



By: TA | AP Insight

Can Europeans be satisfied with Spain's response to the new wave of migrants?



Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez's migration policies faced fierce criticism as leaders from across the European Union met Tuesday following last week's **rush of migrants** to the Spanish territory of Ceuta in North Africa.

The sudden arrival of 72,000 migrants on Thursday and Friday sparked a humanitarian crisis in Ceuta and reignited the immigration debate in the 27-nation bloc, though most of the migrants soon went back.

More than **80 migrants died**, including some who drowned or were trampled in a stampede to cross a breakwater barrier, according to Spanish and Moroccan authorities.

Open letters from 22 EU leaders, and a quick retort from Sanchez, have exposed a roiling debate inside the EU pitting migration hawks against the progressive Spanish leader who has challenged consensus within the bloc on migration as well as **NATO spending**, Gaza and Israel.

Sanchez's government has dismissed the attacks as politically motivated, saying most of the migrants were pushed back from Ceuta within hours in "close coordination with the Moroccan authorities and with very little support from other European states."

While ministers seemed to rally back around Sanchez after meeting Tuesday, Europe displayed a deeply damaging disunity in the aftermath of Ceuta as it faces security threats from Moscow, instability with Washington and economic tension with Beijing, said Alicia García-Herrero, chief economist for Asia Pacific and Middle East for the financial firm Natixis.

"Europe has shown weakness again," she said. "Massive weakness."

Sanchez defends court ruling blamed by Morocco and EU leaders

EU leaders quickly pounced on Sanchez once videos from Ceuta went viral. Many blamed the incident on his government's progressive policies and publicly rallied for new border checks at sea, air and land ports of entry.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni issued the most blunt criticism of Sanchez, as well as announcing that Italy would enforce air and sea border controls with Spain.

Yet Ceuta's remote geographical position meant "there was almost zero risk that people (would) really arrive in Spain and then move on to Italy," said analyst Matteo Villa at the Italian Institute for Political Studies in Milan.

He said that just 2% of migrants arriving in Europe make it to Italy.

Nando Sigona, a professor at the University of Birmingham, said that Meloni detested a move Sanchez presided over in July to **grant legal status** to about 1 million longtime residents, and is eager to portray his approach as a failure.

Sanchez fired back in an online post that called Meloni's position on Ceuta "contrary to European law, humanitarian law, and the principles of solidarity that bind us together."

He said that Italy has allowed in twice the number of migrants as Spain since 2021, with Spain receiving 234,000 to Italy's 478,000.

But the criticism was EU-wide, with Meloni signing a joint letter with 21 other leaders from Finland to Malta that pointed to a July Spanish court ruling as the "trigger" for "this attack on our migration and asylum system."

Spain's Supreme Court had ruled that migrants arriving by sea could not be summarily deported without due process — unlike those who cross by land or climb Ceuta's border fence — because they had not crossed a physical barrier.

Sanchez said that the ruling had been intentionally misconstrued by migrant smugglers to persuade thousands of people to

swim around the border fence.

The Socialist leader replied in his own letter by recalling that Spain had taken in migrants who arrived at eastern European nations from **Belarus in 2021** and at the southern Italian island of Lampedusa in 2023.

This doesn't happen simply due to a passive attitude or omission from Morocco. There was an invitation or it was encouraged - Gil Arias

Morocco's government views the situation as a predictable result of the court ruling, said a high-ranking diplomat who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a highly sensitive issue.

He said it "sent a clear message to migrants: 'Come. If you arrive, you'll be protected.' That outcome should have been anticipated by Ceuta's authorities."

Blame has been pointed the other way, however, with Spain's Defense Minister Margarita Robles on Monday demanding Rabat investigate the local failure to stop tens of thousands of migrants from leaving the kingdom.

Gil Arias, who served as deputy executive director of the EU's border agency Frontex from 2006-2016 and also worked for Spain's interior and migration ministries, said he has "absolutely no doubt" Morocco not only knew of, but was likely directly or indirectly complicit in the Ceuta crisis.

"This doesn't happen simply due to a passive attitude or omission from Morocco," Arias, who retired in 2020, told The Associated Press. "There was an invitation or it was encouraged."

The Moroccan diplomat rejected using force to tackle the migration phenomenon. "We are not Europe's police."

Policies keep changing to meet influx migration patterns

Many right-wing politicians have won elections across the EU by promising to crack down on migration — and they claim to have done so with the **European Migration and Asylum Pact** that grants capitals greater abilities to surveil, detain and deport migrants to so-called "safe countries" like Morocco or "return hubs" outside the bloc.

Data from Frontex shows migration to the EU peaked in 2015 with 1.8 million people, the majority of whom crossed via the Balkans or the eastern Mediterranean.

Since then numbers have dramatically fallen: In the first half of 2026, crossings fell by 37% to around 49,000 people.



The crisis has exposed a need in the EU to develop an emergency mechanism when migration is weaponized - Kyriakos Mitsotakis

"Fewer boats are setting out towards Europe, and that is the result of sustained cooperation with our partners in the region," said Frontex Executive Director Hans Leijtens.

But Ceuta shows there's still an underlying migration problem that the EU has not tackled, said Michele LeVoy, director of the Brussels-based Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants.

"On Ceuta, political games are being played over the lives of people on both sides of the border," she said.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the crisis has exposed a need in the EU to develop an emergency mechanism when “migration is weaponized,” he wrote in a Tuesday op-ed in Politico that attempted to make peace between European politicians.

“The deliberate instrumentalization of migration by state and nonstate actors seeking to test Europe’s resilience, undermine its cohesion and extract political concessions” requires new legal and operational tools to “defend its external borders, deter those who seek to exploit its openness and respond to this new reality firmly, lawfully and collectively,” Mitsotakis wrote.