The external dimension of EU migration policy – new proposals, possibilities, and risks

Under the pressure of an increased number of irregular arrivals and asylum applications in 2022, and while negotiations on the reform of the Common European Asylum System are ongoing, the EU is – again – searching for solutions outside EU territory. SIEPS senior researcher **Bernd Parusel** recapitulates the 'external dimension' of EU migration policy and discusses some of the ideas currently on the table.

The external dimension of EU migration policy tends to reappear on the agendas of EU decision-making bodies whenever migration flows increase and are perceived as a threat.

But what exactly are we talking about? EU policies on migration have both an internal and an external dimension. While the internal dimension can be understood as comprising, for instance, common EU rules on asylum procedures, reception conditions, and the sharing of responsibilities for asylum seekers among the Member States, the external one concerns the EU's relations with other countries and regions. It is an intricate matrix of policy measures, legal instruments, and financial transfers for cooperation with third countries on the management of migration, borders and asylum.

This includes return, readmission, and visa facilitation agreements between the EU and third countries; formal and informal dialogues, consultations and partnerships to discuss and organise migration and mobility; and financial support for migration-related measures abroad. There are operational components as well, such as deployments of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) outside the EU to secure borders, or to facilitate the return of rejected asylum seekers and the prevention of irregular migration.

The external dimension of migration is linked to, but not synonymous with, what scholars sometimes refer to as 'externalisation'. Externalisation has a somewhat narrower focus, referring to measures to prevent migration at source and the offshoring of asylum and migration management. One example is the idea, which Denmark and the United Kingdom have pursued, of outsourcing the reception of asylum seekers and the examination of their applications to Rwanda. The aim of externalisation is that sending, or transit, countries limit migration flows so that they do not reach their intended destinations.

A brief history of EU external action on migration

Looking back at how EU policies on this external dimension have evolved over the past two decades, some milestones should be mentioned.

In 2005, the European Council noted an 'increasing importance of migration issues' and 'mounting public concern' about migration in some Member States. It therefore launched a 'Global Approach to Migration' (GAM), which was further developed by the European Commission in 2007 and 2008 and resulted in a framework for the cooperation of the EU with third countries on migration and asylum. The 'Stockholm Programme' of 2009 acknowledged the importance of strengthening the GAM, called for a 'comprehensive partnership with the countries of origin and of transit', and recommended a balance between the GAM's three goals: promoting mobility and legal migration; optimising the link between migration and development, and preventing and combating illegal immigration.

In 2011, the Arab Spring and the migration flows it triggered put external action high on the EU agenda again. The EU started dialogues on migration, mobility and security with Tunisia and Morocco, and the GAM was revised, becoming the 'Global Approach to Migration and Mobility'

(GAMM). The new framework had four priorities: improving the organisation of legal migration and facilitated mobility; preventing and reducing irregular migration in an efficient, yet humane way; strengthening synergies between migration and development, and strengthening international protection systems and the external dimension of asylum.

After the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers in the EU in 2015 and 2016, external action became more robust as the EU moved from softer approaches to tough – but also controversial – deals. EU states made an agreement with Turkey to stop people in search of protection from transiting into Greece and the rest of the union. The EU also began supporting the Libyan Coast Guard in preventing migrants and refugees from crossing the Mediterranean towards Malta and Italy. Very significant amounts of money were channeled into projects in African countries aimed at addressing the root causes of forced displacement and irregular migration, via a new 'Emergency Trust Fund for Africa'. A main beneficiary of EU funding was Niger, which had been identified as a key transit hub of irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa towards North Africa and Europe. In addition, EU leaders often talked about opening legal pathways to Europe to redirect irregular migration flows towards safer and legal channels, but related pilot projects generally remained small-scale.

What's new?
In early 2023, external action has again taken centre stage. Member States' ministers of justice and home affairs held talks on the topic in January, and heads of state and government in February. Although attitudes differ somewhat between softer and harder approaches towards third countries, the overall tone has become tougher. Proposals now emphasise 'leverage' and pressure on third countries more than mutually beneficial cooperation.

EU leaders' main concern is the return of rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants to their home countries, which they say is not working well at present because some of those countries are reluctant to take their citizens back. These low return rates are partly the result of factors beyond governmental control, such as instability in certain countries of origin, but one idea to make progress is to use EU visa rules as a lever. For citizens of countries that appear uncooperative on return, it would become harder to get Schengen visas. Furthermore, conditionality policies were suggested, making trade preferences and development aid dependent on third countries' cooperation on return and the prevention of irregular migration.

The renewed interest in the external dimension in 2023 is likely a result of two developments: first, an increased number of irregular borders crossings and asylum applications in connection with rising capacity problems in the asylum systems of several EU members in 2022, prompting fears of a new 'migration crisis'; and second, the realization that the ongoing reform of the internal EU asylum rules will take time and, even if it succeeds, will not necessarily reduce immigration. Those in the EU who want fewer asylum seekers are therefore looking beyond legislative reform and pushing for measures to counteract migration overseas, before migrants reach EU borders.

Possibilities and risks
It is difficult to predict whether the recent proposals, if they are implemented, will achieve what they set out to. The visa lever could put pressure on sending countries, but in many places it is already difficult to get Schengen visas. Making trade preferences and development aid conditional on third countries' obedience to restrictive EU migration goals could be ineffective or even counter-productive because many third countries would likely perceive such approaches as one-sided and paternalistic. While governments of third countries have generally no interest in their citizens risking their lives in perilous irregular journeys to Europe, they often expect the EU to offer safe and legal alternatives, to treat migrants fairly and support their integration, and to allow them to send money ('remittances') back to relatives at home, instead of detaining and deporting them.

There is a mismatch, here, between the interests of many third countries, on the one hand, and the EU on the other. EU proposals that are perceived as unbalanced could therefore lead to frustration and alienation among third countries rather than to greater willingness to cooperate. This risks further eroding the trust and sense of partnership that are needed to build a better framework for managing migration and refugee protection.