

17 January 2024

CARROTS AND STICKS IN MIGRATION COOPERATION: THREE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTHS

by Victoria Rietig

Conventional wisdom holds that Europe should use tools from all policy fields, especially the holy trinity of visa, trade, and aid incentives, to reach its migration goals. But what if the prescribed medicine only works for a few patients? New research spells out three uncomfortable truths that should guide Europe's use of carrots and sticks in migration cooperation in the future.

Effective migration partnerships with countries outside of Europe are a declared goal of the European Union and its Member States. But views diverge on what good migration cooperation looks like and which strategies are useful toward different partner countries. A particularly thorny issue is the use of positive and negative incentives. Also known as conditionality, it is debated heatedly in politics, academia – and of course at the [Vienna Migration Conference](#).

Conventional wisdom

“We should not only use the carrot of aid, but the stick of sanctions,” one Migration Minister said during the [high-level panel that kicked off the 2023 conference](#). After all, the argument goes, the credibility of Europe's asylum system hinges not only on granting rights to those who qualify for protection but also on delivering better return results for those who do not. “Without returns, you don't have an asylum system. You have a mockery.”

The belief is simple: If Europe wants to reach its migration goals, it needs to nudge partner countries to comply with its demands by bringing positive incentives to the table, such as visa-free travel, more development funds, trade preferences, legal pathways, diplomatic attention, or military support – but also negative incentives, such as the threat or use of visa restrictions,

decreased development cooperation, the suspension of trade privileges, or other disadvantages partner countries might be keen to avoid.

Beware migration myths: Three uncomfortable truths

This belief is not wrong, but it is incomplete. It is a migration myth – often heard, but not backed by facts. [Research by the German Council on Foreign Relations \(DGAP\)](#) shows three uncomfortable truths about the use of carrots and sticks in migration cooperation:

First, their effects are smaller than European governments like to think. Using incentives toward partner countries can achieve (and has in the past had) some of the desired effects, such as the formalisation of migration cooperation through Memoranda of Understanding or other agreements, increased dialogue, and working-level processes. But it often has a rather small impact on the number of returns.

Second, experience shows that deploying carrots and sticks seems to be more effective toward countries that depend on Europe and are of low geopolitical relevance to Brussels and European capitals. Put simply: Threats can get you increased cooperation only if the other side cannot retaliate easily. If the partner country can exert counterpressure, for instance, by limiting security cooperation or border control measures, or even actively supporting or forcing the onward movement of migrants (aka migration instrumentalisation), Europe's sticks are nothing but tiny twigs. Droll to look at. Easy to snap.

The third uncomfortable truth is that Europe is rarely willing to offer the biggest carrot it is shlepping around. Visa-free access to European soil is high on the wish list of many partner countries, but Europe displays little political will to grant it to most of the countries that want it. This perhaps reasonable, but self-imposed, limitation means that Europe gravitates toward using visas as a negative incentive. But visa restrictions such as those under Art. 25a of the Schengen Borders Code have yet to show significant effects.

DGAP research grants that “the visa lever is the one-eyed among the blind. It is the only lever that is both formalized and established at EU level, it is easiest to use [...] and it can be targeted well to a country’s decision-makers and elites.” But it also finds that “the EU’s visa restrictions are a blunt sword because the visa cannot be taken away, but only made harder to get. The hassle tied to Schengen visa applications is already high under normal circumstances, so increasing the required paperwork, banning multiple entry visas, and adding wait time only seems to have a minimal impact on the number of applications.”

The takeaway: European carrots are often not sweet enough, and its sticks not scary enough.

Better selective than sorry: Change timing and tone

So, what to do with this bleak image? How should governments shape their migration cooperation and use incentives in a less delusional and more realistic manner?

Two steps are needed. The first is to acknowledge that conditionality is often more a rhetorical tool to calm Europeans themselves than a practical tool to change the behaviour of partner countries. Sure, it can work, but Europe achieves its desired results less often than it wants to, and unintended side effects such as backlash in partner countries or even reverse conditionality can make future migration conversations even harder.

The second step is to use incentives more selectively and smartly than in the past. This means changing both timing and tone. Case studies show that partner countries are often more willing and able to change their cooperation when elections or other changes of power occur because they open windows of opportunity for closer cooperation in all areas, not just migration. Timing matters, perhaps more so than Europe’s use of incentives and threats. Tone also matters. Respectful dialogue and joint public communication are crucial since it allows governments to balance their image needs at home and internationally. This common-sensical

advice is, nonetheless, often neglected, as the starkly different messaging of the European Union and Tunisia has shown in recent months.

The winding road can beat the shortcut

Europe will continue to seek migration solutions abroad. It depends on its many neighbours and their willingness to manage migration jointly. Keeping in mind the axiom that “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results,” European countries should shed the delusion that pressuring or pulling partners toward cooperation is the quickest path to reaching migration goals. Shortcuts are tempting but can lead to dead ends. If Europe wants to reach its goals, it needs to take the long and winding road that is migration cooperation. Lasting migration relationships should be based more on facts, [mutual interests, continuous engagement, and trust building](#), and less on tools that sound impressive on paper but have a less impressive track record of changing reality.

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