



The Rightward Shift: Transformation of Global Migration Policy and Discourse

EDITORIAL

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The decades-long European political consensus designed to isolate and contain extremist influences has now decisively collapsed. For nearly half a century following World War II, mainstream political formations across the ideological spectrum—from Christian democrats to social democrats, liberals to greens—maintained an unwritten but powerful agreement to erect barriers preventing far-right nationalist parties from accessing governmental authority. This defensive strategy, formally known in Belgium as the *cordon sanitaire* (literally a protective sanitary barrier) and in Germany as the *Brandmauer* (literally a firewall), represented a collective commitment to safeguard democratic institutions against potentially destabilizing forces (Axelsen 2024). Today, however, this carefully constructed political containment system lies largely in ruins, systematically dismantled by the surging popularity and electoral success of populist movements and nationalist parties that have steadily gained momentum throughout the European continent.

The dramatic realignment of Europe's political landscape is starkly illustrated by the current composition of national governments across the European Union. No fewer than seven member states—Italy under Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, Finland with the Finns Party, Slovakia led by Robert Fico's Direction party, Viktor Orbán's long-established regime in Hungary, Croatia with its conservative coalition, the Netherlands following Geert Wilders' Freedom Party victory, and Czechia's complex parliamentary arrangement—now feature hard-right or nationalist parties either leading government or participating as essential coalition partners. Perhaps even more telling is the situation in Sweden, where the traditionally progressive political environment has been transformed as the minority government's very survival now depends entirely on 'a confidence and supply' agreement with the nationalist Sweden Democrats, a party with controversial roots that has risen to become the second-largest political force in the Swedish parliament.

The meteoric ascendancy of right-wing political movements throughout Europe and across the North American continent has fundamentally and perhaps irreversibly

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transformed the intricate tapestry of migration policy and public discourse surrounding human mobility. From the choppy, contested waters of the English Channel to the sun-scorched borderlands of the Rio Grande, governments of varied political traditions are now embracing increasingly draconian and restrictive approaches to immigration management and border control. This dramatic reorientation represents not merely a temporary policy adjustment, but rather a seismic paradigm-shift away from the relatively liberal and humanitarian-focused migration frameworks that characterized the international order for more than three decades.

In the European context, nations once internationally renowned and domestically proud of their compassionate, welcoming stance toward those fleeing persecution and seeking better lives have undergone profound and startling transformations in their institutional approaches and political rhetoric. Sweden, which distinguished itself in 2015 by accepting more displaced persons per capita than any other European nation—a position that had become central to its modern national identity—has since executed an astonishing reversal in its immigration architecture (Abdelhady, Gren & Joormann 2020). The dramatic electoral ascendance of the far-right Sweden Democrats, a political formation once relegated to the extremist fringe of Swedish politics but now exercising unprecedented influence over the country's migration governance, exemplifies this continental pattern of nativist resurgence. This phenomenon is equally visible in Italy, where successive administrations have implemented increasingly punitive measures targeting non-governmental organization rescue vessels operating in the Mediterranean Sea's treacherous central corridor, effectively criminalizing humanitarian intervention in one of the world's deadliest migration routes.¹ Meanwhile, in Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government has not only constructed elaborate physical barriers along its southern frontiers, but has also systematically dismantled legal pathways to asylum while embedding anti-immigration sentiment within the country's constitutional framework and educational curriculum.²

The profound reverberations of this rightward realignment extend considerably beyond formal policy modifications and legislative reforms. The very nature of public discourse surrounding human migration has undergone a fundamental transformation, becoming increasingly characterized by stark polarization and emotionally charged rhetoric. Right-wing political entrepreneurs have demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in strategically reframing migration discussions, successfully shifting the predominant interpretive lens away from humanitarian obligations under international law or potential economic contributions of newcomers. Instead, migration is increasingly conceptualized and discussed primarily through the narrow prisms of national security imperatives, cultural preservation anxieties, and sovereignty concerns (Lazaridis & Tsagkroni 2015). This securitization of migration carries profound practical implications for migrants themselves, who not only increasingly confront formidable bureaucratic barriers to entry and settlement, but also encounter heightened suspicion, hostility, and occasionally outright xenophobia within their destination communities.

1 <https://searchandrescue.msf.org/news/flows-decree-approved-in-italian-senate-punitive-approach-towards-distressed-people-and-ngos.html>.

2 <https://www.boell.de/en/2015/07/13/viktor-orban-and-building-new-iron-curtain>;
https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AIDA-HU_2022-Update.pdf.

The North American continent has witnessed particularly dramatic policy realignments, especially within the United States political ecosystem. The profound impact of ascendant right-wing populist politics on migration governance was vividly illustrated during Trump's first administration. The controversial Zero Tolerance border enforcement initiative, which resulted in the systematic separation of thousands of migrant children from their parents or guardians, was a practice that generated international condemnation but substantial domestic support among certain constituencies. This rightward policy trajectory continues to exert outsized influence on contemporary debates concerning border security infrastructure, asylum adjudication procedures, and the appropriate allocation of enforcement resources. Even Canada, a nation that has long cultivated and internationally projected an identity centered on multicultural tolerance and immigrant integration, has experienced mounting internal pressure to impose more stringent limitations on immigration, particularly regarding irregular crossings along its extensive border with the United States.³

Perhaps most significant is the gradual normalization and mainstreaming of policy positions that would have been widely considered extremist or beyond the boundaries of acceptable democratic discourse merely a decade ago. Proposals advocating offshore processing facilities for asylum seekers, the widespread deployment of algorithmic surveillance technologies at borders, or even the criminal prosecution of humanitarian aid workers providing life-saving assistance to migrants in distress have transformed from fringe concepts into regular, legitimate features of policy deliberations among centrist politicians. This rightward gravitational pull has effectively established a new baseline for migration debates across Western democracies, systematically marginalizing advocates for more generous, rights-based immigration frameworks and humanitarian approaches to population displacement.

The economic repercussions of these restrictionist policy orientations are beginning to materialize across multiple sectors and institutional contexts. Industries historically dependent on migrant labor contributions, from agricultural production to hospitality services to healthcare delivery, increasingly report critical workforce shortages that threaten operational viability (see [Corrado, Pisascane & Alarcón Ferrari 2024](#)). Prestigious universities and research institutions that have relied heavily on international student enrollment and global talent recruitment face declining application numbers and growing difficulties in attracting foreign scholars.⁴ Meanwhile, the human costs continue to accumulate at an alarming rate as desperate migrants, confronted with strengthened official border controls and diminished legal pathways, increasingly resort to perilous clandestine routes controlled by sophisticated smuggling networks, resulting in tragic loss of life in deserts, mountains, and maritime environments.

The ascendant right-wing influence over migration governance has not proceeded without generating significant countervailing forces and resistance movements, though the fight remains challenging. Serving his second term, Trump's first weeks in office have presented unprecedented challenges to immigration policy nationwide. The Executive Orders on immigration signed by Trump in his first few weeks in office include efforts to redefine birthright citizenship, suspend the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, and declare a national emergency at the border. Additionally, Trump's

3 <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2025/01/canada-continues-to-strengthen-border-security-and-immigration-integrity.html>.

4 <https://www.tpp.co.uk/resources/blog/student-recruitment--current-challenges-and-finding-new-markets/>.

actions, and subsequent legal battles, have focused specifically on what are known as ‘sanctuary cities’ or ‘sanctuary jurisdictions.’ In previous years, certain progressive municipalities formally declared themselves ‘sanctuary cities’ for undocumented residents, establishing non-cooperation policies with national immigration enforcement agencies in direct defiance of central government directives. Now these cities are engaged in costly legal battles with the Trump administration, draining their already limited resources and diverting attention from other municipal priorities.⁵ Meanwhile, the business community’s stance has notably shifted. In the past, critical labor shortages in economically vital sectors motivated some influential business leaders and industry associations to forcefully advocate for more flexible immigration frameworks, creating unexpected alliances between corporate interests and human rights organizations. However, in the Trump era, these same business leaders see more risk than reward in immigration politics. Many have strategically pivoted, choosing instead to prioritize what is still achievable: tax cuts and deregulation.⁶

If the current American approach to immigration policy serves as a harbinger of Europe’s future direction, the outlook for humane and pragmatic migration governance across the Atlantic appears increasingly bleak. The profound impact of right-wing political ascendancy on migration policy and discourse represents far more than a temporary fluctuation in regulatory approaches. It constitutes a fundamental recalibration of how economically advantaged nations conceptualize and operationalize their responses to questions of sovereignty, security, demographic change, and human mobility in an increasingly interconnected yet politically fragmented global environment. The ultimate resolution of these competing tensions will inevitably shape not only the immediate life circumstances and future prospects of millions of potential migrants, but also the fundamental character, demographic composition, and cultural evolution of receiving societies for generations to come. As nationalist movements continue gaining electoral strength across democratic systems, the centuries-old tension between territorial sovereignty and universal human rights has reemerged as perhaps the defining political challenge of our contemporary era.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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5 <https://time.com/7222159/what-are-sanctuary-cities-why-is-trump-targeting-them/>.

6 <https://www.propublica.org/article/business-lobby-immigration-reform-trump>.

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