

## EU Centre Commentary Series

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### Global Compact on Migration: where will rejecting it bring us?

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In September 2016, [the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#) was agreed upon by all member states at the UN General Assembly to address global movement of refugees and migrants. This formed the blueprint for the two legally non-binding documents which aim to [save lives and ensure the protection of rights](#) of refugees and migrants. The Global Compacts on Refugees (GCR) and The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) are an effort by the UN to reinforce the message that dialogue and multilateralism are the key to addressing global challenges, and more international cooperation is needed to tackle migration flows and refugee crisis in the future. It is the latter, also known as the migration compact, which has caused controversy and was rejected by several EU countries citing concerns over sovereignty.

As a reflection of the rising intolerance and divisions over migration and refugees in the West, the US announced in December 2017 that it was pulling out from negotiations for the GCM—becoming the first in a series of rejections to follow. Anti-immigration hardliner, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán quickly followed suit, pulling Hungary out during the negotiations stage of the GCM as well. By the end of 2018, Austria, Poland, Czech Republic, Croatia, and Bulgaria have announced they will not be signing or attending the conference to approve the migration pact, inciting [debates in countries](#) like Germany and France and [a resignation from Slovak foreign minister](#), Miroslav Lajčák, who opposed his Parliament’s decision to withdraw from the GCM. Lajčák had helped to create the document as President of the UN General Assembly in 2017. [Belgium’s ruling coalition was also put at risk](#) as Prime Minister Charles Michel signed the migration pact despite opposition from Flemish right-wing party, N-VA.

### What is the Global compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration?

Despite the withdrawals by the US and more than 16 countries, in December 2018, [the GCM was adopted in an international conference in Marrakech](#), Morocco, by a total of over 160 countries. In all, 9 EU countries have stayed away from ratifying the migration pact for reasons that some have summed up as being uninformed as to the aims of the Global Compact on Migration. At the center of the rejections are claims that the migration compact undermines national sovereignty and promotes migration as a right.

The US has called the GCM an attempt by the UN to “[advance global governance](#) at the expense of the sovereign right of states” while Hungary responded that “[migration is a dangerous phenomenon](#)”. However, the UN maintains that the compact will not diminish but strengthen national sovereignty by tackling illegal immigration and human trafficking. In fact, the document itself states it “[reaffirms the sovereign right of States to determine their national migration policy](#)”.

Moreover, as the agreement is not legally binding, it adds no additional obligation to states. Rather, it presents a [common framework for international cooperation](#) on migration based on “shared principles” and “best practices” for a holistic approach to “managing” instead of “controlling” international migration. The GCM is the first international document aimed at [supporting safe migration](#) and lays out [23 objectives](#) to improve the net safety of legal migration and stem illegal and often dangerous border crossing.

The migration compact also distinguishes between regular and irregular migration. According to [this Euractiv report](#), UN figures show that more than 80% of those moving between countries do so legally, but over 60,000 people have died trying to cross border illegally since 2000. The GCM also calls on countries to share data and work on eliminating the root causes of migration in countries of origin such as violent conflict, poverty and climate change. Moreover, it highlights the importance of integration and developing skills in migrants so they can be seen as contributors rather than burdens to the host societies.

The migration pact follows the migrant’s journey from pre-departure to post-departure to ensure the most vulnerable get the protection they need. Although it is a document that is based on the

principles stated in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other [core human right treaties](#), it does not determine that migration is a right, contrary to [the opinion of those who oppose it](#).

It is also worth noting that besides the GCM, [the EU is already under obligation to uphold human rights](#) for both regular and irregular migrants under the various UN human right instruments and the International Labour Organization (ILO) standards. This [policy insight](#) by Centre for European Policy Studies(CEPS) argues that by rejecting the GCM, countries are not only denying the protection of rights of current immigrants but also of their own citizens living and working as migrants in another country. Thus, the reciprocity of such an international agreement should not be discounted in creating a normative world order based on rules and cooperation.

### Far right pressure and migration

Far right pressure has contributed to the turmoil that preceded the signing of the GCM in Marrakech. A senior UN official overseeing the compact, Louise Arbour, expressed confusion at the withdrawals by EU nations as [the initiative for the GCM was launched at Europe's request after the migration influx of 2015](#). Despite clarifications from the UN about the aims of the agreement, immigration is still seen as a primarily unwelcomed phenomenon by those on the right of the political spectrum.

Signing the pact would symbolize support for migration at a time when more countries are adopting restrictive measures to secure their borders despite [evidence that number of irregular migrants have been lowest since 2015](#) (by 92%). At the same time, there has been an increase in populism as well as the trend of center-right leaders bowing to pressures from the populist bases, perhaps to prevent even more extremist reaction and far right consolidation. Stopping migration is a key platform for nationalist and far right parties in the EU, and they are campaigning to get more seats at the upcoming European Parliament elections by forming alliances.

Arbour also pointed out that there has been misinformation spread about the text itself on social media and vlogs. It was found that [a surge of far right online activity preceded the government's decision](#) to exit the agreement in Italy and Austria. A report by extremism monitoring agency, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), shows that online discussions on the Global Compact shot up in November when right wing social media influencers like Martin Sellner, who started a nativist campaign against the compact, picked up the topic. The top hits were also from far-right sources which formed about 75 out of 100 videos discussing the GCM on Youtube.

Austria's withdrawal was duly [criticised by the European progressives](#) for setting precedence for leaving the compact at a time when it was president of the EU but it also gained support from the European Conservatives and Reformist group in the European Parliament. The controversies surrounding the GCM have shown that migration continues to be a highly divisive issue in the EU and indicates that it will be [one of the key battlefronts for upcoming European elections](#). In this battle, presenting accurate data and analysis on key issues will be fundamental to the outcome of the electoral votes. So far, the Left has been on the defensive about the benefits of migration and

has not utilised the data produced by UN and EU official documents to their political advantage. In an age of info wars and “fake news”, it is becoming increasingly important to make political judgments based on facts and proper research analysis.

Rejecting the compact, however, has [consequences not just for those undertaking the journey to cross borders but also for multilateralism](#). Besides migration, the international agreement is hailed as a triumph for multilateralism in a world where rhetoric of closing borders and nativist sentiments threaten civic solidarity and international cooperation. The compact, which was negotiated over two years, cannot realise its full potential with several countries withdrawing from the compact. EU migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos has also said that the global compact serves the interests of all EU member states by [allowing cooperation with third countries to control migration](#) if another influx such as the one in 2015 and 2016, were to happen again. Withdrawing, he warns, will have the opposite effect.

The issue of migration has reinforced divisions amongst EU nations and [further exposed the East-West divide](#) with Central and Eastern European countries calling for less immigration and tighter border control to stamp out illegal migration. The most vocal has been Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán whose throughline on the migration issue is to protect Europe’s external borders and creating “controlled centres”; this also resonates with the Visegrad Four’s position on curbing immigration and [resisting pressure to take in refugees](#). Since the summer of 2018, Italy under Matteo Salvini’s stewardship, has adopted a hardline stance that reinforces [no entry for migrant rescue ships](#) in the Mediterranean. Germany’s ruling coalition between Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats and Horst Seehofer’s Christian Social Union also [suffered](#) as Seehofer wanted to tighten Germany’s immigration policy.

The splits in the EU has led to stalling of action and [governments to call each other out](#) instead of working together. Notwithstanding calls for solidarity and unity from MEPs and Council President Donald Tusk, no consensus has been achieved on how to manage the migration issue. This is especially telling when it comes to sharing of refugees amongst EU member states. [One of the reasons Italy](#) has adopted the hardline stance is in part due to the inefficacy of the common EU asylum system, which has strained Italian and Greek ports receiving large numbers of arrivals. However, the [overhaul of Dublin regulation](#), which establishes that first ports of entry are responsible for processing asylum application, [have been put on hold](#) due to [demands by populists and anti-immigration rhetoric](#) that has prevailed.

At the 2018 European Council meeting in June, concrete actions being called for were more border security and [regional disembarkation platforms](#)—a hardline position originally proposed by Orbán. However, Brussels has emphasized that these efforts were to seek common ground between the hardliners on immigration and the centre. So far, Brussels has only been able to prioritise managing migratory flows by [externalizing border control](#) via bilateral agreements with North African nations like Libya and Morocco. This is a far cry from [the kind of EU support and solidarity needed](#) to tackle not only flows but also integration of those who are already resettled in Europe.

The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has [called for better integration of refugees and other vulnerable migrants](#), citing the positive economic impacts of migration, especially in countries with ageing populations. Labour market integration is essential to managing migration past the initial reception. However, [according to a recent OECD report](#), in Europe, it can take up to two decades for refugees to reach the same rate of employment as the locals and only one in four finds employment in 5 years after their arrival. OECD also finds that employment rate of low-skilled workers was higher for immigrants than locals. Christophe Dumont, head of the International Migration Division at the OECD [explained](#) the clash between locals and immigrants should not be attributed to migration alone but seen in light of the labour market, access to employment and education.

In terms of alleviating another migration crisis, intergovernmental cooperation as well as working with relevant stakeholders such as civil society and private sector, are paramount. Despite the positive potential of migration to add to the economy, the future of migrants and refugees remain uncertain in the current political climate. The GCM is meant to alleviate the strains of migration by large numbers on national governments by emphasising cooperation and solidarity. It is but a first step in complex global issue that transcends national boundaries. Withdrawing from the conversation around migration means that subsequent steps will be harder.

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The primary mission of the EU Centre is to promote knowledge and understanding of the EU, its policies and development of its relations with Singapore and Southeast Asia through research, publications and different outreach programmes.

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