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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Convergence, Competition or Complementarity? EU-Member States Cooperation on Mobility and Returns

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ABSTRACT

European Union (EU) external migration governance in the Southern Neighbourhood is shaped by variable patterns of interaction between the EU and its Member States (MS). Dynamics of competition, convergence and complementarity coexist across cooperation on legal mobility and returns, producing distinct configurations of external migration governance and shaping the EU's bargaining power with third countries. Building on the 'three Cs' framework, nominal convergence is introduced as a distinct sub-pattern in which MS formally align with EU objectives while pursuing low-cost or politically safer measures that limit their substantive impact. Return cooperation is predominantly characterised by competition through de-coupled governance, as MS pursue bilateral arrangements alongside EU-level efforts. Mobility cooperation, by contrast, displays significant nominal convergence, with MS supporting EU objectives through limited capacity-building and information initiatives rather than substantive legal pathways. Complementarity emerges more selectively in both domains, where national instruments reinforce EU objectives. These dynamics shape the EU's institutional migration power, with competition and nominal convergence weakening, and complementarity potentially reinforcing, its leverage *vis-à-vis* third countries.

KEYWORDS

EU; Migration;
Externalisation; Mobility;
Returns; Migration Power

Who speaks for Europe on migration? As the European Union (EU) and its Member States (MS) increasingly pursue overlapping (and sometimes conflicting) engagement with countries of origin and transit, this question has become central to understanding the EU's role in the global governance of migration. Indeed, cooperation with third countries was arguably the aspect of the New EU Pact on Migration and Asylum that generated the broadest consensus among MS, and the new Asylum and Migration Management Regulation explicitly calls for close cooperation at bilateral, regional, multilateral and international levels (Andrade García 2024).

The EU's commitment to external migration governance is not new, with an extensive body of literature examining the strategic use of cooperation with third countries, its implementation, the mix of policy instruments involved and the related externalisation

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practices (Czaika *et al.* 2023; Niemann and Zaun 2023; Longo and Fontana 2022; Reslow 2015; Cardwell 2013; Wunderlich 2012; Lavenex 2006; 2007; Boswell 2003). Scholars have highlighted the influence of EU institutions and funding instruments (Hernández i Sagrera and Korneev 2012; Zaun and Nantermoz 2023; Arnoux Bellavitis and Ripoll Servent 2025), the role of EU agencies – such as Frontex – in external cooperation (Zhong and Carrapico 2024), as well as the agency exercised by third countries in shaping the outcomes of migration cooperation (Adam *et al.* 2020). Others have examined the role of MS in external migration cooperation, particularly in the Southern Neighbourhood (Wunderlich 2013; Reslow 2019; Lehne 2016; Menz 2015; Weiner 2011; Cassarino 2011). While these studies highlight the importance of multiple actors in shaping external migration cooperation, less attention has been devoted to systematically exploring how the EU and its MS interact across different policy domains, and how such interactions affect broader bargaining dynamics with countries of origin and transit (Fontana and Rosina 2024).

We contend that these patterns of interaction warrant closer scrutiny. Examining how MS bilateral tools relate to, reinforce, influence, constrain or bypass EU externalisation instruments provides important insights into the broader architecture of EU external migration governance and its underlying power dynamics. Accordingly, we advance a multilevel analysis of EU-MS engagement in the Southern Neighbourhood, examining how they align, compete or complement one another in shaping the EU's external migration policy and its “migration power” *vis-à-vis* third countries (Fernandez-Molina and Tsourapas 2024, 2461). In order to do so, we build on the analytical framework of the “three Cs” developed by Iole Fontana and Matilde Rosina (2024, 1468), who conceptualise the relationship between MS external migration policies and EU-level externalisation instruments through patterns of competition, convergence and complementarity. We propose to expand this typology by introducing a sub-pattern – *nominal convergence*. Unlike straightforward convergence, where MS fully align with EU policy objectives in a mutually reinforcing manner, nominal convergence represents a more nuanced form of alignment. It captures instances where MS formally adhere to EU goals but implement measures that in fact either dilute the substance of EU initiatives or fail to substantively advance the EU's overarching goals, opting for low-cost or politically safer actions over more impactful commitments.

Moreover, while Fontana and Rosina develop the framework across a variety of tools, this article aims to go a step further by applying and empirically testing it in relation to two distinct yet interrelated areas that lie at the core of the EU's externalisation efforts: returns and legal mobility. These two policy domains not only represent the operational backbone of the EU's engagement with third countries (European Commission 2023; 2021; 2020; 2016; 2011; 2009) but also provide fertile ground for a comparative analysis of patterns of EU-MS interaction across different externalisation tools and issue areas.

Focusing on the Southern Neighbourhood, the article thus asks: how do the EU and the MS interact in their cooperation with countries of origin and transit on the topics of legal migration and returns? Which patterns of convergence, competition and complementarity prevail?

Through the analysis of official documents, EUROSTAT data and secondary literature, we argue that competition, convergence and complementarity coexist in EU-Member State interactions across return and legal mobility. While return mostly

reveals dynamics of competition through de-coupled governance, mobility displays significant patterns of nominal convergence. Nevertheless, all three patterns are present across both domains, suggesting a landscape of variable geometries in interaction. These dynamics shed light on how national prerogatives shape EU external migration governance and the challenges of establishing a coherent EU approach amidst entrenched bilateral practices. They also offer crucial insights into the evolving balance of power in negotiations with third countries and how competitive dynamics have the potential to undermine the EU bargaining position.

The ‘three Cs’: disentangling EU-MS patterns of interaction in external migration governance

Migration diplomacy encompasses the strategic use of migration in international negotiations (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). It has become an increasingly prominent feature of international relations, as states leverage migration management – whether through control, cooperation or incentives – to pursue broader diplomatic interests. In this context, global migration governance unfolds across multiple layers – multilateral, (trans-)regional, bilateral and even unilateral (Betts 2011, 30; Trachtman 2011). The range of venues and cooperation arrangements at these different levels frequently overlap and intersect, meaning that the international politics of migration is shaped not only by what occurs within each layer, but also by the interplay between them (Betts 2011).

This configuration of international migration governance is clearly reflected in the EU context. While the EU began developing a distinct external dimension of migration policy with the European Council of Tampere in 1999, individual MS had been advancing their own agendas long before that. Since the early 1990s, a proliferation of bilateral agreements with countries of origin and transit (Cassarino 2010) signalled a growing tendency to reframe migration as a matter of external relations, aimed at regaining national control over migratory flows (Boswell 2003; Niemann and Zaun 2023; Weiner 2011) and compensating for the shortcomings of internal migration policies (Rosina 2022; Ellerman 2008). In this regard, the EU represents a case of multilayered migration governance, shaped by the continuous interaction between different bilateral, multilateral, intergovernmental and supranational layers of authority when engaging with third countries (Caponio and Correa 2018; Kunz *et al.* 2011).

Through this network of agreements and initiatives, spanning multilateral and bilateral cooperation, the EU and its MS project what Irene Fernandez-Molina and Gerasimos Tsourapas (2024, 2471) call “institutional migration power”: the “indirect control exercised over socially distant others [...] which can constrain or enable actors’ power through binding legal instruments, [...] informal negotiations [or other means]”. By layering instruments at the regional and bilateral level, they create varying geometries of cooperation (and power) with third countries.

Precisely because of the interconnection of policies, instruments, actors and levels of action (Carrera *et al.* 2019; García Andrade 2019), understanding how MS’ tools relate to or diverge from EU-level initiatives offers valuable insights into the dynamics of EU external migration governance as a whole and related power relations. As Daniel Wunderlich (2010) notes, MS’ bilateral relations across EU external borders

can either facilitate or hinder EU cooperation with third countries, altering negotiating balances.

Yet, despite the relevance of this dimension, within the “three-level game” of EU external migration policy (Reslow and Vink 2015, 857), most analyses focus primarily on the EU-third country interaction. Much of the literature has emphasised the complex power relations between the EU and non-MS (Tittel-Mosser 2018; Okyay *et al.* 2020; Collyer 2016; Limam and Del Sarto 2015; Maisenbacher 2015; Wunderlich 2012; 2013; Stutz 2023), the conditionality-compensation nexus (McGregor *et al.* 2025) and the diverse modes of external governance (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009), while paying less attention to the dynamics between the EU and its MS, and the impact these may have on relations with third countries.

Among the few studies that address this dimension, Marion Panizzon (2012) explores EU-MS competence division in readmission negotiations, while Wunderlich (2010) analyses how Spanish-Moroccan bilateral politics shape EU interventions. James Hampshire (2015) and Natasja Reslow (2015) focus on MS’ divergent migration interests and EU-MS bargaining dynamics in internal decision-making processes concerning agreements with third countries. Yet, the extent to which MS instruments align with or diverge from the EU’s external migration framework, as well as the interaction patterns that unfold across different policy tools, remain insufficiently explored.

Building on the analysis of policy tools as empirical referents of external migration policies, Fontana and Rosina identify a set of ten instruments that shape MS’ bilateral cooperation with third countries in managing migratory flows (Fontana and Rosina 2024; Rosina and Fontana 2024). These include readmission agreements; quota schemes and agreements on labour migration and circular mobility; resettlement and humanitarian corridors; technical and operational agreements; migration-specific agreements; migration clauses in broader bilateral agreements; political dialogue; military missions; and extraterritorial processing of asylum claims. Moreover, recognising that MS external migration policies do not operate in isolation, they outline three patterns of interaction that capture how national instruments intersect with EU-level tools: competition, convergence and complementarity. Importantly, these patterns do not necessarily imply different policy objectives. The EU and its MS frequently pursue broadly shared goals, including strengthening migration management, securing cooperation from third countries, enhancing returns, or expanding selected legal pathways. Instead, the ‘three Cs’ capture different configurations of interaction through which these objectives are pursued and coordinated across governance levels, reflecting variation in political incentives, institutional constraints and the distribution of competences and resources.

Competition arises when conflicting dynamics emerge, prompting MS to distance themselves from the supranational level to safeguard national interests (Hanke *et al.* 2019). This withdrawal often produces dysfunctional interactions (Niemann and Speyer 2017) and inefficient overlaps between EU and national policy tools, hindering the coherence and effectiveness of the EU’s external migration policy. Competition can manifest as either disjointed governance, where policy instruments function in conflict to one another and in contradictory ways (Curry 2018), or as de-coupled governance (Scholten 2013; Scholten and Penninx 2016), characterised by the separate and non-coordinated operation of instruments. In both cases, fragmentation sends mixed signals to target countries, fostering forum shopping and creating opportunities for venue

competition (Betts 2011), as third countries can strategically choose between EU and national initiatives or selectively align with one over the other (Hanke *et al.* 2019). Competition is particularly likely when governments face domestic pressures to demonstrate control over migration and seek to preserve autonomy over key policy instruments, perceiving EU-level frameworks as insufficiently responsive to national priorities. As scholarship on two and three-level games suggests (Carbone 2022; Reslow 2013; Reslow and Vink 2015), governments simultaneously negotiate with domestic audiences, EU institutions and third countries, creating incentives to privilege bilateral or unilateral initiatives even where common EU frameworks exist. Competition may also emerge when MS consider bilateral arrangements more effective than collective EU action in securing cooperation from third countries (Slominski and Trauner 2018).

Convergence emerges when MS and the EU pursue common objectives and priorities, with their respective instruments strategically aligned and working in a mutually reinforcing manner. In such cases, national and EU instruments operate in harmony, fostering a cooperative approach to managing migration challenges and showcasing dynamics of multilevel governance, through the coordination of tools without a clear hierarchical structure (Scholten 2013). Convergence is more likely when MS perceive EU-level cooperation as an effective vehicle for advancing their migration objectives and when the benefits of collective action outweigh those of unilateral initiatives (Slominski and Trauner 2018; Thielemann 2003). It may also result from processes of delegation, whereby MS collectively empower EU institutions to pursue objectives that would be more difficult, costly or politically sensitive to achieve individually (Reslow 2012; Menz 2015).

Finally, complementarity occurs when MS act on behalf of the EU, creating opportunities for the development and expansion of EU initiatives through their action (Fontana and Rosina 2024). It may emerge when MS with strong bilateral ties serve as intermediaries, facilitating dialogue between the EU and specific countries, or when MS step in to compensate for the absence of EU instruments in particular regions or policy domains (Rosina and Fontana 2024; Council of the EU 2019). Complementarity is likely when competences, resources and policy instruments are unevenly distributed across governance levels and where the achievement of EU objectives depends on the activation of national instruments. In such cases, MS may deploy bilateral relationships, labour migration schemes, development initiatives or diplomatic networks in support of broader EU goals (Tittel-Mosser 2020). In the late 2000s, for example, Spain leveraged its bilateral relationship with Senegal, including through job-creating schemes, to secure the African country's support for the EU's anti-immigration strategy (Vives 2017). While convergence stems primarily from the alignment of preferences and objectives, complementarity emerges from the interdependence of governance levels, whereby the pursuit of common goals depends on combining instruments and resources controlled by different actors.

Here, we build upon Fontana and Rosina's (2024) broader conceptual framework by refining the analysis both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, we contribute by introducing the concept of *nominal* convergence, as a sub-pattern of convergence. This captures instances where MS formally align with EU policy objectives but do so through measures that dilute the substance of EU initiatives, favouring low-cost or politically less contentious actions over more substantial and impactful commitments.

Unlike competition, which entails resistance through conflict or decoupled governance, and convergence, which denotes full alignment, nominal convergence reflects a form of alignment that limits the scope of EU action to less ambitious measures, thereby tempering the potential impact of EU external migration policies. While sharing some similarities with concepts such as organised hypocrisy (Lavenex 2018) and non-performativity (Stel 2026), nominal convergence captures a distinct phenomenon. If organised hypocrisy concerns the gap between normative commitments and practices within the EU and non-performativity refers to the strategic use of discourse that substitutes for action in diplomatic relations with third countries, nominal convergence describes a mode of interaction between MS and EU-level frameworks, within a multilevel governance architecture. It captures situations in which MS formally support common EU objectives, yet they do so through the selection of instruments that minimise political costs while limiting substantive ambition. MS engagement with EU refugee resettlement objectives in Jordan offers a clear example: rather than increasing resettlement admissions to their own territory, several MS have channelled substantial financial contributions to Jordan's hosting capacity, formally serving EU external protection objectives while substituting a less politically costly instrument for the admission commitments the framework also envisages (Barbulescu 2017; Tsourapas 2019). As such, nominal convergence is best understood as a subtype of convergence that captures variation in the degree of ambition with which common EU objectives are pursued.

Empirically, while Fontana and Rosina (2024) examine EU-MS interaction across a wide array of externalisation tools, our focus narrows to two specific yet interconnected policy areas: returns and legal mobility. These areas are selected for two main reasons. First, both areas are central to the EU's externalisation agenda, constituting foundational pillars of its migration governance strategy. Second, they offer a compelling lens for analysing patterns of EU-MS cooperation across domains that differ in both degree of supranationalisation and interest structure. On supranationalisation, mobility governance represents "a particular exercise of shared competence" (European Commission 2009), with Brussels reliant on MS initiatives to implement legal pathways. Return cooperation, by contrast, allows both the EU and the MS to conclude agreements with third countries, though the MS bear primary responsibility for implementation (Parusel 2025). On interest structure, the two areas present near-mirror dynamics (Ellermann 2008; Hamilton 1997; Adam *et al.* 2020): while the EU and the MS favour returns in response to domestic demands for control, third countries tend to resist them, given public preferences for emigration and economic dependence on remittances. Mobility schemes, conversely, are a priority for third countries but face resistance from EU and MS actors under political pressure, even while acknowledging a structural demand for foreign labour. Despite the differences in degree of supranationalisation and interest structure, the two areas are methodologically comparable: both operate within the same externalisation framework, target overlapping partner countries and involve the same institutional actors. Comparing these two policy areas thus allows us to assess whether patterns of EU-MS interaction (convergence, competition and complementarity) unfold similarly across domains, or whether they exhibit distinct dynamics depending on the governance context.

Importantly, the dimensions of mobility and returns are intrinsically connected: legal pathways have often served as incentives to secure return agreements, both at the national and EU level (Vives 2017; Rosina and Fontana 2024; Trauner and Kruse

2008; Torres Chedraui *et al.* 2026; Adam *et al.* 2020). The intersection can also cut across levels. In the case of Bangladesh, for instance, Italy appears to have used preferential quota access as a tool to encourage return cooperation, initially granting such access before withdrawing it when an agreement failed to materialise, and reinstating it only after informal EU-level return procedures were established, suggesting a pattern of complementarity (Fontana and Rosina 2024). This case illustrates that links between mobility and returns are not confined to a single level and that unpacking them through patterns of cooperation (convergence, complementarity or competition) can shed light on the broader development of EU-level external migration governance.

In light of the above, the following sections examine how EU-MS interactions unfold in the realms of mobility and return cooperation in the Southern neighbourhood, analysing whether patterns of (nominal) convergence, competition and complementarity, emerge consistently across these two policy areas and the impact this may have on relations with third countries and power dynamics.

EU-MS cooperation on mobility in the Southern Neighbourhood

From early strategic frameworks such as the Global Approach to Migration (Council of the EU 2005), the concept of “mobility packages”—later rebranded as Mobility Partnerships (MP) (European Commission 2007)—was introduced as a potentially significant tool to integrate labour migration into the EU’s external relations (Carrera and Hernandez i Sagra 2009, 1) and promote a “new generation of temporary migration schemes” (Cassarino 2009, 5). Since 2007, MPs have functioned as non-binding cooperation frameworks involving the EU, a third country and participating MS. Structured around a Joint Declaration outlining objectives in terms of legal migration and mobility, prevention of irregular migration and development cooperation, these frameworks were occasionally accompanied by an Annex listing specific initiatives proposed either by the EU or individual MS, allowing for cooperation via practical implementation of projects (Cardwell and Dickson 2023).

After the Arab uprisings of 2011, MP were relaunched as the EU’s main cooperation framework with Southern Mediterranean countries, offering legal migration opportunities in exchange for commitments on migration control and border management (European Commission 2011; see Figure 1). This “next generation” of MPs (Cardwell and Dickson 2023, 3130) was signed with Morocco (2013), Tunisia (2014) and Jordan (2014), while negotiations with Senegal, Egypt and Ghana stalled or failed (Tittel-Mosser 2020). Although formally presented as EU-third country agreements and key instruments of the EU’s externalisation toolbox (Longo and Fontana 2022), the provision of legal migration opportunities largely depends on MS initiatives and capacities (Reslow 2019), making EU-MS cooperation central to their implementation. MPs can thus only function if national tools are pooled and coordinated, thereby shaping the overall content and scope of cooperation (Kunz *et al.* 2011).

Following the ‘migration crisis’, the EU introduced the Migration Partnership Frameworks (MPF) to foster comprehensive cooperation with third countries (European Commission 2016). While focused primarily on curbing irregular migration, mobility remained a core component. Under the MPF, a Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility (CAMM) was signed with Nigeria and Ethiopia in 2015,

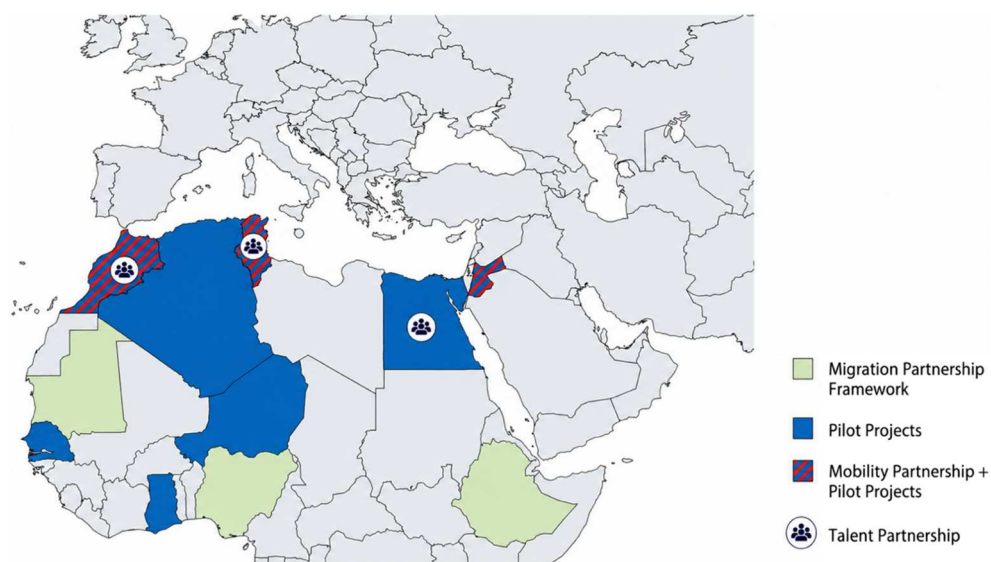


Figure 1. EU/MS Mobility Cooperation in the Southern Neighbourhood.

Source: Author's elaboration.

and a Migration Partnership was concluded with Mauritania in 2024. Although broader in scope than MPs and formally involving the EU as a whole rather than a coalition of willing MS, these non-binding frameworks similarly link enhanced legal pathways to cooperation on border management and return, making MS' engagement crucial. To support MPF's implementation, a Migration Partnership Facility was launched in 2016 to fund 'Pilot Projects' across a range of thematic areas – including return and reintegration, border management and anti-smuggling.¹ Pilot projects on legal migration and labour mobility were launched in ten countries in the Southern Neighbourhood: Morocco and Tunisia, that already had a MP; Ethiopia and Nigeria as part of the CAMMS; Egypt, Gambia, Niger, Senegal and Ghana as additional priority countries (Tittel-Mosser 2020). In 2024, Mauritania was also added to this list of priority countries.

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum further strengthened the mobility dimension through the Talent Partnerships (TPs) as “one of the key aspects of the external dimension” (European Commission 2022). Designed to connect students, graduates and skilled workers with opportunities in the EU, while also funding capacity-building in partner countries, TPs build on the experience of earlier Pilot Projects implemented under the MPF and, like MPs, involve the participation of multiple MS per single partner country (Ibid). In this sense, as with previous frameworks, the implementation of TPs remains contingent on MS' willingness to offer legal migration opportunities, making cooperation between national and EU actors essential. Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt were selected as priority countries for the first TPs in 2022.

¹For the full list of projects, see <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/about>

Mobility amid patterns of competition ...

Scholars have widely examined the characteristics and implementation of MPs, often highlighting their limited effectiveness and the extent to which their scope and impact are largely dependent on MS' willingness and capacity to mobilise national policy tools (Carrera *et al.* 2019; Reslow 2015; Abderrahim 2019; Panebianco and Cannata 2024; Seeberg 2017; Tittel-Mosser 2018). Not only do the majority of projects stem from bilateral MS-third country initiatives, but legal economic migration, in terms of quotas and employment permits, remains an exclusive MS competence (Tittel-Mosser 2020). Moreover, despite some harmonisation at the EU level, the issuance and processing of short-stay visas still depend heavily on MS discretion. Hence, the EU's capacity to offer meaningful incentives, or the "tastiest carrots" (Hampshire 2015, 580), relies on MS' readiness to activate specific instruments of their externalisation toolbox, such as visa policy and quotas (Rosina and Fontana 2024).

In this sense, viewed through the lens of the 3Cs framework, MPs were originally designed around a logic of complementarity. Given the EU's limited competence in key areas of mobility governance, MPs sought to mobilise national initiatives and resources on behalf of the EU and in support of collective objectives – such as the conclusion of EU readmission agreements in return for mobility incentives. MS tools were thus expected to complement and reinforce EU efforts by lending substance to the partnerships. However, empirical evidence suggests this complementary logic did not consistently materialise.

In the Southern Neighbourhood, levels of engagement varied considerably across MPs: nine MS joined the MP with Morocco, ten the MP with Tunisia and 12 joined the MP with Jordan. All three agreements established common objectives under the 'Mobility and Legal Migration' pillar, notably improving visa procedures and facilitating multiple-entry visas (Council of the EU 2013; 2014a; 2014b).² The Morocco MP, for example, combined EU-level commitments – such as improving access to short-stay visas and strengthening consular presence – with bilateral pledges by France and Spain to facilitate the issuance of multiple-entry visas (Council of the EU 2013). Yet, data on short-stay visas issued to Moroccan nationals before and after the MP reveal no significant increase; issuance rates stagnated and even declined following the height of the migration crisis. A similar trend is evident in the Tunisian case (Figure 2).

Rather than giving real traction to the MP's mobility pillar, this stagnation signals that MS did not fully activate their visa-related instruments as envisioned, thereby undermining the complementarity logic. This limited engagement reflects a pattern of competition through de-coupled governance, where national and EU instruments operate separately without effective mutual reinforcement.

Moreover, despite being a key proponent of both the Moroccan and Tunisian MPs, France introduced restrictive measures in 2021, sharply reducing the number of visas issued to Moroccan and Tunisian nationals (Schengen News 2020). This decision was explicitly framed as a bilateral retaliatory response to the perceived unwillingness of

²Visa Facilitation Agreements have historically functioned as incentives for readmission cooperation, rather than as independent instruments (Trauner and Kruse 2008). In the following analysis, we therefore use visa figures as an *indicator* of MS engagement with EU mobility schemes, not as a standalone object of study.

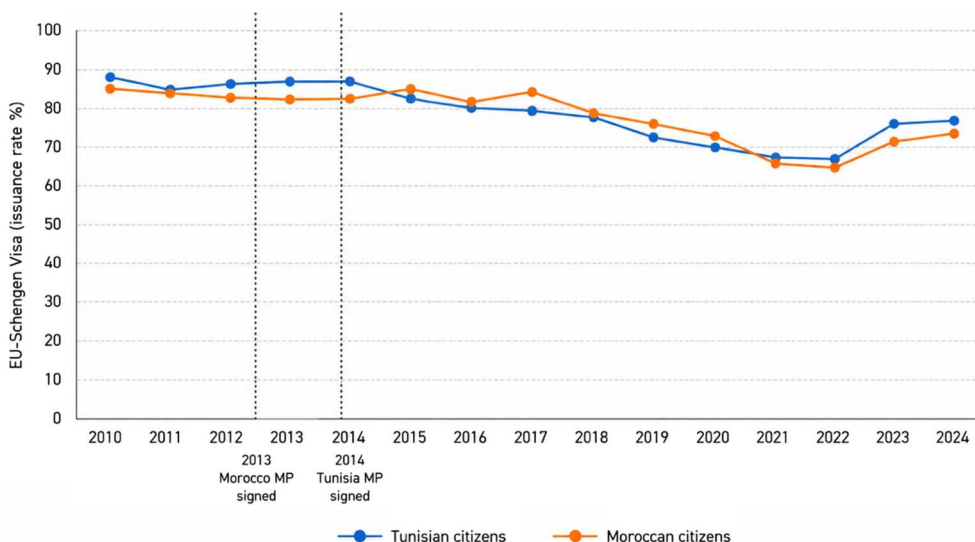


Figure 2. Short-term Schengen visa, issued at the EU level, for Tunisian and Moroccan citizens (2010-24). Source: author's own elaboration from European Commission's Schengen Statistics.

these countries to readmit their nationals deported from France (*Schengen News* 2024b), illustrating how MS may continue to deploy visa policy in pursuit of bilateral migration objectives even within a broader EU mobility framework. As *Figure 3* shows, alongside the sharp decline in short-stay visa issuance rates during the Covid-19 pandemic, France's 2021 restrictions further reduced approval rates for Moroccan nationals. This decline was also observed at the EU level, with France accounting for most rejections.

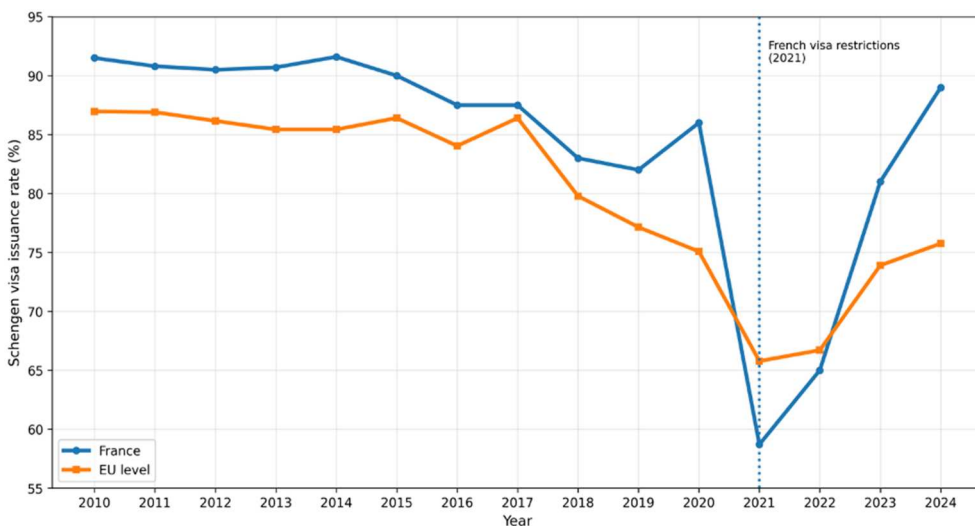


Figure 3. Schengen visa issuance rates for Moroccan citizens, by France and at the EU level (2010-24). Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission Schengen Statistics.

More broadly, MS' unilateral use of visa policy for national objectives hampers the EU's ability to offer third countries coherent, enforceable incentives. This may result in a fragmented system, where national prerogatives may prevail over collective EU goals and national tools are deployed independently, often in pursuit of domestic political agendas.

These limitations are further compounded by MS' entrenched bilateralism that bypasses EU frameworks (Van Criekinge 2010). For instance, in January 2024, Germany signed a comprehensive migration partnership with Morocco to establish “joint mechanisms to reduce irregular migration and strengthen legal labour mobility” (Federal Government of Germany 2024). From a decoupling perspective, this partnership reflects the use of national tools – such as quotas – to negotiate initiatives with no formal integration into existing EU instruments. The German-Moroccan partnership was negotiated entirely outside the MP framework and is unrelated to any of the projects proposed by MS (Germany included) within that context. Simultaneously, the agreement exemplifies a case of disjointed governance: its unilateral nature – and timing, coinciding with broader EU efforts to relaunch cooperation with Morocco (European Commission 2023; 2024) – risk weakening the EU's collective bargaining power and complicate the negotiation of common frameworks conditionally linking legal pathways to arrangements on return at the EU level.

Crucially, this is not a recent phenomenon. Cases of disjointed governance hindering the negotiation of EU-third country frameworks have emerged in the past. A key example is the failed MP with Senegal (Van Criekinge 2010). While the European Commission sought to formalise cooperation as part of its broader externalisation strategy, these efforts clashed with France's negotiation of its own bilateral migration agreement with Senegal, which already covered key pillars of cooperation – legal migration through quotas (1000 per year) reserved to temporary workers from the country, returns and development assistance³—thus closely mirroring the very logic envisioned in the MP. As Meng Chou and Marie Gibert (2012) note, EU officials reported that parallel negotiations caused confusion and mistrust on the Senegalese side, who feared that entering an MP would supersede or constrain the more flexible bilateral arrangement with France. France, in turn, reportedly saw little value in “multilateralising” a policy domain where it had already secured favourable terms (423).

... (Nominal) Convergence ...

While some aspects of mobility policy – like bilateral negotiations between MS and third countries, despite EU efforts to secure cooperation at the supranational level – reflect competition, others display nominal convergence. For instance, looking at the list of projects annexed to the Morocco MP (Council of the EU 2013), a clear trend emerges: most MS-led initiatives under the ‘Mobility’ chapter focus on information campaigns regarding migration opportunities or capacity-building projects targeting Moroccan authorities. These include raising awareness on legal migration options, training Moroccan employment services staff or developing labour market information systems. In such

³See, Accord franco-sénégalais relatif à la gestion concertée des flux migratoires [French-Senegalese agreement on the collaborative management of migration flows], <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/pdf/circ?id=30426>

cases, MS primarily activate technical and operational tools (Rosina and Fontana 2024; Fontana and Rosina 2024) rather than opening legal migration channels directly.

While these actions are not in conflict with the overarching goals of the MP and may even formally align with EU priorities – such as improving partner countries' capacity to manage migration or provide information on legal migration channels – they reflect a case of nominal convergence. That is, MS nominally adhere to the MP's objectives, but operationalise their commitments through low-cost, low-risk activities that fall short of offering substantive legal pathways. Instead of leveraging the highest-impact tools of their externalisation toolbox – such as labour migration quotas or visa facilitation – to substantively advance the mobility objectives of the MP, MS have prioritised locally targeted technical and informational activities that, while useful, do little to expand actual mobility opportunities for Moroccan nationals. This approach dilutes the MP's potential by prioritising politically safer or manageable actions over more meaningful, yet sensitive, commitments. Thus, the convergence remains superficial, masking a deeper reluctance to invest in measures that would substantively fulfil the MP's mobility promises.

Although no comprehensive list of annexed projects is publicly available for the Tunisian and Jordanian MPs, the structural similarities across all MPs – both in format and in the type of cooperation envisioned (Chou and Gibert 2012; Tittel-Mosser 2020) – suggest that comparable dynamics were likely at play. As these frameworks similarly rely on voluntary MS' engagement and emphasise capacity-building, information dissemination and institutional support over expanding legal mobility, we can reasonably expect patterns of nominal convergence to characterise these cases as well.

Nominal convergence also appears to be the prevailing pattern in the implementation of recent and upcoming Talent Partnerships. As previously noted, these initiatives build on earlier Pilot Projects under the Migration Partnership Facility and other schemes such as the Migration of African Talents through Capacity Building and Hiring (MATCH).⁴ Among the 20 Migration Partnership Facility projects in the Southern Neighbourhood, most promoted circular mobility schemes. For instance, the MENTOR project⁵ was implemented in two editions between June 2017 and December 2024 between Italy, Morocco and Tunisia to promote professional traineeships in Italy. Similarly, the HOMERe project facilitated temporary legal migration of talented youth through internships in France from Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.⁶ The Digital Explorers project promoted the mobility of young ICT specialists from Nigeria to Lithuania.⁷ Finally, the MATCH initiative involved companies from Italy, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium in recruiting skilled workers from Senegal and Nigeria.⁴

However, many of these projects remained limited in scope, involving very few participants. For example, the MATCH project, ultimately resulted in only eight recruitments – seven from Nigeria and one from Senegal (IOM 2023). Common challenges included the difficulty to scale pilots into stable, consistent and institutionalised regular migration channels (Ferro 2024a) and an overemphasis on highly skilled

⁴See, Migration of African Talents through Capacity building and Hiring (MATCH), <https://belgium.iom.int/match>

⁵See, MENTOR Mediterranean Network for Training Orientation to Regular migration, <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/11-mentor-mediterranean-network-for-training-orientation-to-regular-migration/preview>

⁶See, High Opportunity for Mediterranean Executive Recruitment (HOMERe), <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/33-high-opportunity-for-mediterranean-executive-recruitment-homere/preview>

⁷See, Digital Explorers, <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/mpf-projects/4-digital-explorers/preview>

talents, overlooking lower-skilled profiles despite labour market demand (IOM 2023; Friederici 2022). In some cases, the low participation rates were also attributed to modest benefits offered by EU employers, especially compared to similar programmes in the United States (US), Canada and Australia (IOM 2023).

These limitations reflect a broader pattern of nominal convergence: while formally aligned with EU's legal migration objectives and associated with sustainable and replicable practices (IOM 2023; Ferro 2024b), their outcomes remained modest. MS engagement primarily translated into low-cost limited interventions, falling short of creating significant mobility opportunities and leaving the resulting pathways selective, restricted in scope and predominantly temporary (Samuk *et al.* 2024), thereby weakening the overall transformative potential of these frameworks.

Nonetheless, some initiatives reveal the potential for spillover from nominal convergence into more genuine forms of convergence. The MENTOR project, for example, contributed to national-level discussions in Italy on expanding labour migration quotas and considering additional admissions outside standard quota frameworks (Ferro 2024a). Similarly, the Digital Explorer project helped establish direct consular cooperation between Nigeria and Lithuania, including the setup of a dedicated visa desk in Abuja and a notable increase in the issuance of work permits, which had previously been minimal (Friederici 2022). These cases indicate that, despite their limited scalability, pilot projects have the potential to evolve into more robust frameworks of cooperation, aligning national instruments more effectively with EU objectives and paving the way toward deeper convergence.

... and Complementarity

Finally, while competition and nominal convergence have predominantly shaped mobility governance in the Southern Neighbourhood, recent cases suggest emerging patterns of complementarity. In July 2022, the European Commission and Morocco concluded a “new operational anti-smuggling partnership” (European Commission 2022) to enhance border management and police cooperation. This partnership was followed by intensified cooperation between Frontex and Moroccan authorities in October of the same year (Frontex 2022). Although the new framework does not explicitly include mobility among its core objectives, the renewed engagement was underpinned by bilateral action at the MS level. According to the European Commission, Spain played a key role by reaching an understanding with Morocco to improve bilateral cooperation – including on mobility – as a precondition for advancing the broader EU-Morocco partnership (Schengen News 2022). Just two months after the partnership's launch, in September 2022, Spain initiated the ‘Wafira Project’, a new scheme enabling 16,000 Moroccan nationals to participate in seasonal agricultural work in Spain, made possible by the renewal of a bilateral framework on the collective management of hiring at origin.⁸ By activating a high-impact national instrument – temporary labour migration quotas – Spain reinforced EU efforts and bargaining power to incentivise cooperation on irregular migration through the expansion of legal pathways.

A similar case of complementarity has recently emerged under the EU-Tunisia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). While the MoU envisions the launch of a Talent

⁸See, Launch of WAFIRA Project, <https://www.migrationpartnershipfacility.eu/news/launch-of-wafira-project>

Partnership, in July 2024 Italy initiated a programme to recruit 400 Tunisian workers in the construction sector. According to the EU embassy in Tunis, this initiative reflects “how the EU, in cooperation with its Member States and Tunisia, is implementing concrete measures to enable legal migration within a framework of mutually beneficial cooperation – thus contributing to the reduction of irregular migration” (*Schengen News* 2024a).

These examples demonstrate how, under certain conditions, MS can activate national tools to complement EU frameworks, enhancing the overall coherence and impact of the EU’s external migration policy and generating productive interactions across governance levels.

Reading this through the lens of “migration power” (Fernandez-Molina and Tsourapas 2024), these findings suggest that EU-MS interaction shapes not only the implementation of mobility instruments, but also the EU’s capacity to exercise influence *vis-à-vis* third countries. Patterns of competition and de-coupled governance weaken the EU’s institutional migration power by fragmenting incentives and enabling third countries to engage selectively with either national or supranational actors. Similarly, nominal convergence, by channelling engagement into capacity-building, information campaigns and small-scale pilot projects rather than substantive legal pathways, limits rather than expands the EU’s ability to offer meaningful mobility as a strategic asset. The cases of complementarity point in a different direction, suggesting that when MS activate high-impact national instruments in alignment with EU objectives, they can meaningfully reinforce the EU’s institutional power *vis-à-vis* third countries. These cases remain exceptions rather than the rule in the Southern Neighbourhood, but they illustrate the conditions under which EU-MS interaction can translate into genuine migration power rather than its fragmentation.

EU-MS cooperation on returns in the Southern Neighbourhood

Ensuring the return of irregular migrants has long been a central priority for the EU’s migration policy, with efforts to create a unified EU approach to returns dating back to the establishment of the Schengen Area (Zanker *et al.* 2019; Roig and Huddleston 2007; Longo and Fontana 2022; Ellerman 2008). As early as 1992, the European Council issued a Declaration on the External Dimensions of Migration Policy, emphasising the need for EU-level return agreements. The 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam enabled the EU to conclude such agreements on behalf of the MS and the Tampere summit in 1999 reaffirmed the objective of promptly returning individuals whose asylum claims were rejected. This emphasis on returns was further enshrined in the 2000 Cotonou Agreement between the EU and the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Article 13 of the agreement commits each side to accept the return of its nationals found to be unlawfully residing in the other’s territory, with minimal procedural hurdles. The EU’s first coordinated external migration policy, the 2005 Global Approach to Migration (GAM), also included return as a core component. In 2011, this framework evolved into the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM), which promoted non-binding cooperation tools like Common Agendas on Migration and Mobility.

Following the migration ‘crisis’ of the mid-2010s, the EU’s approach changed in important ways, becoming more transactional, increasingly informal and more

focused on West African partners (Zanker *et al.* 2019; Longo and Fontana 2022; Slagter 2019; Torres Chedraui *et al.* 2026; Cassarino *et al.* 2023). First, the EU adopted a more transactional strategy through the European Agenda on Migration and the MPF, tying development cooperation and other policy incentives to progress on migration control and returns. Under this model, countries that cooperated on return saw more benefits, while those that resisted faced reduced support. Second, the EU has increasingly shifted away from formal readmission agreements, opting instead for more flexible, informal arrangements, such as joint declarations, MOUs, ‘Joint Ways Forward’ and compilations of good practices. These formats have proven to be quicker and easier to negotiate, particularly with countries in the Southern Neighbourhood. Third, the EU altered its regional focus, prioritising West African nations: four of the five priority countries for return cooperation (Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal) were in this region, with Ethiopia as the fifth (European Commission 2016), and the EU secured (non-binding) agreements with Guinea, the Gambia and Ivory Coast in the late 2010s.

More recently, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum has further reinforced emphasis on returns. Building on the Pact, the European Commission proposed a Common European System for Return in March 2025 to “facilitate, increase and speed up returns” (European Commission 2025). The proposal includes the introduction of a “European return order”, supported by shared databases, to allow mutual recognition and enforcement of return decisions among MS. It also envisions the establishment of “return hubs” in third countries for the reception of migrants subject to return orders (Ibid). Notably, the post-Cotonou Partnership Agreement between the EU and the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) signed in 2023, also included a chapter on the return of irregularly staying migrants.⁹

Convergence, competition or complementarity?

Returns have been a cornerstone of EU migration policy, evolving from formal agreements to more flexible, informal arrangements, particularly since 2015. Specifically, EU Readmission Agreements (EURAs) are considered the “oldest instruments employed by Member States to control migratory flows” (Roig and Huddleston 2007, 367). These agreements establish procedures and obligations for the identification and repatriation of migrants in irregular situations to their countries of origin or transit.¹⁰

Return cooperation unfolds along several dimensions: level (EU-wide or bilateral), partners (individual third countries or groups of countries, as in the EU-OACPS Agreement), legal nature (from formal return agreements to informal, non-standard agreements and MoUs), and issue linkages (most often visas, aid and trade) (Leerkes *et al.* 2022; Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik *et al.* 2024; Torres Chedraui *et al.* 2026; Ellermann 2008; Roig and Huddleston 2007; Cassarino *et al.* 2023).

As of 2026, the EU has concluded a total of 18 formal readmission agreements (with Hong Kong, Macao, Sri Lanka, Albania, Russia, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova, Pakistan, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan,

⁹Title VI, Chapter 4 Return, Readmission and Reintegration. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8372-2023-REV-1/en/pdf>

¹⁰See, EMN Glossary “Readmission Agreement”, [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/home/emn-glossary/glossary.html?classification=12&detail=readmission±agreement](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/home/emn-glossary/glossary.html?classification=12&detail=readmission%20agreement)

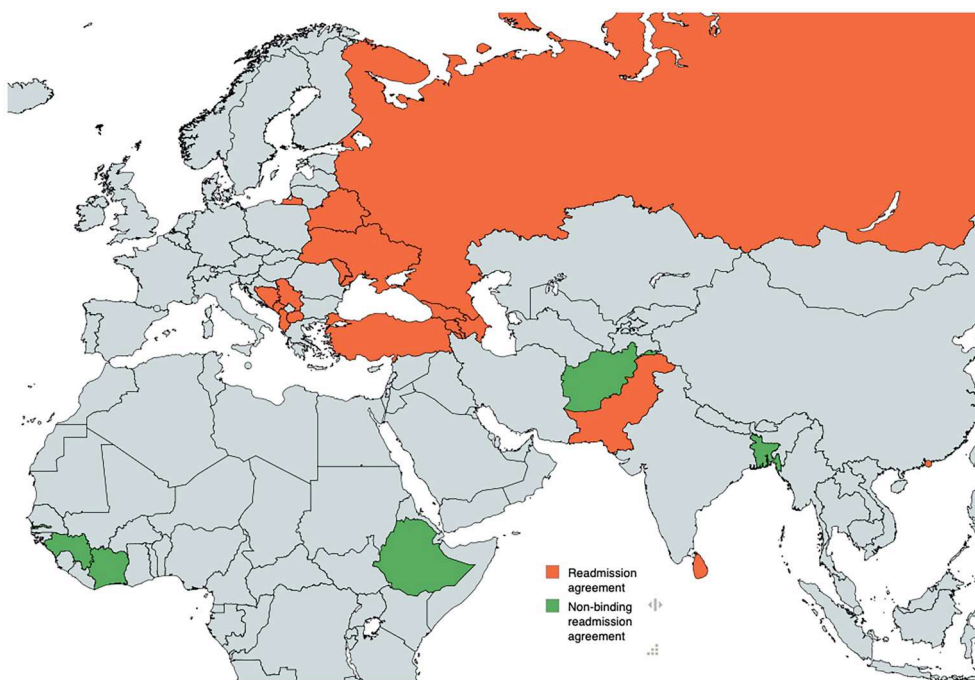


Figure 4. EU return cooperation.

Source: Authors' elaboration, made with MapChart.

Türkiye, Cape Verde and Belarus) and six non-binding arrangements (with Afghanistan, Guinea, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Gambia and Ivory Coast) (Figure 4) (European Commission 2026).¹¹ Notably, formal RAs are concentrated in Eastern Europe, whereas African and Asian countries remain under-represented (Leerkes *et al.* 2022). As of early 2026, Cape Verde is the only African country with a formal RA. All return-related agreements concluded since 2015 (except that with Belarus) have been informal.

Importantly, MS have the authority to sign their own RAs until the EU formally intervenes. However, once the European Commission receives a mandate to negotiate an EU-wide RA, MS are expected to suspend any ongoing or future bilateral negotiations (ECA 2021). Interpreted through the 3Cs framework, EU and MS return instruments were originally designed to function as instruments of *convergence*, with EU and national level tools reinforcing one another. In practice, however, MS have often pursued their own bilateral arrangements even while the EU was actively negotiating on the same front (Carrera 2019; Garcia Andrade 2019), suggesting competitive dynamics.

In the case of Algeria, for instance, although the European Commission obtained a negotiating mandate as early as 2002, negotiations never began (European Commission 2022). In the meantime, several MS opted for bilateral cooperation instead: Germany, Spain and the UK all signed RAs that entered into force between 2004 and 2007; France

¹¹ Additionally, the EU announced “the initialling of the EU-Nigeria Readmission Agreement” in March 2026 (see note 12). The EU also concluded migration partnerships or MoUs covering migration and/or returns with countries including Tunisia (2023), Egypt, Mauritania and Lebanon (all 2024). Yet, these are omitted from the present analysis, given its specific focus on formal and informal return agreements.

concluded a police cooperation agreement in 2003; and Italy engaged in both formal and informal arrangements, including a formal RA that took effect in 2006, a declaration in 2022 and a police cooperation agreement in 2024 (Cassarino 2025). These actions reflect a fragmentation of return cooperation, despite a standing EU mandate.

A similar pattern unfolded with Morocco. Although the Commission obtained a mandate in 2000 to negotiate readmission and visa facilitation agreements, only a single round of negotiations took place and discussions have stalled since 2015 (European Commission 2022), largely over the issue of third-country nationals and its potential domestic and international repercussions for Morocco (Lahlou 2025). In the absence of progress at the EU level, cooperation continued through bilateral channels (Cassarino 2025). Spain concluded multiple bilateral instruments, including MoUs in 2003 and 2007, a police cooperation agreement in 2012, and a formal RA which entered into force in the same year. The UK signed an informal deal in 2011, followed by France in 2020, Austria in 2023 and Belgium in 2024. Portugal signed a formal RA in 2004. The above developments illustrate Morocco's preference for bilateralism, most notably in its extensive cooperation with Spain.

Likewise with Tunisia, the European Commission obtained a negotiating mandate in December 2014. Although talks made good progress in 2018, they were put on hold in 2019 and 2020 (European Commission 2022). Despite the EU's continued efforts to relaunch negotiations, several MS proceeded independently: Germany, Belgium and Italy signed informal bilateral agreements in 2017, 2018 and 2020, respectively (Cassarino 2022; 2025; Fontana and Rosina 2024). Negotiations between Tunisia and both Bulgaria and Spain remain ongoing, highlighting once more the MS tendency to act outside of or in parallel to EU channels.

Finally, Nigeria and Turkey present comparable cases. Despite the EU holding a mandate to negotiate an RA with Nigeria since 2016, such negotiations were only concluded in March 2026,¹² by which time cooperation with individual MS was well established, including an informal agreement with Italy in 2019 (Cassarino 2025). Concerns over national sovereignty and domestic political sensitivities made Nigeria reluctant to commit to an EU-wide RA; it preferred bilateral arrangements with individual countries such as Italy and Germany, whose more flexible, targeted cooperation afforded it greater agency (Uzomah *et al.* 2025; Olakpe 2020, 15).

Competitive dynamics are not limited to the EU's Southern Neighbourhood. In the case of Russia, for example, the Commission obtained a negotiating mandate in 2000. However, both Greece (2004) and Italy (2006) signed informal bilateral deals (Slominski and Trauner 2018). Turkey shows a related pattern: although an EURA was successfully concluded in 2014, following a mandate from 2002 MS continued with separate arrangements with Spain signing an agreement in 2009, and Bulgaria and Greece in 2016. These examples underscore a persistent pattern across regions: despite the existence of EU

¹²Reports vary on the precise status of this agreement as of March 2026. The Joint Communiqué of the Eighth Nigeria-EU Ministerial Dialogue (23 March 2026) refers to the agreement being "initialled" (3) with both sides expressing willingness to expedite signature and entry into force. Some press coverage subsequently described the agreement as "signed", but it is unclear whether this reflects a distinct, later step or a looser use of the term. It is also not yet clear whether the agreement will take the form of a binding EURA or an informal arrangement. See, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/r3ogw4kb/joint-communication-eight-nigeria-eu-ministerial-dialogue.pdf>; <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/70531/eu-and-nigeria-seal-migrant-returns-pact>

mandates, MS continue to pursue their own agreements, often independently and even concurrently.

Together, these cases point to a recurring pattern of *competition through decoupled governance*, where MS actions do not align with EU-level negotiations. Despite formal mandates, coordination is lacking, and national initiatives often duplicate or undermine collective efforts.

This fragmented approach reflects the strategic preference of both MS and third countries. Bilateral deals are more attractive to the latter, allowing them to limit visibility of return cooperation to their electorate, negotiate more favourable terms with individual states and avoid accepting returns from all 27 MS (see Zanker *et al.* 2019, Cassarino 2010, Rosina and Fontana 2024; Olakpe 2020; Uzomah *et al.* 2025). Indeed, return cooperation is politically sensitive and highly costly for partner countries due to its impact on remittances, diaspora relations, domestic legitimacy and returnee reintegration (Ellerman 2008; Torres Chedraui *et al.* 2026; Cassarino *et al.* 2023; Olakpe 2020; Uzomah *et al.* 2025; Adam *et al.* 2020). In Senegal, for instance, returns became a contentious election issue in 2019, with politicians openly rejecting increased cooperation. In The Gambia, a civil society actor described return cooperation as a “hot potato” (Zanker *et al.* 2019, 6). In Nigeria, the diaspora regularly lobbies for more humane policies, while the media often highlight returnees’ difficulties, raising the political cost of supporting RAs (Uzomah *et al.* 2025).

MS are also better placed than the EU to offer the kinds of incentives third countries find compelling. As the Commission itself noted: “[a]s [RAs] are solely in the interest of the Community, their successful conclusion depends very much of the ‘leverage’ at the Commission’s disposal” (European Commission 2002, 4.1.1). While visa facilitation has been proposed as a key incentive (Roig and Huddleston 2007; Torres Chedraui *et al.* 2026), the discussion above on MPs shows it has proven difficult to coordinate in practice, particularly for African partners. MS, by contrast, can offer targeted and more immediate incentives than the EU, particularly in the form of labour migration quotas (see also, Olakpe 2020). Italy, for example, has routinely tied RAs with countries including Albania, Morocco, Tunisia and Moldova to yearly entry quotas, turning the latter into effective bargaining tools (Rosina and Fontana 2024). Similarly, following the surge in arrivals to the Canary Islands in the mid-2000s, Spain established temporary migration programmes to persuade Senegal to accept the return of irregularly staying migrants (Vives 2017).

MS, meanwhile, often prefer bilateral agreements over EU-level solutions, as these allow for greater flexibility, direct control over negotiations and incentives, as well as the ability to tailor arrangements to specific national interests. By contrast, EU-level agreements can be harder to secure and do not necessarily enhance return outcomes. As Philip Stutz and Florian Trauner (2021) show, return rates depend less on the presence or absence of EU return arrangements, than on regional dynamics. More specifically, Ana Maria Torres Chedraui *et al.* (2026) find that, while bilateral RAs tend to increase return rates by 17 percent, EU-wide RAs connected to visa facilitation have a positive but more limited impact of 13.5 percent and non-binding EU-wide frameworks can even reduce return rates by 9 percent. Notably, by 2025, none of the countries with informal return agreements (Ethiopia, Côte d’Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, Afghanistan and Bangladesh) recorded more than a few hundred returns, with Bangladesh as the only exception at 1,910 (Eurostat 2025b).

While bilateral RAs may serve the interests of third countries and MS, they arguably undermine the EU's collective negotiating power by offering an alternative negotiating venue to countries of origin and transit. Since only the signing MS can return migrants under bilateral terms, this pattern of *competition* compromises the EU's objective of collective return enforcement. The problem is compounded when the EU itself resorts to informal return arrangements, whose non-binding nature leaves MS free to negotiate their own agreements – a freedom that may ultimately conflict with or sideline EU-level efforts (Slominski and Trauner 2018).

Together, these dynamics alter 'migration power' dynamics between the EU, MS and third countries (Fernandez-Molina and Tsourapas 2024). The fragmented architecture of bilateral and informal arrangements (the very instruments through which the EU and MS project institutional migration power) enables strategic forum shopping by third countries, which can selectively pursue EU or MS incentives depending on which arrangement appears less demanding or more beneficial (see also Olakpe 2020). *Competition* has thus not only emerged as a defining feature of return cooperation but also demonstrated that "leverage is far from being unidirectional" (Cassarino *et al.* 2023, 27).

While competition is the main dynamic emerging from the above analysis, this does not mean that the other two Cs (convergence and complementarity) are entirely absent. First, post-2015 developments, particularly under the MPF, suggest a shift in framing toward *convergence*. Faced with challenging formal negotiations – evidenced by the fact that only one new formal EURA has been signed since 2015 – the EU has embraced bilateral and informal arrangements as pragmatic tools to boost returns. As the Commission itself noted, "the paramount priority is to achieve fast and operational returns, and not necessarily formal readmission agreements" (European Commission 2016, 7). While the substance of EU-MS interactions has remained largely unchanged, the framing has shifted: such bilateral and informal efforts are now increasingly presented as part of a pragmatic convergence strategy, rather than as evidence of fragmentation.

Second, *complementarity* can be observed when MS open new channels or use national incentives to support EU-level efforts. The case of Ivory Coast is illustrative. In 2016, Ivory Coast was identified as a priority country under the MPF. That same year, a high-level migration dialogue was held in Abidjan between the Ivorian Foreign Minister and the Dutch Foreign Minister, on behalf of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. With the Netherlands playing a mediating role, this official dialogue marked the launch of discussions on enhancing return cooperation (EEAS 2016). Two years later, in 2018, the EU and Ivory Coast signed the 'Joint Document on the Procedures for Identification and Readmission of Migrants Presumed to be Ivorian Nationals Staying Irregularly in the EU', an informal readmission agreement aimed at facilitating returns (European Commission 2023b). Interestingly, while most Southern Neighbourhood countries had received labour migration quotas from Italy between 1998 and 2010, Ivory Coast was only included in 2016 – coinciding with its prioritisation under the MPF and the launch of the EU-Ivory Coast migration dialogue. Italy's inclusion of the country in its national quota system at that moment appears to align with the broader EU strategy, serving as an incentive to encourage cooperation on returns and reinforce the emerging EU-Côte d'Ivoire partnership, thus exemplifying

a logic of complementarity between national and EU-level initiatives. Similar dynamics can be detected also beyond the Southern Neighbourhood, as the above-mentioned case of Bangladesh illustrates. These cases suggest that complementarity is indeed possible, with national tools such as quota schemes used to reinforce EU-level agreements, thereby supporting a multilevel external migration governance.

In sum, while EURAs were originally conceived as tools of convergence, their development quickly gave way to significant competition from MS, who continued to pursue bilateral and informal deals even when the EU held negotiation mandates. This reflects a clear pattern of *competition through de-coupled governance*, marked by limited coordination and overlapping efforts. Since 2015, such dynamics have persisted in substance, but their framing has shifted toward one of *convergence*: the EU has come to endorse bilateralism and informality as pragmatic tools to advance cooperation, given the stagnation of formal EU-level negotiations. As we have argued, *complementarity* also emerges, most notably when MS deploy national incentives (primarily in the form of quotas) to reinforce EU-level agreements, as demonstrated in the case of the Ivory Coast. Notably, while competition weakens EU institutional migration power by fragmenting incentives, convergence and complementary dynamics have the potential to strengthen it by enabling the EU and MS to reinforce each other's actions and objectives on returns, including across levels.

Conclusion

In recent years, cooperation with third countries of origin and transit has been at the forefront of the EU's strategy to manage migration, as reaffirmed by the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Yet, the ways in which the EU and its MS interact in delivering the external dimension of migration policy, and how this shapes cooperation and power dynamics with third countries, have received limited scholarly attention.

This article has addressed this gap through a multilevel analysis of cooperation between the EU, MS and third countries, drawing and expanding on the analytical framework of the 'three Cs' – Competition, Convergence, and Complementarity (Fontana and Rosina 2024). According to this framework, competition involves antagonistic dynamics between the Commission and the MS; convergence refers to the alignment of objectives, tools and priorities; and complementarity occurs when MS act in support of EU-level efforts.

Theoretically, we extend this typology by introducing a sub-pattern: nominal convergence. Whereas standard convergence involves MS fully embracing and implementing EU goals, nominal convergence describes instances where MS formally support EU objectives but adopt measures that dilute their effectiveness. Instead of committing to robust or ambitious actions, they settle for minimal compliance. This constrains the effectiveness of the EU's external migration policies, highlighting how superficial agreement can conceal underlying national divergences.

Empirically, we test the 3Cs framework in two key policy areas: legal mobility and returns. In the area of mobility, variable geometries of EU-MS interaction emerge. Mobility Partnerships were originally intended to complement MS efforts. Given the EU's limited authority over legal mobility, MS were expected to leverage their national initiatives in support of broader EU goals, acting, in effect, 'on behalf of

the Union. In a few cases, MS did activate important instruments to support EU initiatives, as illustrated by Spain's actions in 2022 to reinforce EU-Morocco cooperation. However, MS' unilateral use of visa policy for national objectives reveals a fragmented, competitive landscape, where national interests often override EU priorities. Closer inspection of apparent convergence further reveals that MS initiatives tend to be modest in scope, limiting the overall potential of MPs and offering only constrained mobility opportunities for third country nationals, in clear patterns of nominal convergence.

In the area of returns, EU-level Readmission Agreements were initially intended to replace fragmented MS actions. However, negotiations quickly encountered competition from MS pursuing their own bilateral arrangements, even when the EU had already been granted a negotiating mandate, as demonstrated by Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Nigeria. This competition through de-coupled governance, marked by limited coordination and overlapping efforts, weakened the EU's negotiating position *vis-à-vis* third countries. Since 2015, the EU has increasingly framed bilateralism and informality as pragmatic tools to advance cooperation, with some complementarity emerging when MS use their own bilateral incentives, such as labour quotas, to facilitate EU-level agreements, as in the case of Ivory Coast. Overall, both across mobility and returns, EU-MS interaction is marked by a complex mix of competition, (nominal) convergence and complementarity.

Viewed through the lens of 'migration power' (Fernandez-Molina and Tsourapas 2024), different patterns of EU-MS interaction shape not only the implementation of agreements, but also the power relations underpinning negotiations with third countries. Nominal convergence and competition both weaken the EU's institutional migration power: the former by limiting the EU's ability to offer meaningful incentives (with MS typically contributing capacity building and information campaigns, rather than substantive mobility opportunities), and the latter by fragmenting cooperation instruments and enabling third countries to engage in forum shopping, strategically selecting whichever level of negotiation (bilateral or EU-wide) offers the most favourable terms. Convergence and complementarity, by contrast, can strengthen EU institutional migration power, respectively by presenting third countries with a unified set of incentives and interlocutors, and by supporting, rather than fragmenting, the EU's position.

The analysis raises further questions: How do third countries strategically navigate and leverage these multilevel dynamics? How do EU-MS dynamics play out in areas such as resettlement and development aid? And under what conditions are cross-level issue linkages more likely? These questions are crucial for unpacking the complexities of the EU's multilevel external migration governance.

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Data access statement

This study analyses existing data as cited in the “References” section.

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