Rhetoric Over Rules: EU Migration Crisis

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The Impact of Anti-Migrant Rhetoric on EU Migration Solidarity Under the 2024 Pact

Introduction

"We do not want to see a significant minority among ourselves that has different cultural characteristics and background. We would like to keep Hungary as Hungary," stated Orban (Descamps, 2015). The European Union's 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum aims to share responsibility

for asylum seekers across member states, requiring solidarity through relocations, financial contributions, or operational support starting in 2026 (European Commission, 2024).

The pact was presented in September 2020, with the purpose of giving a new perspective on how to manage migration. “Over three years later, the European Parliament and the Council reached political agreement on 5 of the key files in a historic breakthrough”(European Commission, 2024). Around 10 new legislative texts were incorporated by the European Parliament. The new law determined a more stable and solid legal foundation when referring to migration policies.

According to the European Commission (2024), the main measures of the Pact include: Screening and amending regulations, which state that “All irregular migrants will be registered and subject to identification, security, and health checks”. A further element of the pact is the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation, which consists of a mechanism to protect and balance the responsibility of those countries that carry the major burden of asylum applications. A further provision is the solidarity mechanism, which “allows flexibility. Member states can choose to relocate asylum seekers, pay €20,000 for each person they do not take in, or provide operational support such as infrastructure funding. The Commission has set a minimum annual target of 30,000 relocations and €600 million in financial contributions, subject to yearly review by the Council.”(ETIAS, 2025). Hungary and Poland reject these solidarity mechanisms, using strong anti-migrant rhetoric to mobilise domestic opposition.

Figure 1: EU Migration Solidarity Mechanism: Design vs Reality

Comparison between EU migration solidarity options and actual member state responses.

The present article aims to understand the extent to which anti-migrant rhetoric in Hungary and Poland undermines EU migration solidarity under the 2024 Pact. This article argues their rhetoric significantly undermines solidarity by encouraging non-compliance, splitting East and West Europe, and creating legal chaos for 2026 implementation.

Figure 2: EU Migration Pact Timeline (2020-2024)

Hungary’s rhetoric

Viktor Orbán has been in power in Hungary since 2010, leading the Fidesz party. When it was founded in the 1980s, Fidesz was a liberal, anti-communist movement. Over time, especially under Orbán, it shifted into a nationalist and conservative party. Migration became its defining issue after the 2015 refugee crisis, and Orbán has built much of his political identity around it ever since.

His language on migration has always been harsh. He has called migration a "poison" and claimed that "every single migrant poses a public security and terror risk" (TIME, 2016). He has also spoken of "invasion" and "population replacement." These are not just words in speeches; the Hungarian government has spent public money on billboard campaigns, state television coverage, and national consultations, all repeating the same message: migrants are a threat to Hungary's security and identity.

In practice, Hungary has backed up this rhetoric with firm policy decisions. In 2015, it built border fences that blocked over 100,000 crossings. It has refused to host migrant camps or accept EU decisions on who can settle in the country. When the EU introduced relocation rules, Hungary refused to follow them. When courts fined Hungary for this, it chose to keep paying rather than comply. By mid-2025, the total fines had reached around €512 million, with the EU deducting the money directly from funds owed to Hungary (Hungarian Conservative, 2025).

This approach is popular at home. Around 70% of Hungarians support Orbán's position on migration, and it has helped him win election after election. By presenting EU solidarity rules as an attack on Hungarian sovereignty, he has made any compromise politically very difficult. But the consequences are felt elsewhere; Italy and Greece are left handling far more than their fair share of arrivals, and Hungary's refusal to engage weakens the EU's ability to manage migration as a whole.

Poland says no too

Poland has equally resisted EU migration-sharing plans, and the opposition cuts across party lines. In 2023, the then-ruling PiS party held a referendum asking Poles whether they accepted mandatory EU migrant quotas; the answer was a clear no. PiS also framed irregular crossings from Belarus as a deliberate hybrid attack on Poland, a narrative that gained traction as over 20,000 people crossed that border between 2024 and 2025.

The new government under Donald Tusk has maintained the same vision. Despite previously issuing 2.8 million work visas, making Poland one of Europe's largest labour migration destinations, Tusk has suspended asylum processing and refuses EU relocation funding. His argument is straightforward: Poland has already absorbed over one million Ukrainian refugees, and that contribution should count.

Poland could face fines of up to 500 million euros from the European Court of Justice for refusing to comply with EU migration rules. That is a significant sum, but for Tusk's government, the political calculation at home makes it a risk worth taking. Around 60% of Poles oppose mandatory migrant-sharing, meaning that standing up to Brussels is not just acceptable, it is popular. For a government that needs votes, defying the EU on migration is far less costly than agreeing to take in asylum seekers.

What makes Poland's case particularly interesting is that Tusk does not come from the same political tradition as Orbán. He leads a centrist, pro-European government that replaced the nationalist PiS party in 2023. Yet on migration, the difference is hard to spot. Tusk has adopted much of the same tough language that PiS used for years, talking about border security, national sovereignty, and the limits of EU authority. The main distinction he draws is that his government, unlike PiS, actually delivers results rather than just making noise. But the message to Brussels remains essentially the same: Poland will not be told who to let in.

All of this has a bigger consequence for Europe as a whole. Poland's refusal to share responsibility leaves countries like Italy and Greece (which are the first to receive migrants crossing the Mediterranean) dealing with the pressure largely on their own. These countries are on the front line, but they get little help from Poland or other Eastern European states. When Tusk says things like "no migrants, no money," he is not just speaking for Poland, he is sending a message that undermines the whole idea of European countries working together on migration. If enough governments take that position, the EU's ability to manage migration collectively simply breaks down.

Figure 3: Main Migration Routes to Europe

How Language Shapes the Debate

Hungary and Poland have both chosen to frame migration as a security threat rather than a humanitarian issue. Orbán regularly uses terms such as "invasion" and "population replacement," language that is amplified daily through state-controlled media and government campaigns. Tusk, on the other hand, describes irregular crossings at the Belarus border as Russian "hybrid warfare," which he uses to justify suspending asylum claims entirely.

The Visegrád Group has reinforced this approach by coordinating its messaging, collectively insisting that external EU borders must be strengthened before any internal burden-sharing can take place. Leaders in both countries maintain a strong social media presence that extends their reach beyond traditional media, Tusk's posts on X alone attract enormous engagement. The results are visible in public opinion: approximately 80% of people across V4 countries oppose the Pact's relocation quotas, which reflects just how effectively this rhetoric has shaped attitudes.

The institutional consequences are serious. By presenting EU solidarity as a threat to national identity and culture, both governments have encouraged legal challenges to the Pact at the European Court of Justice. Hungary and Slovakia have already filed cases against its implementation. What starts as a domestic political strategy ends up as organised resistance to EU policy, making it very difficult for Eastern European governments to compromise without paying a heavy political price at home.

EU Pact Solidarity Mechanisms Under Pressure

The 2024 Pact establishes a solidarity mechanism designed to activate when frontline states come under disproportionate migration pressure. As outlined earlier, member states must either accept relocated asylum seekers, make financial contributions, or provide operational support. In practice, however, this system is not working as intended.

Hungary accepts the financial penalties but refuses to pay them, with potential liabilities reaching 10 billion euros by 2027. Poland rejects all three options outright, leaving significant gaps in implementation from the start. The burden falls most heavily on frontline countries: Italy, which receives around 150,000 arrivals per year, is left without adequate EU support as V4 countries continue to opt out. Court rulings have shown a limited deterrent effect (Hungary's existing 200 million euros penalty remains unpaid), and the accumulation of unpaid fines has diverted an estimated 420 million euros away from Frontex operations, weakening the very border infrastructure that V4 governments claim to prioritise.

Diplomats from V4 countries have actually admitted that the real reason they do not comply is not that they think the rules are legally wrong, but it is simply because it would be politically damaging at home. This tells us something important about why the Pact is struggling. When the EU designed the solidarity mechanism, it built in flexibility on purpose, thinking that giving countries choices would make them more likely to participate. In practice, the opposite has happened; countries have used that flexibility as a way to avoid contributing anything at all.

The result is that Italy, Greece, and other frontline states are left to cope on their own, without the support the Pact promised them. And the more this happens, the harder it becomes to trust that the EU can actually deliver a shared response to migration. The system exists on paper, but in practice, it is not working.

Consequences for European Unity

The effects of Hungary and Poland's refusal to cooperate reach well beyond migration policy. Italy has begun negotiating bilateral agreements with North African governments, sidestepping EU frameworks entirely. This sends a clear signal: when collective mechanisms fail, countries find their own solutions, which makes the common approach even harder to sustain.

Politically, far-right parties across Europe have pointed to Hungary's defiance as proof that resistance to EU migration rules is possible and profitable, using this argument to push for similar opt-outs ahead of the 2027 elections. Unpaid fines have also created budget tensions within the EU, while enforcement gaps have left openings that Belarus and Russia have exploited. Even within the Visegrád Group, there are differences. Czechia has shown some willingness to engage, but this has not translated into meaningful support for frontline states.

The longer-term picture is more concerning. Climate-related displacement is projected to increase migration pressure significantly by 2030, and without a functioning solidarity framework, the EU may fracture into separate groups of countries operating outside collective agreements. Hungary and Poland have shown that consistent national rhetoric can, in practice, override EU law, and that precedent does not stop at migration. It raises questions about what the EU can realistically enforce in areas like fiscal policy or climate commitments as well.

Conclusion

Anti-migrant rhetoric in Hungary and Poland has significantly undermined EU migration solidarity under the 2024 Pact. Both governments have refused relocations and financial contributions, left billions in fines unpaid, and widened the gap between Eastern and Western Europe, placing an unfair burden on frontline states and weakening the EU's enforcement credibility.

The broader consequences are difficult to ignore. Without meaningful reform, the combination of climate-driven migration and growing geopolitical pressure could push the bloc toward fragmentation before 2030. The EU needs either stronger and genuinely enforceable sanctions or real incentives that make cooperation a politically attractive option for Eastern member states. Without one or the other, national rhetoric will keep undermining collective responses to problems that no country can solve on its own.

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