

The trail of Trump's (anti-)immigration policies in Europe

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Theme

Since Donald Trump took office and implemented measures to curb irregular (or, in his words, 'illegal') immigration, several European countries, including the UK and Germany, have introduced similar policies and rhetoric. This analysis examines to what extent these developments reflect an influence of US (anti-immigration) policies on Europe.

Summary

Europe is seeing a general tightening of migration policies. In the UK, the Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government has adopted a firm stance on irregular immigration, including workplace raids and a proposed Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. The bill seeks to expand police powers, introduce new criminal offences related to illegal immigration and restrict access to citizenship for individuals who entered the country irregularly. In Germany, the CDU has broken the *cordon sanitaire* by cooperating with the far right in the Bundestag, while in France, the Prime Minister François Bayrou's remarks about the 'feeling of migratory flooding' have sparked controversy.

These shifts in Europe could be interpreted as a 'contagion effect' of [Trump-era policies](#). However, the trend towards restrictive migration policies in Europe predates Trump, notably intensifying after the 2015 refugee crisis. This analysis suggests that while the restrictive migration policy trend did not originate in the US, its policies have influenced the rhetoric and frameworks through which immigration issues are framed and addressed. Three main effects are identified: (a) the influence on political discourse; (b) the shifts in party positions; and (c) the changes in public opinion; all of which contribute to normalising measures once deemed extreme.

Analysis

After taking office in July 2024, the British Prime Minister Keir Starmer cancelled the planned deportation flights to Rwanda and dismantled the deportation programme for irregular migrants, citing legal and humanitarian concerns. This decision was perceived as a shift towards a more open immigration policy. In contrast, in Italy, Giorgia Meloni launched her transfer of asylum seekers to Albania.

Despite shutting down the Rwanda deportation project, the Labour government remained committed to reducing irregular immigration across the English Channel and sought cooperation with European nations, including Germany. By early 2025, [workplace raids](#) in the UK targeting undocumented migrants –especially in sectors like hospitality, services and personal care– had significantly increased. Reports confirm that raids took place at 828 locations, including nail salons, car washes and restaurants, leading to 609 arrests, a 73% increase from January 2024. The government said that [nearly 19,000](#)

foreign criminals and people without the right to remain in the UK had been expelled since taking office.

The Home Secretary, Angela Eagle, defended the release of videos of these operations on platforms such as YouTube and social networks, generating a strong controversy. She said: 'The decision to release footage of the arrests was aimed at sending a message about the realities of working illegally' and defended the government's approach as 'compassionate'. While some sectors see this dissemination of images of raids and deportations as a deterrent strategy, human rights organisations have criticised the measure for promoting the stigmatisation of migrants.

Less publicity has been given to the Guidance on how to assess 'good character' in foreign workers' applications for citizenship. Under this 'clarification', it is practically impossible for a person who enters the UK irregularly to obtain citizenship. Previously, foreign workers –regardless of whether they had entered hidden in a lorry and applied for asylum or had entered as a skilled worker– could, as a general rule, apply for citizenship after 10 years of residing in the country. Now, this right has become inaccessible to asylum seekers who entered the country irregularly, effectively barring the vast majority.

At the same time, Parliament has been debating the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which seeks to strengthen the fight against unauthorised immigration. The proposed changes include new criminal offences, such as the supply or handling of any object intended to facilitate illegal immigration (eg, inflatable boats), as well as the collection of information to organise unauthorised travel to the UK, measures inspired by the Terrorism Act 2000. A new crime would also be introduced: endangering another person during an illegal crossing of the English Channel. The government justifies this as a way to discourage dangerous behaviour, while migrant rights organisations criticise the measure for penalising migrants instead of human traffickers.

Additionally, immigration agents and police would be given new powers to confiscate mobile phones or other electronic devices from unauthorised migrants if suspected of containing information about illegal immigration networks. Access to HMRC (Tax and Customs Agency) customs data would be facilitated to strengthen intelligence efforts. The bill would establish the Border Security Commander as an official position responsible for coordinating the government's border security response and setting strategic priorities in consultation with partner agencies. Martin Hewitt was appointed to this role in September 2024.

Thus, while the Labour government's discourse on immigration differs significantly from that of the Trump Administration –not only in substance but also in form, avoiding terms like 'criminals' or 'dangerous illegals'– certain parallels are worth noting. These include the strengthening of police authority, the emphasis on border control with the Border Security Commander, and the 'propaganda' around deportations and limitations on access to citizenship. These measures bear a clear resemblance to the images of the early days of Trump's Administration, filled with news of military planes carrying immigrants in handcuffs, raids (especially in sanctuary cities) and images of ICE

Deportation Services and detention centres. The role of the border czar, Tom Homan, has also been prominent in the US, akin to the UK's Border Security Commander.

In Germany, weeks before the federal elections, an unprecedented event took place: Friedrich Merz's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) voted with the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the Bundestag. The vote supported a [non-legislative proposal](#) seeking to restrict family reunification for refugees, expand the police powers to detain people without valid documentation at points of entry into the country, implement permanent border controls to prevent illegal entry, and deny entry to individuals without valid documents, including asylum seekers from neighbouring 'safe' countries. Although the proposal did not pass, the alliance between CDU and AfD has sparked major controversy. Merz's cooperation with the AfD, broke the so-called *cordon sanitaire* to the far right for the first time since WWII. In addition, this vote took place in an electoral context in which immigration consolidated as one of the most debated and polarising issues. The CDU's leader, Friedrich Merz, [advocated stricter immigration policies, including closing borders to undocumented immigrants and deporting asylum seekers without valid documentation.](#)

In this vein, the AfD, for its part, focused its campaign on anti-immigration rhetoric, promoting the mass deportation of immigrants and opposing the implementation of new measures or the improvement of integration policies. Its growing electoral support, consolidating itself as the second force in Parliament, has generated [concern among immigrant communities and human-rights organisations, which fear an increase in racist attacks and the normalisation of xenophobic discourses in German society.](#)

In France, Prime Minister [François Bayrou's statements about the 'feeling of migratory flooding'](#) have prompted intense public debate and [opposition](#). Undoubtedly, his words are reminiscent of the statements of Trump's election campaign about the 'immigration invasion' that the country was suffering and that caused both reactions of support and rejection in the political and media spheres, but which were a spur to his election victory.

This account of measures and discourses in different European countries, including Italy, Hungary and Austria, shows that 2025 has begun with restrictive political measures in the field of migration –or anti-immigration policies– that may continue and impose themselves over more inclusive visions that respect international legislation and conventions, and human rights. Given this scenery, it is worth asking whether this is an effect of the new Trump Administration's policy on European migration policies –that is, if there is a 'Trumpisation' of immigration policies in a 'contagion effect'. The evidence indicates that it is not, but also that it is.

It is true that in his first 10 days in office, Trump signed at least 21 executive orders that included restrictive aspects of immigration policy –an anti-immigration stance reflected in many forms, implemented through a series of measures aimed at displacing opponents and avoiding or delaying lawsuits against them–. The declaration and signed orders address the 'enhanced screening' of visa applicants, the revocation of birthright citizenship, increased border security and the declaration of a national emergency, as well as the suspension of asylum and refugee programmes and temporary protection programmes.

In this context, a review of both recent and past migration policies in various European countries reveals a striking resemblance. However, it is important to recognise that the restrictive trajectory of migration and asylum policies in many European nations, such as Italy, predates not only Trump's second Administration but also his first. For many, this restrictive trend can be tracked back to the early 2000s in some countries, although pinpointing a specific starting date is challenging. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that a turning point in Europe is the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 and the subsequent measures and declarations in countries such as Hungary, Austria and Poland. This shift has led to what is often referred to as the [democratic dilemma for immigration policies](#).

Although a historical review does not allow the Trump Administration to be held responsible for the restrictive policies and measures adopted by European countries, the influence of the regulatory and interpretative frameworks shaping immigration policies cannot be overlooked. US discourses, policies and decisions impact policy choices and narratives in other countries –both through explicit actions omissions–. In the initial phase of the 'new' US immigration policy, measures aimed at facilitating legal immigration or supporting integration programmes have been absent. Instead, both the policy decisions and the rhetoric of the US President have framed immigration primarily in terms of its association with crime, drug trafficking and public expenditure, without acknowledging or emphasising its positive aspects: its potential contribution to employment, economic growth, cultural diversity and innovation.

A classic in the study of polarisation and extremism is, precisely, the analysis of how ['extreme' ideas \(and measures\) gradually infiltrate the political mainstream and become central points of debate](#). Basically, three key effects can be examined in this regard:

- (1) The effect on political discourse: extreme ideas, measures, and rhetoric – particularly anti-immigration narratives– shape the issues that dominate the political agenda (eg, mass deportation operations), and dictate the terms in which they are discussed. Trump's series of policy measures and executive orders enabled him to control the agenda, limiting the scope of debate and excluding alternative perspectives.
- (2) The effect on party positions: by framing discussions in 'extreme' and polarised terms (for or against), traditional parties are compelled to adjust their positions, often finding themselves in a defensive stance. This reduces the space for arguments against restrictive policies or for more inclusive alternatives.
- (3) The effect on public opinion: policies and measures that were previously considered extreme become normalised and seen as plausible options. The vocabulary –terms such as 'raids', 'mass deportations' and 'securing the border'– becomes familiar, entering everyday discussions aligned with party loyalties and ultimately leading to the perception that these measures are 'normal', necessary or inevitable.

These effects can also be examined in the context of policy strategies employed in other areas. The continuous repetition of restrictive rhetoric and discourses on migration, the construction of debates around extreme measures, and the saturation of media space

with imagery of raids and deportations allow for the introduction of previously unthinkable ideas and proposals into public discourse. These strategies marginalise more moderate perspectives and legitimise radical approaches, even when such measures may be legally or politically unfeasible or when their effectiveness in achieving intended objectives is expected to be minimal or non-existent. As a result, immigration debates shift away from concerns of rights and management and become framed in terms of control, criminality and security.

In brief, while the new US Administration cannot be held accountable for the origin of restrictive immigration measures in Europe, its discourse and policies –aligned with those of various European governments– undeniably have a global impact on how migration policies are defined, framed and justified, particularly in a climate where restrictive policies are already widespread across much of Europe.

Restrictive migration policies not only have direct implications for managing migration flows but also shape political discourse and public perception. The enforcement and implementation of stringent measures and the dissemination of specific narratives influence public opinion, reinforcing the legitimacy of tougher approaches while marginalising more inclusive perspectives and displacing moderate solutions.

Conclusions

Although the UK's Labour government has maintained a more moderate discourse on immigration compared with previous administrations, its recent actions reflect a significant shift towards more restrictive migration policies. Despite the initial cancellation of the deportation programme to Rwanda, workplace raids and the proposed new Border Security, Asylum and Immigration law emphasise security and control, aligning with a broader European trend. This tightening of migration policies is not an isolated phenomenon. In Germany, for instance, the recent vote in the Bundestag, in which Friedrich Merz's CDU allied with the far-right AfD to support proposals restricting family reunification and expanding police powers in migration matters, illustrates how immigration has become a central issue in federal elections. In France, statements by political figures such as François Bayrou, who described a 'feeling of migratory flooding' reinforce a security-oriented narrative over one focused on human rights.

While the Trump Administration cannot be directly blamed for these restrictive policies in Europe, its influence is undeniable. The discourse and decisions of the US government contribute to shaping the interpretative framework through which migration policies are addressed in other countries. The impact is evident in how the political agendas are set, the pressure exerted on traditional parties to adopt more hardline stances, and public opinion, which gradually comes to accept and normalise discourses and measures once considered extreme. The shift towards a control and security narrative has redefined immigration debates, moving them away from discussions centred on rights and management towards a focus on criminalisation and border enforcement.

Ultimately, this evolution in migration policies presents serious challenges, not only for the management of migratory flows but also for social cohesion and the protection of human rights. By legitimising tougher approaches and marginalising inclusive

perspectives, there is a risk of eroding the democratic foundations and humanitarian principles that have historically guided migration policies in many Western democracies. Furthermore, in electoral contexts where immigration becomes a politicised and central issue, the push for anti-immigration policies may intensify, particularly as mainstream parties seek to compete with far-right narratives to capture voter support.