New MENA Migration Deals

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The European Union has long considered its role as a normative power that stands up for human rights, democracy and the rule of law worldwide. Referring to Ian Manner's (2002) highly acknowledged theory 'Normative Power Europe', he argues that the EU seeks to build on its ability to shape global norms and values in addition to its economic influence. With its identity as a moral authority, the EU also wants to convey and represent these values to the outside world through its actions.

However, the recent migration agreements with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, Egypt and Lebanon, pose a serious challenge to this self-perception and the moral character of its policies. While these migration agreements

have been concluded in recent months, reports of serious human rights violations against migrants in the respective countries are becoming increasingly frequent. Migrants and refugees are sometimes arbitrarily detained by local officials and held in inhumane conditions. There are documented cases of migrants being transported to remote areas and practically abandoned to their fate without sufficient food, water or shelter. Such practices not only violate the fundamental rights of these people but also stand in stark contrast to the values proclaimed by the European Union. This is because, in the context of the agreements being signed, the respective countries are now actively receiving funds from the EU in order to organise the migration situation more effectively and reduce the flow into the EU. Even if the EU legally complies with and implements its agreements, the consequences of the inhumane mismanagement of migrants by its partners should be alarming to the EU. After all, the consequences could be recognised and reflected by a moral authority also outside its borders.

Another reason for this wave of agreements is the EU's new strategy of externalising migration management to its external border. In particular, the newly adopted migration pact of April 2024, which fundamentally reforms the asylum procedure in the EU, aims to increasingly relocate refugees to its external borders. There, they will be clearly identified in special facilities and checked to determine whether they will be sent back to their home country without further processing.

These cases at the external borders are subjecting the EU to an increasing dilemma, driving it between its established values and pragmatic action, with regard to the migratory pressure on European countries. If this discrepancy between values and pragmatism increases in the future, the EU's credibility as a moral authority will steadily suffer, leading to a potential loss of trust from its citizens and international partners.

As a consequence of these developments, the EU could be forced to formulate its foreign policy in a way that is less value-orientated and more clearly interest-led. Instead of continuing to emphasise its claim to normative power, the EU could articulate its strategic interests more clearly and adopt a more pragmatic stance in its international relations. This could mean that, in certain situations, the EU is prepared to compromise on its values in order to achieve security and economic goals. Such a reorientation could weaken the EU's credibility as a normative power, but at the same time strengthen its ability to act and its efficiency in an increasingly complex world politics.