



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Effectiveness of migration crackdowns becomes political football



A series of recent statistics in both the US and Europe are suggesting that harsh anti-migration measures are having an effect on arrivals.

The US might have seen the first net decline in migrant numbers of the last fifty years. And the new German government says that its border controls and pushbacks have drastically cut asylum requests.

The apparent success of severe and often destabilising crackdowns, even if partly illusory or temporary, is bound to have a polarising effect across the political spectrum.

The measures often fly in the face of due process and previously agreed conventions, domestic and international.

In the US, President Trump's White House has claimed credit for a decline of over one million people in the country's foreign-born population, as **signalled** by a Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data. It's the first such decrease since the 1960s.

In Germany, the government of Chancellor Friedrich Merz introduced sharper border measures and asylum rules in May this year when it came to power.

It now says that asylum requests dropped some 60 per cent year on year in August. In total, since May, Germany has **turned** some 10,000 people away at its borders that should, in theory, be open under European Schengen free-travel rules.

Too early to speak of a trend

The narratives promoted by both the Trump and Merz governments are self-serving on many levels. First, it is that the declines are all due to their policies, which is not always completely evident. Then, it assumes that this is a good thing, which, certainly in economic terms, is not clear either.

They also take it for granted that their aggressive approaches are worth the damage -

to social and political stability in the US case, and to European unity in Germany's. Lastly, there is the question of whether the numbers actually hold up and represent a trend.

In the US, critics point out that it's much too early to speak of a trend and that only next year's Census Bureau data will bring clarity. Also, if there's a trend, it started under former president Biden, who **sharpened** migration and asylum rules mid-2024.

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Still, the decline in new arrivals since Trump took over in January this year is stark. Deportations, on the other hand, a centre-piece of Trump's migration policy, are only up moderately.

In terms of migrants leaving the country, voluntary returns appear to be more significant, yet this still has nowhere near the effect of the drop in migrants entering the country.

As far as Trump's policies are concerned, their effectiveness, if indeed there is any, seems to lie in creating a deterrent effect. Yet, the question remains whether this deterrence would be as effective in times of heightened migrant pressure.

Several extraneous circumstances might contribute to the declining flow of migrants towards the US, first and foremost among them the **increased** Mexican and Panamanian anti-migration efforts.

These can, of course, be partly explained by the pressure on these countries exerted both by both Trump and Biden.

To a lesser degree, probably, some economic stabilisation in Venezuela might have had an effect. Also, many migrants are opting to stay in neighbouring Latin American countries, rather than attempt the difficult journey

further north.

Mild compared to the US

As for the consequences, the US Bureau of Labour Statistics **estimates** that there are now 1.2 million fewer migrant workers in the American workforce.

Farms and others who use seasonal labour are feeling the squeeze. Most economic analysis predicts that this will come at the expense of GDP growth.

But the political and social effects go much further, with evidence emerging that the militarisation of daily life that accompanies the migration crackdown in many places is gnawing away at the democratic foundations of the country.

Migration cases also help create a pattern in the courts. On at least five occasions, the Supreme Court has stayed or vacated lower court injunctions against Trump migration policies.

This is more than any other administration policy and helps create the impression that there's no effective check on presidential power.

In Germany, the domestic situation under Friedrich Merz and his centrist coalition of Christian Democrats and Social Democrats is far less dire.

But even though the government is not pursuing a far-right agenda, on migration it is clearly acting with an eye on the growing popularity of the extremist AfD.

Compared to the US, Germany's measures are mild, with restrictions on family reunions that are also implemented in some other countries, including the UK

Even since elections in February this year, the AfD has **gained** some four per cent in popularity, while the coalition has lost even more. The anti-migration measures were among the first policies implemented by the new government but have so far not stemmed the tide in the polls.

In Merz's case too, the measures are partly from his predecessor, Olaf Scholz, who already instituted renewed controls on Germany's borders in 2024.

Under the EU's Schengen rules, these are supposed to be only in case of crises, and even then, just for a limited period. Germany, however, has said that it will keep them in place indefinitely.

This could at least be until the EU's own **enhanced** migration and asylum rules kick in in 2026. These will make it easier to turn back and repatriate asylum seekers and include an enhanced solidarity mechanism for sharing the asylum seeker population across EU member states.

Compared to the US, Germany's measures are mild, with restrictions on family reunions that are also **implemented** in some other countries, including the UK, and a stricter entry regime at the borders. Repatriations, including to Afghanistan, have also increased.

Yet, it's questionable whether the sharp reduction in the number of asylum seekers that Germany's hardline Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt **celebrates** are all, or even mostly, due to the new measures.

More of extreme political agendas than a genuine desire

The EU has seen a precipitous **drop** in the number of irregular arrivals, both in 2024 and the first half of 2025, of close to forty and twenty per cent.

This was even more pronounced on routes that mostly feed migrants into Germany rather

than Spain and Italy.



Harsh migration measures offer no solution to the much bigger questions of our time - Donald Trump with Friedrich Merz

If this is due to an enforcement mechanism, it's mostly due to the EU's own and by now well-entrenched aggressive anti-migration policies.

These include boosting its Frontex external borders agency, not acting consistently against migrant pushbacks, and paying third countries around the Mediterranean to keep migrants and take measures to prevent their departure to Europe.

While the situation remains dire in many of the countries of origin of those who seek to come to Europe, over the last six months some of the worst drivers of migration might also have at the very least stabilised, particularly in Syria and somewhat in Iraq.

It's evidently premature to claim longer-term trends as a consequence of tougher asylum policies, both in the US and Europe. Drivers of migration could increase again, and given long enough, the likelihood of the measures being evaded also looms.

At least, for now, the path followed by Germany avoids the grotesque domestic clampdown seen in the US. But the damage to the European fabric is already considerable, with internal distrust growing and transport companies, for example, complaining of huge losses due to the controls.

What's for sure is that harsh migration

measures offer no solution to the much bigger questions of our time. They do not address the West's demographic decline, nor its need for foreign labour. And they don't solve the climate, conflict, economic and political pressures that drive migration.

Border controls and humane paths towards entry to both the US and EU can exist side by side. Increased enforcement might have to be a part of that. But the way it's being implemented now speaks more of extreme political agendas than of a genuine desire to achieve a reasonable balance.