CHAPTER 15

The Illiberal Bargain on Migration

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, Western states have pursued a dual migration strategy: economically liberal policies to secure labour supply and hardline measures against 'unwanted' migration. The Trump administration has amplified these long-standing tendencies. Across Europe, governments as different as the UK Labour Party and Italy's Brothers of Italy are cracking down on asylum and maritime arrivals while muddling through on labour migration. Economic and demographic pressures ensure persistent demand for migrant workers, even as short-term politics reward spectacular enforcement campaigns with damaging consequences. What has shifted is the growing centrality of migration as a security domain. Fears of 'weaponized' migration in Europe and Trump's confrontations with origin states show how trade and aid are being deployed to pressure poorer countries into cooperation on control and deportation. Despite hostile rhetoric, the European Union (EU) and the United States are increasingly converging on coercive, illiberal bargains. Whether labour market needs, practical limits or political resistance can soften this trajectory remains uncertain.

Keywords: *migration, borders, liberalism, refugees, security, transatlantic relations*

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Introduction

After the Cold War, it seemed briefly as if a new 'borderless' world was emerging. Yet as the Iron Curtain came down, new barriers appeared at the United States–Mexico border – continuing the 'securitisation' of especially Latin American migration pushed by Ronald Reagan's administration in the 1980s. In the European Union, securitization accompanied the establishment of a shared external border. In both cases, a security approach to migration emerged as the liberal vision of free trade and openness ran into deep contradictions. Yet this 'security model' has failed. This failure, in turn, has contributed to rising political fervour – fuelling, in the process, even more demand for border security.

Notably, the 'security model' short-circuited ordinary political procedure. Measures were frequently pushed through from the top with little democratic scrutiny. Externally, it involved strengthening the repressive apparatus of 'partner states'. Rather than bolstering democratic values, 'border security first' increasingly eroded their importance – as seen most starkly in the European Union's (EU) collaboration with repressive regimes.

Domestically, 'border security first' hindered a robust democratic debate over the realities of migration. In the United States, border enforcement was a stopgap measure to address a central contradiction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA): capital and goods moved frictionlessly while workers did not. In the EU, border security similarly rose as a simple 'fix' when member states failed to enact a functioning common migration or asylum policy to accompany their new borderless area of free movement and trade.

In the process, a two-faced migration regime was consolidating on both sides of the Atlantic. The promotion of a globalized economy – including for large-scale labour migration – was accompanied by an increased, if selective, securitization of poorer overland migrants and asylum seekers from the south. The two sides of the transatlantic relationship, insofar as migration was concerned, seemed to move as much in lockstep as in other domains such as trade, finance and international security.

These recent historical patterns reveal some remarkable continuities in the politics of migration across the Atlantic. However, in recent years the 'security model' against unwanted migration has gained increasing salience despite solid evidence that it has tended to fuel border chaos and stronger smuggling networks

while eroding fundamental rights and liberties. The crisis footing over migration has been central to rising 'populist' or authoritarian sentiment, to the point where its framing and 'solutions' are increasingly mainstream.[1] While this tendency has become especially stark under the second Donald J. Trump presidency, the EU and many of its member states are equally wedded to the security model. Meanwhile, the failure to adequately account for the structural determinants of migration – the supply and demand of labour, deep demographic and economic imbalances, and drivers of forced displacement – will continue to haunt politics on both sides of the Atlantic. The risk is that, on current trends, this 'unresolved business' will keep fuelling demand for authoritarian 'solutions'. Here governments may not simply keep 'muddling through' but actively shift towards a renewal of transatlantic relations through hard securitization – including, besides vast investments in rearmament and surveillance, the securitization of mobility on a much wider scale.

The chapter will compare migration politics in the United States and at the EU's southern external border since the 1990s. We will examine one emblematic case, Spain, which became an important immigration destination around this time. As elsewhere in Europe, both conservative and socialist governments responded to this shift in part by securitizing numerically small movements of African migrants and asylum seekers towards Spanish land and sea borders – a pattern replicated on a much larger scale at the US–Mexico border. The security model has fed further border crises in both cases, while overall migration has continued to fluctuate in response to structural factors, with border security itself providing further impetus for undocumented migration. Next, we shift focus to the present Trump administration and to the increasingly nationalist politics of Europe, showing how the security approach has fed on its own failures while opening a window for radical offerings from the 'new right'. Throughout, we must understand US and European migration regimes as intertwined: rhetoric, expertise and technology have travelled across the Atlantic while buttressing an increasingly shared political outlook, with one partial exception: Spain itself, which in recent years has opted for a more liberal approach.[2]

1. The term 'populist' alluded to here as it is the keyword of the collection as a whole, would require specifying given its frequent blanket and negative use in public debate. Space precludes such a discussion.
2. The extent to which the 'epistemic communities' emerging on the new right will inflect these existing transatlantic bordering communities and practices remains to be seen (compare Robert Benson elsewhere in this volume); but the entrance into the border security market of new actors at the Big Tech/political interface are already starting to reshape it.

Europe's two-faced migration regime since the 1990s

A small Spanish enclave at the tip of North Africa is emblematic of the challenges in managing the EU's external border. At the 'autonomous city' of Ceuta, one of the EU's only two land borders in Africa, Europe erected its first border barriers against migration in the 1990s. Since this time, each new measure at the border has fuelled more dangerous entry methods, as the guards themselves point out. The fences were soon being breached *en masse*, similarly to the 'kamikaze runs' taking place at the San Diego–Tijuana border. When Madrid announced it would reinforce the barrier in 2005, migrants took their chance. The result was one of Europe's earliest 'border crises': an event in which at least fourteen migrants were killed in gunfire, with many more expelled deep into the Sahara desert.

Since that time, crises have periodically recurred. However, this has not stopped Ceuta's barrier from becoming a prototype for fences that today stretch from Greece to Finland. Spain also provided Europe with a model for 'externalizing' controls to African states, first in Morocco and later, when routes shifted due to post-2005 crackdowns, to West Africa.

Meanwhile, Spain pursued diplomatic efforts that fed into **the Europeanization of border management**. The Frontex agency conducted its first notable operations off the Canary Islands, where the next 'migration crisis' occurred in 2006, itself a knock-on effect of the 2005 crackdowns. EU initiatives on border security, development, and even 'mobility partnerships' multiplied – a process driven partly by member states such as Spain, keen to offer aid and diplomatic relations in exchange for African states agreeing to patrol migration routes and accept deportees. The carrots-and-sticks approach – articulated by European governments at a 2002 summit in Seville – seemed to offer a 'solution' that paired border security with opportunities for cross-regional collaboration.

In the intervening period, the Spanish economy continued to grow at a febrile pace. Amid demographic imbalances and strong labour demand, migrant workers were desperately needed. Madrid ensured a steady supply of workers, especially from Latin America, Eastern Europe and even Morocco. In this context, **the spectacle of border enforcement allowed politicians to show a 'tough' line on**

migration while simultaneously encouraging large-scale labour immigration.[3] This disproportionate concern over the external border was a Europe-wide phenomenon: indeed, already in the 1990s, northern European states had been leaning on their southern counterparts to enforce strict measures. Spain also remained emblematic of the wider European 'muddling through' on migration as it launched regularization campaigns and released boat arrivals from detention with a deportation order, free to join the informal economy.[4] The two-faced migration regime kept the economy thrumming and the borders 'secure' – sending a mixed message picked up in origin states and among European voters.

To critics in politics, advocacy and academia, a small minority of migrants and asylum seekers were seeing their basic rights sacrificed as they faced dangerous expulsions into desert areas by partner forces or extremely risky sea crossings in attempts to evade patrols and radar systems. The heightened salience of a small – and clearly racialized – minority of migrants was, at the same time, channelling right-wing 'populist' sentiment towards the borders, fuelling demand for further crackdowns. Meanwhile, deaths owing to 'Fortress Europe' policies since 1993 have been estimated at more than 66,000 – a staggering figure (United Against Refugee Deaths 2025).

The United States: A model of mismanagement?

A similar trend could be observed in the United States. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act, similar to Spanish efforts, offered an amnesty to undocumented migrants while paving the way for further crackdowns. President Ronald Reagan hardened rhetoric as he called undocumented migration 'a threat to national security' with 'terrorists and subversives… just two days' driving time' from the Texas border – echoing Trump's later pronouncements (Massey 2015, 288). By the 1990s, army surplus landing mats were stood on their ends outside

3. In the early 2010s, a Spanish immigrant census showed that, for all the media and political attention, fewer than 1% of those entering the country since 1990 had done so by means of irregular boat migration (Andersson 2014).
4. Indeed, many deportees in West Africa suggested that Madrid had opened the path to the Canary Islands as it needed workers in construction and agriculture (Andersson 2014).

San Diego to form the first rudimentary border barrier (Harding 2012, 91). Border security operations started multiplying while collaboration deepened with Mexico and Central American states – replicating the 'externalization' pattern of Euro–African relations.

Unlike those in Europe, migration flows across the southern US border were of a different magnitude. Very much like in Europe, however, Washington was 'muddling through' as it tried at once to satisfy labour needs and project selective toughness. The resulting 'border game' (Andreas 2000) offered a stark contrast with the post-Second World War approach. The bracero program – a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico that began in 1942 to address wartime US labour shortages and allowed millions of Mexicans to work legally in the United States as seasonal agricultural labourers – had once provided legal pathways for labour migration. Once it ended in the 1960s, irregular migration rose correspondingly as legal routes were replaced by illegal ones (Massey et al. 2015). As border enforcement saw vast sums of investment from the 1980s onwards, migrants still kept arriving – only now, they were easier to exploit.[5]

As in Europe, border security was deployed as a solution to an eminently political problem: it papered over the cracks and contradictions of a 'free' transnational market – a market that, through NAFTA, was leading to a 'migration hump' as many Mexicans left amid shifting economic opportunities. After 9/11, securitization escalated under the aegis of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. However, the tremendous efforts did not halt deaths or irregular migration. In 1986, there were some two million undocumented migrants in the United States; after years of heavy border security investment, in 2008, there were twelve million (Massey et al. 2015). Many of these were migrants who no longer felt it safe to return to Mexico after the agricultural season, owing to the fences and patrols. Each new border crisis kept feeding demand for more border security, opening further avenues for authoritarian and right-wing forces to propose ways for breaking the stalemate.

5. Meanwhile, at the border, social scientists identified a 'voluntary-departure complex' – in essence, authorities apprehended migrants and then released them, incentivizing further entry attempts (Heyman 1995). This increased statistics of apprehensions while simultaneously feeding the informal labour market.

Post-2008: Securitization gains momentum

After the financial crisis, **the path dependency of the security model was strengthened on both sides of the Atlantic.** In the United States, immigration reform became increasingly contingent on ploughing even more funding into border security. While the political battles played out along broadly familiar lines, the underlying security model remained bipartisan, as revealed by Senate wranglings over draconian immigration bills or indeed the record three million people removed under the Obama administration (Foley 2013).

Yet in the early 2010s, Mexican immigration was in fact *falling* due primarily to demographic and economic factors. Migrant apprehensions were at their lowest numbers in about forty years (WOLA 2025). **The security model was taking on a momentum of its own**, irrespective of actual migration figures or its actual results.[6]

In Europe, the security model received great impetus from the 2015 border crisis, when record numbers crossed the Mediterranean via Türkiye and Libya. Frontex began operations with a modest budget of €19 million in 2006: by 2022, it had reached €750 million. The allocation to Frontex was but a small part of the expenditure on the national level, or the cost of externalizing controls. The security model was building further momentum via attempts by both 'partner states' and hostile actors to use irregular migration as a bargaining chip with Brussels and EU capitals. Favours included financial disbursements – such as €1 billion in aid for Niger, the exact sum it had asked for in 2016 'to fight clandestine migration', or the much larger aid deal struck with Türkiye (Financial Times 2016). It also included political favours, such as Spain's acquiescence to Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara as quid pro quo for Rabat playing its on-again-off-again role as Europe's 'gendarme'.

6. Incidentally, many political, institutional and commercial actors – from companies providing the hardware to outsourced forces fighting migration along transit routes and employers inland – stood to gain from this momentum. Since the end of the Cold War, the Border Patrol budget has increased almost twenty-fold – from some $263 million in 1990 to $4.8 billion in 2024. In a reflection on the 'winners' of securitization, the migration scholar Douglas Massey writes that a 'Latino threat narrative was manufactured and sustained by an expanding set of self-interested actors who benefitted from the perpetuation of an immigration crisis, which drove an unprecedented militarization of the border that radically transformed a long-standing migration system from a circularity to settlement' (Massey 2015).

In sum, **politicians on both sides of the Atlantic converged around a two-faced migration regime**: feeding migrants into their labour-hungry economies on the one hand, including illegalized workers who could be readily exploited, and launching tough-seeming crackdowns at physical borders and in third countries, on the other. The result was a growing enforcement industry and a self-sustaining spiral of securitization. In this spiral, there was eventually one clear winner: the challengers on the hard or new right, which actively played the two sides of the border regime against one another – using overall immigration figures as an argument for more crackdowns at external land and sea borders, for instance, or using the frequent crises at those borders as a justification for saying the whole migration system (and by implication, its mainstream political architects) was compromised.

2020s: total security

Even as political challengers started becoming more vocal – including in the United Kingdom's Brexit campaign, in the first Trump presidency, or in the rise of right-wing authoritarian forces across continental Europe – one could still see much transatlantic 'muddling through' on migration. However, **the two-faced migration regime is tilting further towards securitization**. The impetus is not only coming from the Trump administration or from Europe's authoritarian right. Centrist European governments are also adopting similar rhetoric and objectives, while increasingly following the new right's lead. Instead of sating popular demand for more border control, however, they contribute to an uncontrollable appetite for more security and for more hard-right solutions.

In the EU, policymakers are increasingly painting migration as a security problem. Measures include crackdowns on 'instrumentalized' migration – the tactic of using migrants as a bargaining chip, which developed in direct response to Europe's migration-induced panic. Even so, governments still adhere to the two-

7. We can also compare with the United Kingdom after Brexit. In recent years, it has experienced a pattern that offers parallels with the Spanish crackdowns on irregular migration, while being emblematic of the two-faced migration regime and its increasing tilt towards securitization. Brexit had to a large extent been framed as a task of 'taking back control' of the border. Yet, in the years since the vote, immigration increased by large numbers. The structural demand for workers had not gone away, and the UK labour market remained as unregulated as it had been when it first attracted large numbers of European workers. Meanwhile, rhetorical focus kept being hardened against the small number of asylum seekers and migrants arriving across the English Channel. Here, like in the Mediterranean, the security model kept failing in its ostensible aims. In earlier years, those seeking to cross the English Channel did so via the Calais tunnel and ferries. As

faced migration regime in important respects – including Italy's 'populist' right-wing government, which has opened legal migration pathways into sectors with labour shortages paired with harder crackdowns in the Mediterranean.[7]

In the United States, Trump has shifted focus inland. Raids on homes and workplaces have targeted green card holders and blue-chip technology companies (Financial Times 2025). European visitors have been caught up in crackdowns, adding potential transatlantic friction. Overall, the securitization of US cities and workers shows how the security model increasingly 'trumps' the economy. In the 'Big Beautiful Bill' of 2025, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) alone received an estimated $37.5 billion a year while its watchdog was gutted, citizenship-stripping came up for discussion, and the courts and Congress let checks and balances melt away – creating, as one commentator put it, a 'security state within a state' (Luce 2025).

On both sides of the Atlantic, there are again some clear winners. First, the hard or far right, which always offers more convincing 'security theatre'. Second, the defence, security and detention–deportation industries, which are seeing a staggering surge in demand. And third, the human smugglers, who have found themselves with a captive market – a lesson that has consistently been ignored despite clear evidence that criminal syndicates have grown stronger and more predatory on the back of enforcement efforts (Andersson 2024).

Where next?

The two-faced migration regime has proven remarkably long-lived, as even the most hardline governments struggle to square the circle of economic realities and security politics. However, we may also discern not just a quantitative but a *qualitative* shift in the security model. Migration is becoming central to how 'security' is envisioned, and this is occurring in transatlantic dialogue. We see this, for instance, in the

control and surveillance accelerated, routes migrated towards the sealine, leading to a booming market for smuggling via small inflatable rafts. In response, the Labour government has offered a 'counterterror' approach to fighting smugglers. As many predicted, this has failed miserably (Andersson 2024). In the absence of attention to the structural drivers of desperate migration – and in the absence of workable post-Brexit agreements with the EU – 'small boats' have kept appearing. As a result, the government has increasingly shifted towards painting overall migration as a problem. In spring 2025, it flagged crackdowns on care workers, nurses and students. A few months later, it launched plans for a digital ID as a means of stopping the boats – bringing repercussions for citizens as well. It is a sledgehammer to crack a nut: maritime arrivals into the United Kingdom in 2024 made up a paltry 4% of all immigration.

geopolitics of bargaining with migrants played by the Trump administration with origin and 'dumping' countries, or in the very similar deals being crafted by the EU and its member states. We see it, notably, in how the earlier emphasis on development and human security, especially in the EU case, has melted away. Even a classical 'security crisis' – Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine – has increasingly been framed in terms of 'instrumentalized' movements of desperate people.

The Trump administration likes to lecture 'liberal' Europe on sleepwalking into an 'invasion' – deploying rhetoric not dissimilar to that of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi when he once used racist language to threaten Europe over engineered migration flows. Yet the rhetorical smoke hides the reality of **increasing convergence around treating migration as a security domain**. The security model is now hitting legal migrants, permanent residents and sometimes even citizens with invasive surveillance and control. Meanwhile, both the United States and European actors engage in lopsided bargaining with poorer states over responsibility for migration and asylum, 'instrumentalising' migrants for domestic and geopolitical ends.

Some dampers exist, especially in the EU, where some aspects of the Union and some member states (Spain being one) hold out for a more liberal approach. In fact, one main risk of a breakdown in transatlantic relations comes from the Trump administration's putting its thumb on the scale in favour of far-right challengers while undermining checks and balances. Yet for now, the transatlantic bargain is developing, much as in the military domain, with Europe enthusiastically following through on further securitization. While we continue to see much 'muddling through' domestically, we are also seeing signs of **a 'renewal' of transatlantic relations around an illiberal bargain** that construes migration as a threat and refugees and migrants as bargaining chips in the international arena.

The path forward

For those who wish to reverse this trend, a few things should take priority:

1. Establish a civil liberties compact in the interest of citizens and foreigners alike. As we can start to discern both in the ICE raids in the United States and in various European initiatives of control and surveillance, efforts to securitize migration eventually start hitting the wider social fabric and affecting citizens' liberties as well,

while frequently fuelling an anxiety that benefits the far right.[8] A compact on liberties can ensure that the EU's 'area of freedom, security and justice' becomes concrete and meaningful for all residents. Baking in privacy and civil liberties safeguards into new control proposals is a start, as even some of the architects of the US homeland security state are now acknowledging.[9] Enshrining such safeguards would show that the EU is still keeping some faith in small-l liberal values – a project that may surprisingly appeal to many of the voters flocking to the new right, who, on the whole, are worried about state surveillance and overreach.

2. Rework relationships with 'partner states'.

The European externalization of controls has led to a *ceding* of control to neighbouring states, who have consistently used migration fears to extract political or economic concessions (Chebel d'Appollonia 2012). As border guards themselves recognize, it is a game the Europeans are increasingly losing. Here is an opportunity to shift to a more positive, pragmatic footing. It is in the gift of Brussels and member states to shift the equation back towards economic cooperation, humanitarian and peacebuilding support and reaffirmed democratic rights – but this will require some heavy lifting, including a revival of refugee resettlement programmes offering an alternative to displaced people and some goodwill to the world's largest refugee hosts in Africa and Asia.

3. Foster positive foreign policy coherence.

The EU and its member states can gear foreign policy towards less distress-inducing migration, not more, as is so frequently the case. The 2015 spike in arrivals was in no small part a knock-on effect of NATO's disastrous Libya intervention. While the chaos spurred large-scale departures from the country, Russia saw the risk of regime change elsewhere and scaled up involvement in Syria's civil war. Geopolitical bargaining with Syrian refugees followed. Today, EU support for Israeli war crimes in Gaza may not be adding pressure to Europe's borders – given the particularities of that context, and the lock-in of its bombarded inhabitants – yet the pattern remains: of foreign policy choices fuelling forced displacement rather than addressing it.

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8. Indeed, in the United Kingdom, protest against state surveillance of the kind offered by digital IDs – pushed by the Labour government as a 'solution' to cross-Channel migration in small boats – is an important part of the new right's political project.
9. As Michael Chertoff, the second Department of Homeland Security chief under George W. Bush, told a 9/11 commemoration in 2025, homeland security efforts 'need to be consistent with our values as a country' – a point increasingly forgotten amid the rush to securitization and surveillance (Government Technology and Services Coalition 2025).

4. Strengthen the social model.

The EU could be bold and see migration as an opportunity and a source of enrichment. Instead, it has frequently been handled terribly poorly through the two-faced migration regime – as a security problem on the one hand, and as a source of use-and-discard labour on the other. The security model, in other words, distracts from the need to strengthen labour protections. A smart policy would be to turn this around. In fact, a de-securitization of migration can occur in tandem with a strengthening of social security.

This strengthening would entail adequate labour standards and fair pay for citizens and migrants alike; fortifying the welfare state and so creating attractive jobs; cracking down on unscrupulous employers, not employees; and providing genuine rights for people fleeing persecution through safe routes rather than via the heavily policed borderlands that feed the smuggling economy and partner-state brinkmanship. Such controls would provide pathways to genuine 'integration' rather than generating just-in-time labour pools. Paired with targeted funds for local areas where migrants concentrate – as well as sensible policies for ensuring everyone does not end up in the same place – this will reduce costs and increase benefits for citizens. It may well put a damper on international movement as people respond to reduced labour demand. Incidentally, however, this may also help origin countries struggling with large outflows of their working population through unsafe routes. It will also offer migrants a genuine and safe alternative.

It is notable that *border guards themselves* are alive to the unsustainability of the two-faced border regime and its increasingly illiberal tilt. At Ceuta, the Civil Guard chief presiding over Europe's first border fences told the author in 2023 that migration had to be returned to the political fold. However, in his view, there was a 'political cost' that no government wanted to assume in creating regular labour migration. The EU, he suggested, could recruit workers into seasonal agricultural programmes or develop other pathways that could compete with 'irregular migration'. At the moment, he noted, there was no competition. Unfortunately, in the political sphere as well, there is increasingly no competing perspective against the disastrous security model, even as it extends its reach ever further into everyday life and into international relations. So far, the only real political winner in the securitization arena is the authoritarian right. For the EU project, and certainly for progressive and liberal actors within it, this should be the time to find a better, more rational, and more humane model that competes with the vision offered by right-wing authoritarian forces and their backers across the Atlantic.

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