



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

# Europe's migration debate up while numbers down



Migration is very much back at the centre of performative politics in Europe, after the first six months of the year were dominated by Donald Trump-induced disruptions over issues such as tariffs, NATO and Ukraine.

From the UK to Germany and the Netherlands, although under very different circumstances, the far-right knocking at the doors of power has once more put migration at the top of the agenda, albeit without any new ideas, insights, or indeed practical proposals.

The European Commission is chipping in as well, with a stream of tough policy ideas, mainly **focused** on a common 'European Return Order' and processing asylum seekers in third countries outside the European Union. It's the same approach that has already proved problematic both in Italy and the UK.

Tougher EU asylum rules agreed last year - that should also enhance solidarity among member states - only enter into effect in 2026 and have been criticised by the far-right as too little, too late.

The EU has long been the focus of dissatisfaction from the far-right for supposedly not allowing tougher border controls, although countries have largely taken steps that they see fit regardless of EU and Schengen regulations.

Additionally, the EU has taken what **critics** at the other end of the political spectrum regard as draconian measures at its external border to keep migrants and refugees out.

These include payments to third countries to prevent migrants from reaching the EU. And the EU border agency, Frontex, has been accused of being complicit in pushbacks.

None of this has lessened the anti-immigrant rhetoric in most EU member states and beyond, and it has had even less impact on the issue being used as a far-right wedge in the struggle for political advantage.

## Germany's get-tough approach

Germany's new government under the centre-right's Friedrich Merz is trying to fight off a surge by the far-right AfD. It has instituted tough new entry controls that controversially include sending back asylum seekers at its border with fellow EU and Schengen free-travel-zone countries.

In a sign that the new government, which includes the left-of-centre SPD, is serious about projecting a get-tough approach, it this week also **proposed** restrictions on family unifications for certain categories of migrants.

**Geert Wilders has threatened to bring down the Dutch government if it didn't follow Germany's lead**

The German measures have been seized upon in the Netherlands by Geert Wilders, the far-right leader of the country's largest coalition party, who has **threatened** to bring down the Dutch government if it didn't follow Germany's lead.

He has also, for good measure, demanded it reduce the number of asylum seekers reception centres, make sure that Syrian refugees leave the country, and suspend EU asylum rules.

Wilders appears motivated by falling poll numbers for his far-right PVV, but he might also see an opportunity to turn the tables on some of his even less popular coalition partners.

New coalition negotiations or a new election could see him realise his dream of becoming Prime Minister himself, rather than delegating it to a figurehead, as is the case for now.

## UK's migration contradictions

The resumed migration ructions are by no means limited to the European mainland.

Having 'taken back control' with Brexit, the

UK, now under a left-of-centre Labour government, took the lead in the new round of tough talk after Nigel Farage and his Reform UK made gains in the local elections and won a by-election earlier this month.

The British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, infamously **spoke** of migration risking the creation of “an island of strangers” and vowed a renewed crackdown.

### The UK is a prime example of the contradictions of migration policy and politics

The UK is a prime example of the contradictions of migration policy and politics. Net **migration** last year stood at around 420,000, double the pre-Brexit campaign, 2016 number. This was down from even higher peaks in 2022 and 2023.

Most of this is from regular entries, people who are legally allowed to work in the UK, allowed in on a points system and mostly hailing from much farther away than nearby EU countries.

Asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented arrivals who are the focus of measures in most countries roughly accounted for just one in ten of people entering, with ‘irregular entries’, including so-called small boats migrants, accounting for less than half again.

While still not insignificant, particularly in terms of human suffering, the relatively small numbers of irregular entries that are the focus of so much political sturm und drang can hardly be held liable for structural issues such as the housing shortage, a creaking NHS and rising wealth gaps.

## Renewed focus on migrants

The same is true across the board in the EU. The presence of irregular migrants, while not trivial, pales in comparison to other inflows.

Border checks, such as the ones that Germany has ramped up in recent weeks, will hardly make a dent in overall migration numbers.

The hardline interior minister, Alexander Dobrindt, proudly announced after one week of stepped-up entry checks that the number of people who were turned back at the border increased from 511 to 739. Of 51 asylum requests at the border, 32 were refused and sent back.



*The German government has tried to point at the marked decline in irregular entries and asylum applications as evidence that the border controls are working - Friedrich Merz*

It might allow the government to boast of tougher action but is relatively insignificant compared to the hundreds of thousands of migrants and the tens of thousands of asylum applications each year.

In Germany, as in the UK and the Netherlands, the renewed focus on migrants and especially asylum seekers comes as numbers are actually declining, reinforcing the sense that the rhetoric is more driven by populist politics than actual developments.

The German government has tried to point at the marked decline in irregular entries and asylum applications as evidence that the border controls, re-introduced partly in 2023, are working.

But one look at numbers provided by the EU's Frontex shows that the decline of arrivals both in Germany and the Netherlands is most likely due to the sharp drop in irregular crossings into the EU as a whole, down 38 per cent in 2024.

While some might make the case that this drop was also due to tougher policies, it is much more likely to be caused by the winding down of the civil war in Syria, even before the fall of the Assad regime, and the reduction in people fleeing places such as Afghanistan.

It's very unlikely that the tougher approaches that are being implemented now, both along the external EU borders as well as on the internal borders, will be effective should there be new forces pushing migrants in Europe's direction.

And politically, centrist parties imitating the far-right or adopting its talking points have a bad track record of surviving for very long. The best they can do is tackle the real problems facing their countries and economies, rather than try to sell their own brand of snake oil.