One Crisis, Two Europes: Ceuta and the Politics of Solidarity

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In May 2021, thousands of people crossed into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on the northwest coast of Africa. The reaction was relatively unambiguous: Spain's borders were treated as Europe's borders. The European Parliament declared that Ceuta's protection concerned the entire Union and expressed "full solidarity" with Spain. The Commission and Frontex likewise offered assistance. The crisis was framed and understood both as a Spanish and European one, with Spain's vulnerability understood as the result of pressure at the EU's external border.

However, five years down the line, another crisis in the same territory has produced a highly politicised response. This time, on 30 July 2026, around 72,000 people temporarily entered Ceuta in a mass movement that overwhelmed local capacity and resulted in 88 deaths. This time, the crisis was not discussed solely as pressure on Spain's external border but soon became a matter of the country's migration policies. Earlier this year, Spain

approved an extraordinary regularisation programme aimed at granting legal status to undocumented migrants already living in the country. The policy itself received heavy criticism from other governments who claimed that Spain's approach could send an undesirable signal to the rest of Europe. Italy subsequently imposed temporary border controls on non-EU travellers arriving from Spain, and the policy attracted heavy criticism all around Europe. Josep Borrell, the former EU foreign policy chief, put it starkly: European solidarity has died in Ceuta.

But if solidarity has "died", what has disappeared exactly? It seems that the reality is much more complex than that, as EU states have continued to show support for Spain as a state under migratory pressure, while at the same time criticising some of its policies. Perhaps then the more important point is not that solidarity has been lost, but the political conditions under which it can be gained.

The Pact and migration governance

The EU has been developing a migration framework for decades, and the recent Pact on Migration and Asylum is the most ambitious attempt yet to make responsibility sharing part of that institutional framework so far. The crisis in Ceuta provides an opportunity to look at the functioning of this new system and poses a question to the Pact itself:

Can the EU Europeanise migration governance without Europeanising the way Member States understand solidarity?

It would be easy to conclude that Europe simply became less solidaristic. However, the real problem here lies not in the fact that solidarity was present in 2021 and absent in 2026. On the contrary, the problem is that solidarity got politically entangled with the idea of responsibility, and the political image of Spanish vulnerability changed. While in 2021 Spain appeared to be the object of external pressure by Morocco, in 2026 Spain remained under pressure, but now its own policies became part of the discussion.

The EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum came into force on 12 June 2026. For the first time, the Union has a formal mechanism aimed at structurally incorporating solidarity into its approach to managing migration. The first annual solidarity pool establishes a reference of 21,000 relocations or other solidarity measures, or €420 million in financial contributions, and identifies Spain, Italy, Greece and Cyprus as member states facing migratory pressure. The Pact formalises the principle of responsibility sharing, but it does not solve the problem of legitimacy of solidarity claims from member states. The EU can relocate and determine financial contributions, but it cannot legislate the politics of solidarity. This is the issue that emerges from Ceuta: not the absence of solidarity but the difference between solidarity as a legal obligation and solidarity as a political practice. The EU makes solidarity increasingly measurable, but measurability does not imply

a shared value. This is why the distinction between the Europeanisation of governance and the Europeanisation of political values is crucial.

The meaning of solidarity

The gap between institutional and political solidarity highlights an essential point in European migration governance: that it is not merely a tool for distributing tasks among members but also a political relationship shaped by judgments about responsibility. When solidarity is translated into an administrative procedure, then one dimension of solidarity becomes measurable, but the political relationship that gives it meaning remains harder to standardise. Spain therefore was both an object of solidarity and political suspicion at the same time, and the political conflict was over whether support for Spain could be separated from judgments about how Spain managed migration. The more difficult conclusion to draw concerns the rights of the migrants themselves. If every government prioritises ensuring no pressure reaches its soil, then the responsibility can move endlessly from one actor to another and ultimately back onto the people who have crossed the border.

The problem of Europeanization does not lie in the continued disagreement between member states, nor is it possible to judge a system that has only become applicable in June. The 2026 response to Ceuta does not mean that European cooperation doesn't exist altogether. It reveals something different: the fundamental tension at the heart of Europeanising migration governance: the EU can increasingly Europeanise the mechanism through which solidarity is delivered without fully Europeanising the political meaning attached to it.

In other words, solidarity should not only be understood as a tool of resource allocation, but also as a relationship shaped by trust, reciprocity, and political responsibility. The Pact is able to institutionalise the first dimension, but it cannot create the second. Ceuta is a reminder that a member state can be officially recognised as being under pressure while its political claim to solidarity remains contested. What the EU has learned is to measure solidarity, and Ceuta raised the harder question of whether member states can still give that measure a shared political meaning.