignty over respectively [Ceuta](#) or [Aegean islands](#), where both countries have [let irregular immigrants arrive](#) recently. Even in the absence of territorial disputes, there are always issues between neighbours on which it can be tempting to extract concessions.

As illustrated above, Spain could use its leverage on France to get support in the fight against the Basque independence movement. Morocco [contests](#) Spanish support for the Polisario Front. Turkey wants [more money](#) from the EU and more support for its operations in Syria. By making destination countries vulnerable to transit countries, restrictions always allow instrumentalisation.

As a new war broke out between Russia and its Belarusian ally and Ukraine, it would be foolish to believe that Belarus and Russia, who have [helped irregular migrants move towards the EU](#) in peacetime, will not continue. This new situation increases the costs and risks of restrictive policies.

When neither unilateralism nor cooperation can solve the problems of interdependence, internal reform is the rational answer. Yet, it is illusory to believe that one could simply tear down restrictive policies, as the commentators who reach this stage of the debate suggest.

Their statements have even contributed to preventing the search for

solutions and have favoured restrictions. There would still be tensions if there were no restrictions but within destination countries. Putting forward that, at the aggregate level, immigration has been [economically beneficial](#) to destination countries does little to undermine this point.

There has been a consensus on restricting immigration across the political spectrum in all EU countries – for more than half a century in some of them. Recall the French socialist government's '[complete](#) lock-down of borders in the early 1980s. Another constant is that the political entrepreneurs of restrictions have presented them as [easy](#) and a matter of sovereignty – overlooking the costs of such policies and the vulnerability they create. We know so little to explain this predicament within European countries.

In my [historical research](#), I investigate how cultural fears and law-and-order concerns have emerged long after the turn to restrictive migration policies. Therefore, they have been probably more the outcome of the policies marginalising immigrants than the original cause of restrictions. It is as if the very restriction policies had created [an unstoppable spiral](#). Yet, there is little reflection on how European countries' political process has orchestrated economic conflicts and supposed cultural incompatibilities to produce the current predicament.

Debunking illusions about restrictive migration policies are helpful to start thinking about possible solutions, but as long as it leads to questioning what we still do not know about those policies. No one knows why restrictions really started in Europe, why they have systematically become [more coercive](#) over the last half-century, and what the alternatives could be.

Both the claims for escalating restrictions and the simplistic solutions suggesting we could easily tear down those restrictions prevent a solution. Instead, the focus should be on investigating the driving forces behind the recent history of migration restrictions in Europe.