

# **Far-right Mainstreaming and Migration Governance in Europe**

by Z Coronel



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### **Executive summary**

European migration governance has increasingly been shaped by the mainstreaming of far-right ideas at both national and EU levels. This paper examines Germany, France, and Italy as illustrative cases. Across these, three recurring trends appear: the securitisation of migration, cultural conditionality in integration, and bureaucratic systems limiting access to protection. These measures have little effect on migration flows but strongly shape administrative practices and public perceptions of state control.

At EU level, the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum is an agreement for shared rules handling migration and asylum, but each country is still free to apply those rules in its own way. As a result, some countries are much stricter than others, and this makes cooperation between EU states difficult. This analysis identifies three strategic policy pathways. Each approach involves trade-offs between what is politically acceptable, what governments can realistically implement, and how well migrant rights are protected.

### **Introduction**

Over the past decade, far-right ideas have increasingly shaped migration policy in Europe, influencing political debate and government action even where far-right parties are not in power. Between 2015 and 2025, these ideas have led migration policy to focus more on strict control, cultural conformity, and administrative rules that limit access to protection and rights.

This paper argues that these ideas have led migration policy to focus more on strict control, cultural conformity, and limiting access to protection and rights. Across Germany, France, and Italy, this has resulted in a shared shift toward securitisation, cultural conditionality in integration, and bureaucratic exclusion. While these policies have limited impact on overall migration flows, they significantly reshape administrative practices, political debate, and the balance between state control and migrant rights.

The analysis uses EU and national legislation, including the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, France's 2023 immigration law, Germany's 2023-24 returns legislation, and Italy's maritime decrees. Across these cases, three patterns appear: migration policy is increasingly securitised, integration rules emphasising cultural conformity, and bureaucratic procedures limiting access to protection. While these

policies have little effect on overall migration numbers, they significantly affect administrative practice and political framing of migration, leading to important humanitarian and democratic consequences.

For the purposes of this paper, far-right conservatism combines traditional conservatism with an intensified emphasis on national identity, exclusionary nationalism, and resistance to global governance. It often views migration and cultural diversity as threats to national integrity. Unlike mainstream right-wing politics, far-right conservatism promotes cultural homogeneity and questions pluralism within liberal democracies (Heinisch et al., 2019). This paper focuses not only on far-right parties themselves but also on how their ideas are adopted and institutionalised through laws and policy discussions.

### **Theoretical and historical context**

This section explains the analytical approach used to understand the three case studies. It exemplifies how identity politics and securitisation help explain why migration is increasingly treated as a cultural and security issue, rather than primarily a social or economic one.

#### ***Identity migration politics and post-colonial history***

Migration politics in Europe cannot be understood just in terms of numbers or capacity. Following World War II, European integration created shared political and economic institutions, but the question of who “counts” as culturally European remained unsettled (Wiener et al., 2018). Post-colonial research highlights how migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia are often seen as cultural outsiders, perpetuating historical hierarchies (Bhambra, 2015; Coen, 2024). The far-right often exploits these perceptions of cultural outsiders, framing economic and demographic concerns as existential threats to national identity (Bhambra, 2015). When these ideas enter mainstream debates, they often result in policies of stricter residency rules, civic and language tests, or conditional access to social benefits (Wiener et al., 2018).

#### ***Securitisation and mainstreaming***

Securitisation theory explains how leaders frame migration as a threat to justify restrictive policies (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998). In migration, securitisation happens when migrants are portrayed as risks to public order or security to legitimize restrictive measures. The EU’s 2024-25 legislative agenda,

especially the Pact on Migration and Asylum, illustrates this. While presented as improving coordination, it emphasizes control and risk management, giving member states discretion over borders and returns (European Commission, 2024).

Within this context, mainstreaming refers to when centrist parties adopt elements of far-right rhetoric in response to electoral pressure and voter expectations (Heinisch et al., 2020). This does not mean full ideological agreement. Instead, restrictive policies are implemented while maintaining humanitarian or legalistic language. Often, centrist actors publicly present tougher migration policies while still using the language of fairness and rights, even as enforcement and procedural controls tighten.

### ***Implications for policy analysis***

For policy analysis, the key is to look beyond what policies say on paper to how they are applied in practice. Analysts should consider how legislation and enforcement reflect specific priorities and assumptions, and whether policies actually affect migration outcomes.

This approach guides the evaluation by assessing whether measures change migrant experiences or governance processes, and allows comparison across countries to evaluate effectiveness, risks, and unintended consequences.

### **Comparative policy analysis**

This section examines national policy changes in Germany, France and Italy, showing how securitisation and mainstreaming operate differently depending on political context. Each case illustrates different ways far-right ideas influence policy.

#### ***Germany - AfD pressure, legislative tightening, and expressive governance***

In Germany, migration policies are often more aimed at showing political control than to reduce migration directly. The AfD's growth in elections and focus on migration and identity pushed mainstream parties to take a tougher public stance on irregular migration and returns. In 2024-25, Alice Weidel played a key role in raising public attention on return policies and internal security issues (Marsh, 2024).

In 2023, the German Federal Ministry of the Interior introduced the Rückführungsverbesserungsgesetz, which shortened appeal windows, improved coordination, and fixed procedural gaps (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2023). These reforms strengthened enforcement capacity while signaling political control.

While asylum applications were high in previous years, EU-wide flows started falling in 2024 (Eurostat, 2025). National reforms improved administrative efficiency and return rates but did not remove backlogs or tackle structural migration causes like conflict, labor demand, or smuggling (European Commission, 2024). Germany's approach, while politically expedient, has had limited success in impacting migration flows and has done little to address structural factors including conflict or labor demand. Germany's focus on returns and internal security reflects EU efforts to tighten border control through the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum.

### ***France - Assimilation under centrist governance***

France shows mainstreaming, where centrist governments adopt far-right ideas. The 2023 immigration law, upheld by the Constitutional Council, tightened return procedures and introduced language and civic tests linked to “republican integration” (Migration and Home Affairs, 2023). Media and think tanks observed a shift from multiculturalist to assimilationist rhetoric (Pascual, 2025).

Administrative efficiency gains were modest, but the law significantly influenced public debate, making cultural conformity a clear policy goal (AP News, 2024). Effects on EU-level migration flows were minimal, showing legal reforms often reshaping discussion more than actual migration patterns.

France therefore shows how far-right ideas can become normal through laws passed by centrist governments, turning cultural assimilation into official policy while still operating within democratic rules. The law's legal effectiveness remains debatable. The 2023 immigration law signifies a shift from multiculturalist to assimilationist rhetoric, institutionalizing far-right ideas about cultural conformity in official policy.

### ***Italy - Institutionalised restriction under Meloni***

Italy illustrates how far-right ideas become integrated into executive policy. Under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, Italy's executive decrees have institutionalized strict measures, limiting rescue operations and restricting humanitarian protections. Restrictive maritime policies limit NGO rescue operations through directives on disembarkation and sanctions for captains (Amnesty International, 2023; Squires, 2025). The "Cutro" measures and subsequent decrees also narrowed humanitarian protection categories (ECRE, 2024), demonstrating the power of executive authority in shaping migration governance..

Reports document increased fatalities at sea and reduced search-and-rescue capacity (IRC, 2024; Amnesty International, 2023). Italy simultaneously pressures the EU for border funding while resisting mandatory migrant relocation under the 2024 Pact (European Commission, 2024).

Italy shows how far-right institutionalisation under strong executive authority allows securitised policy frames to become standard administrative practice (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Amnesty International, 2023).

## **Comparative findings and policy evaluations**

### ***Recurring patterns***

Across Germany, France, and Italy, three clear trends appear in migration policy:

- Policies focus on faster returns and tighter borders. The EU's 2024 Pact introduces mandatory screening and quicker procedures at external borders (European Commission, 2024).
  - Integration rules increasingly emphasize cultural requirements, such as higher language tests and fewer support programs for migrants (Pascual, 2025).
- Exclusionary practices, such as detention and restricted asylum access, have become routine in many EU states (Amnesty International, 2023).

Other observations:

- Migration flows have decreased in some areas, but mostly due to border control measures rather than long-term policy success (Kassam & Rankin, 2025).

- EU proposals like fast-track returns or “safe country” designations may undermine asylum protections and harm migrants’ rights (Human Rights Watch, 2024).
- The 2024 Pact sets common rules but allows member states flexibility, which creates uneven implementation and strains solidarity (European Commission, 2024).

Mainstreaming far-right ideas risks normalizing exclusionary practices and democratic commitments to minority rights. As restrictive measures become more common across EU member states, they shift the discussion around migration, from humanitarian protection to control and exclusion, thereby compromising fundamental rights and democratic principles.

### ***Policy effectiveness and unintended consequences***

EU migration is largely driven by global factors like conflict, economic conditions, and refugee movements. While asylum applications fell slightly in 2024, this is mainly due to changes in origin countries or coordinated policies across multiple transit states, not national law alone (EUAA, 2025). Tightened national procedures therefore have short-term, localized effects but do not address the root causes of migration.

Restrictive maritime and return policies create real risks. New procedures like “safe country” lists and fast refusals reduce access to protection, increase the dangers of irregular journeys, and can result in fatalities or limited reception capacity (Amnesty International, 2025).

Bringing far-right ideas into mainstream policy can weaken democratic norms. Procedures may appear fair while hiding shifts in values. Over time, routine exclusionary practices threaten minority rights and undermine evidence-based decision-making (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

### ***EU cohesion and governance implications***

The 2024 Pact is a paradox, as it tries to standardize asylum and border procedures but gives member states wide discretion. For example, Greece, Cyprus, Spain, and Italy can receive solidarity support, yet each state implements rules differently. Italy uses EU funding but resists mandatory relocation, while France and Germany enforce stricter domestic controls (Reuters, 2025).

This uneven application weakens EU solidarity, showing how far-right ideas at the national level interact with EU-wide rules, allowing member states to prioritize their own national agendas over collective EU goals.

## **Policy options**

Based on the comparative analysis of Germany, France, Italy, and recent EU reforms, the following policy options are presented. Each model shows how political capacity and the protection of migrant rights interact, with the trade-offs involved.

### ***Option 1: Managed enforcement with oversight***

Countries focus on controlling borders, speeding up asylum procedures, and ensuring returns. At the same time, independent oversight, judicial review, and public reporting are used to prevent abuse. Germany's 2023-24 return laws align with this model, as they expedite returns and improve procedures while including safeguards like independent review to avoid abuses (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2023).

This approach is politically viable in countries like Germany, where strong institutional frameworks and public trust in judicial oversight exist. However, in countries with weaker institutions or high far-right political influence, such as Hungary or Poland, it may face significant resistance due to their strong nationalist and anti-immigration stance, which conflicts with the idea of independent oversight.

Strengths:

- Politically appealing in the short term
- Easier to implement in countries with strong institutions
- Signals control and responsiveness to domestic voters

Risks:

- Doesn't necessarily reduce migration in the long term
- Humanitarian risks remain if oversight bodies are underfunded or lack authority

### ***Option 2: Conditional integration (control and incentives)***

Strict enforcement against irregular migration is paired with opportunities for legal work, education, or integration programs. Long-term residence depends on participation in language classes, vocational training, or community projects. France's 2023 immigration law integrates conditional measures,

requiring language and civic tests linked to the concept of "republican integration" (Migration and Home Affairs, 2023).

This model is politically feasible in countries like France, where integration policies are already heavily focused on cultural assimilation. However, Option 2 could face challenges in countries with anti-migrant sentiment, and where cultural integration is less prioritized and nationalistic politics dominate.

Strengths:

- Politically moderate and responsive to labour needs
- Links migration governance to economic participation
- Provides incentives for migrants to comply and integrate

Risks:

- Administratively complex and costly
- Could create unequal legal statuses if requirements are applied inconsistently

### ***Option 3: EU-level solidarity with rights safeguards***

Focus on EU-wide relocation, legal pathways, and humanitarian admissions. Reception, detention, and appeals are standardized across countries. EU funding is linked to human-rights compliance and monitored independently.

This approach may be difficult to implement politically in countries like Italy, which prioritize national sovereignty over EU mandates. Italy's response to EU migration policies often focuses on resisting mandatory relocation, despite receiving EU funding for border management (European Commission, 2024).

This model is likely to face significant challenges in Italy, where national sovereignty is a major political issue, and in other countries with far-right or nationalist governments that oppose EU-wide solutions.

**Strengths:**

- Strongest protection of migrant rights
- Shared responsibility increases legitimacy
- Better coordinated response to crises

**Risks:**

- Politically difficult to implement
- Requires member states to share burdens and compromise national discretion

***Measuring success across all options:***

To avoid superficial compliance, all options need transparent, evidence-based support.

**Key indicators could include:**

- Number of first-time asylum applications
- Recognition rates by nationality
- Detention and return numbers
- Asylum backlogs
- Fatalities at sea
- Outcomes from independent audits and monitoring

A balanced approach combining enforcement with human rights safeguards and EU cooperation is the most sustainable path forward.

**Conclusion**

Far-right ideas have increasingly influenced migration policy across Europe, shaping both national governments and EU-level decisions. Germany, France, and Italy show different but connected ways in which identity and security focused politics become administrative practice. In all three cases, migration governance has moved toward stricter enforcement, cultural requirements for integration, and more bureaucratic controls that limit access to protection.

The evidence shows that policies focused on deterrence have little effect on overall migration flows, which are largely shaped by structural factors beyond national control. The EU's 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum reflects this and led to uneven implementation.

This paper has shown that far-right ideas, now mainstreamed in European migration policy, are potentially failing to efficiently and effectively address the root causes of migration, creating long-term humanitarian and democratic risks. The future of European migration policy must have a balance between enforcement, legal obligations, and cooperation at the EU level to ensure that human rights are protected and the rule of law is upheld. Without these safeguards, migration policy risks becoming more about control than lasting results.

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