

The Trap of Migration Sovereignism: What the Ceuta Tragedy Teaches Us



by Ferruccio Pastore

- Relying entirely on outsourcing controls to third countries makes EU states more vulnerable to irregular migration inflows.
- The Ceuta tragedy demonstrates the destabilising effects of this approach.
- Only by strengthening the EU's external sovereignty can member states better manage migration and avoid the pitfalls of nation-based sovereignism.

Europe's political future has never so dramatically hinged on the migration issue. And actually not so much on migration dynamics on the ground (irregular arrivals are at moderate levels and falling), but rather on the way in which these are portrayed and perceived.

Elections in Italy, France and Spain are now just round the corner, all scheduled for spring 2027; with increasingly radical migration policy proposals everywhere at the centre of the debate.

Against this backdrop, the international dimension of the migration issue is becoming increasingly crucial and complex. To try to make sense of it, a brief recap is essential.

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Dropping solidarity

For decades, EU governments have been engaged in ever more sophisticated forms of ‘migration diplomacy’. In directly affected countries like Italy, awareness that ‘controlling migration’ is impossible without the cooperation of countries of origin and transit dates back at least to the late 1990s.

The entry into force of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum represents a defeat for the Mediterranean countries

For a long time, however, this ‘external dimension’ of migration policy was complemented by an ‘internal’ agenda, perceived as at least equally important and centred on the concept of solidarity among member states. Among both experts and decision-makers, the prevailing view was that completely halting unplanned migration flows was essentially impossible, from both a practical and a legal standpoint. The fundamental principle prohibiting the refoulement of migrants in distress remained a cornerstone, albeit under mounting pressure.

Given this premise, until a few years ago, much of the European debate centred on the rules for distributing the burden of reception fairly. Traditionally, the states most geographically exposed to unplanned migration flows (mostly from Africa and the Middle East) – such as Italy and Spain – were united, on the basis of a largely bipartisan domestic consensus, in calling for greater solidarity from the less exposed countries. The latter opposed this, criticising – often justifiably – the laxity of the former in preventing so-called ‘secondary movements’, meaning migrants moving to their territory after landing in southern EU states.

In the wake of the massive influx of Syrian refugees in the summer of 2015, for a brief

period a spirit of tangible solidarity seemed to prevail, with the EU agreeing on binding decisions (though never fully implemented) to redistribute asylum seekers amongst member states, regardless of their point of entry. But that compromise could not withstand increasingly relentless sovereignist propaganda. The principle of mandatory redistribution has gradually but inexorably become a political no-go.

In 2022, the reception of Ukrainian refugees – let free to choose in which member state to seek temporary protection – represented a one-off exception driven by the unanimous perception that a rift within the EU would have played into Russia’s President Vladimir Putin’s hands, but undoubtedly facilitated by the fact that, for once, refugees were white and Christian.

With that exception over (but 4.4 million Ukrainian refugees still residing in the EU), migration sovereignism – which systematically prioritises national interests over European balance – has quickly regained the upper hand. The new Pact on Migration and Asylum, fully implemented since 12 June 2026, maintains a complex mechanism of solidarity; but leaves member states free to convert the actual reception of asylum-seekers into other (vaguely defined) forms of operational or financial support.

From this perspective, the entry into force of the Pact represents a historic and definitive defeat for the Mediterranean countries in their decades-long quest for a European migration order that is more solidarity-based than the one established in Dublin back in 1990, and which is essentially still in force. This structurally unbalanced system places a disproportional burden on peripheral countries.

Explaining a tragedy

On paper, the ‘geopolitical’ defeat of the southernmost and most exposed member states crystallised in the Pact has been offset by



increased investment in external measures, with Brussels giving the green light to ‘innovative solutions’ such as those trialled by the Meloni government in Albania from November 2023, consisting essentially of **extraterritorial detention** of asylum seekers or of irregular migrants awaiting expulsion. Despite some evident shortcomings, these solutions have inspired numerous European governments, desperately **seeking new measures** to pander to electorates apparently more in need of a placebo than of real remedies.

It is against this backdrop that what is more accurately described as the ‘tragedy’ of Ceuta – rather than just a ‘crisis’ – takes place. The facts have not yet been fully established, but what is certain is that, between 30 and 31 July 2026, a number ranging between 60,000 and 80,000 people, mostly Moroccan citizens, poured into the Spanish exclave situated just fifteen nautical miles from the Iberian coast.

Apparently, both Madrid and Rabat were taken by surprise, but within a few hours the Moroccan authorities exerted pressure which led the vast majority of the refugees to turn back. Several thousand fugitives – including many underage boys and girls – remain, in increasingly precarious conditions, on the streets of the small ‘*ciudad autónoma*’ of Ceuta (population 85,000). Sadly, 82 deaths must be added to the toll: mostly adult males, **still unidentified**, who were trampled and drowned whilst attempting to cross the border.

The origins of the tragedy appeared unclear from the outset. Some, including Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez himself, pointed the finger at unnamed ‘traffickers’, who allegedly exploited the news of a **ruling by the Spanish Supreme Court** on 8 July 2026, which denies the possibility of summarily rejecting those who have entered Ceuta or Melilla (Spain’s other exclave on the North African coast) by swimming.

Other sources suggest that the government in Rabat deliberately turned a blind eye. In those days, I was travelling in Morocco, albeit far from the epicentre of the crisis. The events in Ceuta were the talk of the town, and various theories were circulating as to the possible causes of the failure of the border controls. Some, for example, speculated that it was an act of retaliation prompted by a recent **visit by Sánchez to Algiers** (20 July 2026), which stirred anger in Rabat by paving the way for the **granting of Spanish citizenship** to the descendants of *Sahrawis* (inhabitants of Western Sahara, which is claimed by Morocco) born during the period of Spanish colonial administration.

The origins of the Ceuta tragedy appeared unclear from the outset

Other rumours I picked up during those days drew **broader connections**, interpreting the extraordinary exodus as a snub to the socialist government in Madrid in deference to pressure from the United States and Israel, in reaction to Sánchez’s strongly critical stance on the wars in Gaza and on Iran.

Such interpretations cannot be easily dismissed as the product of conspiracy theories. In the chaos of contemporary international relations, where ever-new forms of ‘hybrid warfare’ are proliferating, the induction of mass migration flows to place the adversary in political and operational difficulty has now become standard practice. The best-known precedent was the wave of migrants, mostly from the Middle East, unleashed from the summer of 2021 onwards by the Belarusian government against Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, in retaliation for a package of sanctions adopted by the EU.

But there is also **a lesser-known precedent**, which specifically concerns the Maghreb monarchy. In May 2021, in an ‘incident’ bearing



many similarities to that of July 2026, more than 8,000 migrants poured into Ceuta within a few hours. On that occasion, the Moroccan ambassador in Madrid made allusions suggesting that the exodus could be interpreted as retaliation for the hospitality, offered on health grounds by the Spanish government, to Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front.

What is more surprising are some of the political reactions, particularly those of the Italian government

An ideological retaliation?

From the perspective of purely migratory dynamics, therefore, the tragedy in Ceuta is certainly nothing new. What is more surprising are some of the political reactions, particularly those of the Italian government.

With remarkable promptness, on 31 July, whilst the crisis was still in full swing, the Italian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Piantedosi, convened a high-level committee which **highlighted** “risks for internal security, in relation to possible uncontrolled and sudden movements of third-country nationals [...] with potential terrorist infiltrations”. On this basis, the government immediately ordered the temporary reinstatement of border controls on all arrivals from Spain.

In theory, there is nothing surprising about this: the reintroduction of controls is a safeguard mechanism expressly provided for by the 2016 ‘Schengen Borders Code’. It is frequently activated by member states in response to alleged ‘threats’ relating to migration, terrorism or public order (including even sporting or musical events). Nothing out of the ordinary, then?

In reality, in the case of Ceuta, there is a glaring anomaly, given that the Spanish exclaves on

North African soil *are not, and never have been, part of the Schengen Area*. Migrants trapped in Ceuta do not have the right or the possibility to travel freely to other EU states.

In light of this fundamental inconsistency, it is hardly surprising that not only the Spanish government but also numerous independent observers have questioned the legitimacy of the measure taken by Rome, raising the suspicion that it was motivated by ideological hostility and domestic political calculations (i.e. stemming the growing appeal of Futuro Nazionale, a new radical party born to the right of Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia).

The sovereignist trap

But rather than focusing on the formal legitimacy of reinstating checks on passengers arriving from Spain, it is important to question the strategic significance of this swift Italian response to the events in Ceuta.

With the suspension of Schengen, the Meloni government has officially declared the existence of a high risk of ‘secondary movements’, despite the absence, to date, of any concrete evidence. Yet this government is the very same one which, in line with most of the governments of all political persuasions that have held office in Italy over the past few decades, has consistently sought to oppose readmissions (under subsequent ‘Dublin Regulations’) of asylum seekers who moved irregularly from the peninsula to other countries within the Schengen area, which wanted Italy to get them back.

From this perspective, a look at **official statistics** is extremely informative. Generally speaking, it must be said that the Dublin transfer system is cumbersome and inefficient: out of a total of 111,708 requests submitted in 2025, only 16,620 readmissions actually took place (less than 15 per cent). But if we break down the data, we see that the country receiving the most requests for passive readmissions is Italy itself, with 24,152 requests, followed by Germany (16,519)



and Croatia (12,358). As for actual transfers, the country that agrees to readmit the highest number of asylum seekers who have transited through its territory and then moved on to other member states is Germany, with 4,865 transfers, followed by Spain (3,398) and France (2,021). Italy is near the bottom of the table, with just 85 incoming transfers, equivalent to 0.3 per cent of the requests received.

It is clear that a country with such a low compliance rate lacks credibility when it presents itself as a bulwark against secondary movements, such as the ones allegedly arriving from Ceuta. It is therefore hardly surprising that Meloni's initiative has caused discontent in several European capitals and has led to

increased pressure for Italy to apply the Dublin principle more rigorously. A principle which the new Pact – it is worth recalling – not only fails to abolish, but in some respects actually tightens.

A very clear and distinct lesson can be drawn from this tragic and chaotic summer affair: when it comes to migration policies, as in so many other areas, national sovereignism is not only a blunt weapon, but one that even risks exploding in the hands of those who handle it clumsily. Only a strengthening (and democratisation) of European sovereignty, including in the fields of migration and foreign policy, can pave the way for a more balanced and effective international governance of migration.

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