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Rights, Accountability, and Political Agency across Borders

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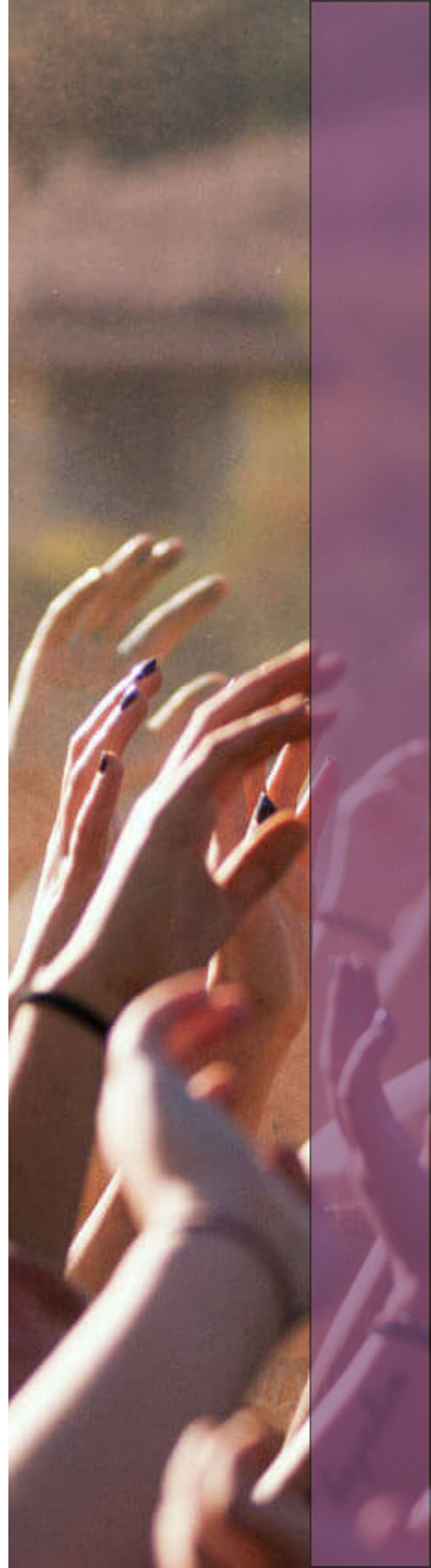
Issue Brief n.01/26

Democracy, Multilateralism and
Migration

January 2026

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Issue Brief 6 – Democracy and Migration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across world regions, migration has become one of the clearest arenas where both democracy and multilateralism are under strain. How states manage migration speaks directly to equality, non-discrimination, access to rights, participation, transparency and accountability. When these principles are weakened, migrant populations are among the first to experience arbitrary detention and expulsions, pushbacks, denial of services and shrinking civic space, sometimes with deadly consequences.

At the same time, migration governance is now embedded in a dense multilateral landscape. Human-rights and labour standards, regional freedom-of-movement regimes and, more recently, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) provide shared reference points and fora. Regional organisations, route-based processes and deals have multiplied around them. These arrangements can support responsibility-sharing and policy innovation, but they can also reduce transparency and accountability when key decisions are taken through opaque bilateral agreements, driven mainly by security concerns, and shift risks onto less powerful states and mobile populations.

The brief argues that democratic quality and migration governance shape each other: the weakening of democratic safeguards makes rights violations against migrants easier to normalise, while polarising migration debates are instrumentalised to mobilise partisan support, channel grievances and redraw boundaries between “insiders” and “outsiders”, reshaping how equality and rights are understood. It shows that multilateral frameworks offer important tools for rights-based and accountable migration governance, but that their democratic value depends on how they are implemented, monitored and linked to domestic checks and balances. It also treats migrants as political actors, highlighting their roles in elections, campaigning, lobbying, public debate and grassroots mobilisation. Running through these arguments is a concern with how struggles over jobs, housing, welfare and territorial inequalities cut across borders. Scholarship has shown the value of shifting attention towards shared vulnerabilities, needs and struggles among migrants and long-term residents in precarious situations, rather than treating administrative categories as natural boundaries.

The brief is organised in three parts. Part 1 maps key tensions at the intersection of democracy, multilateralism and migration: how the deterioration of democratic safeguards, the instrumentalisation and externalisation of migration, and migrant political agency interact, and why a non-EU-centred lens is needed. Part 2 reviews the existing multilateral and regional architecture, including global standards, regional and route-based cooperation, and the roles of cities, civil society and migrant-led actors. Part 3 proposes policy pointers and questions for dialogue around four axes: re-anchoring practice in existing standards; changing political and media incentives that reward harmful “toughness”; treating inclusion as a form of governance capacity; and reconnecting migration debates to wider struggles over welfare, labour conditions and territorial inequalities that affect migrants and non-migrants alike.

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION.....	4
1. DEMOCRACY, MIGRATION AND MULTILATERALISM: CURRENT DYNAMICS.....	6
1.1 Migration politics and democratic quality: a two-way relationship	6
1.2 Instrumentalisation – and the underlying incentives	6
1.3 Externalisation and accountability across levels	7
1.4 Migrants and diasporas as political actors	8
1.5 Adopting a non-EU-only lens.....	9
2. MECHANISMS: WHAT ALREADY EXISTS	9
2.1 Global architecture	9
2.2 Rights standards as common baseline.....	11
2.3 Regional/route-based and “mini-lateral” cooperation.....	12
2.4 Beyond states: municipalities, civil society, migrant-led/diaspora actors.....	13
3. POLICY POINTERS AND DISCUSSION OPENINGS.....	14
3.1 Re-anchor practice in existing standards	14
3.2 Reduce toxic incentives in public debate	15
3.3 Inclusion as governance capacity	16
3.4 Linking to the “social question”	17
3.5 Questions and openings for a policy dialogue	18
REFERENCES	20

INTRODUCTION

Across world regions, migration has become one of the most visible arenas where democracy and multilateralism are tested. The ways states manage borders, asylum regimes, labour recruitment and diaspora engagement are closely tied to core democratic principles: equality and non-discrimination, access to rights, participation, transparency and accountability. When these principles erode, migrants and refugees are often among the first to feel the effects – for example through arbitrary detention, summary expulsions, denial of basic services or shrinking civic space for organisations that support them¹. Recent syntheses in migration and refugee studies also underline that much of the world’s refugee and labour mobility occurs within and between countries of the Global South, even as public and academic debates tend to centre movements towards North America and Europe².

At the same time, migration politics feeds back into the quality of democracy itself. High-salience debates about asylum, irregular crossings, border control or labour mobility are used to mobilise electoral support, channel socio-economic grievances and draw symbolic boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Political actors may frame migration as an existential threat to “the nation” or “our way of life”, legitimising restrictive measures that sit uneasily with commitments to equality and non-discrimination. Research on democratic erosion, security practices and migration governance shows how such dynamics can gradually normalise rights-limiting practices while preserving the façade of electoral competition³.

From a multilateral perspective, migration is also a field where important normative and institutional advances have been made. Human-rights treaties, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, regional freedom-of-movement and protection instruments, and, more recently, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) form part of an evolving architecture. Early analyses highlighted its fragmented and state-centric nature, relying heavily on informal forums and soft law⁴. The Global Compacts introduce iterative, review-based and multi-stakeholder elements into this landscape and how a broader array of institutions – from cities and international organisations to private actors and migrant networks – participate in it⁵.

This evolving architecture is under pressure from a drift—among some key states and donors—toward more selective, transactional forms of international cooperation, and a preference for bilateral or multilateral channels. A recent example is the 7 January 2026 U.S. Presidential Memorandum ordering withdrawal from the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) and democracy-support infrastructures such as the UN Democracy Fund and International IDEA, illustrating a willingness to reshape multilateral engagement through exit and funding decisions⁶.

The existence of standards and fora has not prevented stark divergences between discourse and practice⁷. The same governments that endorse rights-based language in multilateral settings may pursue border practices and bilateral arrangements that shift responsibilities outward, constrain access to protection or

¹ UNGA, 1948; UNGA, 1993; UN, 2009; International IDEA, 2017a; Luttringer & Tixador, 2025; Fassin, 2011.

² de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020; FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; IOM, 2024.

³ International IDEA, 2017a; Urwin, Foedit & Krause, 2025; Faist, 2019; Fassin, 2011; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

⁴ UNGA, 2018a, 2018b; Betts, 2011; Newland, 2010.

⁵ Lavenex, 2020; Pécoud, 2024; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

⁶ The White House, 2026; Tokhi & Zimmermann, 2026.

⁷ UNGA, 2018a, 2018b, 2024; Betts, 2011; Lavenex, 2020; Pécoud, 2024.

limit avenues for regular migration. The central question is how multilateralism interacts with domestic politics, regional projects and unequal power relations in concrete migration settings⁸.

Social science perspectives emphasise that these dynamics are also bound up with what has been called the “transnationalized social question”: struggles over social protection, labour market segmentation and welfare redistribution that increasingly cut across borders. Migration policies become proxy battlegrounds over who is recognised as deserving of solidarity and under what conditions, which in turn affects perceptions of democratic fairness and inclusion⁹. Migrants and diasporas are not passive in these processes: they participate in elections, lobby governments, engage in public debates and organise protests that challenge exclusionary policies or, in some cases, support projects that are themselves contested in normative terms¹⁰.

This issue brief examines how democracy and migration intersect at different levels, and what role multilateral and regional mechanisms can play in supporting more rights-respecting, accountable and inclusive forms of migration governance. In line with the broader series, it adopts a non-EU-only lens, drawing on cross-regional patterns and selected examples from different parts of the world, including South–South mobility and intraregional movements¹¹.

Three guiding assumptions underpin the analysis:

1. Democracy and human rights are mutually reinforcing. International human-rights law and UN democracy norms provide key benchmarks to assess whether migration governance is compatible with democratic commitments¹².
2. Multilateralism is normatively loaded, not neutral. While the UN does not prescribe a single model of government, multilateral migration frameworks are embedded in a broader *acquis* that links human rights, democratic governance and inclusive development, and that increasingly recognises civil society and migrant actors as stakeholders¹³.
3. Migrants and diasporas are part of the democratic picture. Their political participation – formal and informal, domestic and transnational – can support, complicate or contest democratic orders. Treating them only as governed populations overlooks important dimensions of democratic practice and legitimacy¹⁴.

The brief is organised in three parts. Part 1 outlines key tensions at the intersection of democracy and migration: how migration politics can both reflect and accelerate democratic backsliding, and how migrants and diasporas act as political subjects. Part 2 reviews existing multilateral and regional mechanisms for governing migration and protecting rights, with a focus on where they intersect with democratic accountability. Part 3 proposes policy pointers and discussion questions, highlighting possible entry points to re-centre existing human-rights, refugee and labour standards as the baseline for migration governance, while making multilateral migration arrangements more inclusive and democratically grounded.

⁸ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Lebon-McGregor & Micinski, 2021; Collrin & Bauder, 2025; Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023.

⁹ Faist, 2019.

¹⁰ Bauböck, 2017; Kapur, 2010; Meseguer, Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2022; Nyers, 2015; Schwiertz, 2022.

¹¹ IOM, 2024; International IDEA, 2017b.

¹² UNGA, 1948; UNGA, 1993; UN, 2009; International IDEA, 2017a; Lutringer & Tixador, 2025.

¹³ UNGA, 2018a, 2018b, 2024; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Lebon-McGregor & Micinski, 2021; Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023

¹⁴ Bauböck, 2017; Lafleur, 2013; Meseguer, Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2022; Nyers, 2015; Schwiertz, 2022.

1. DEMOCRACY, MIGRATION AND MULTILATERALISM: CURRENT DYNAMICS

1.1 Migration politics and democratic quality: a two-way relationship

The relationship between migration and democracy runs in both directions. On the one hand, the quality of democracy – understood here in terms of rule of law, effective guarantees of rights, pluralism and meaningful participation – shapes how migrants and refugees are treated. Where checks and balances erode, where courts and independent media are weakened and civil society is constrained, it becomes easier to normalise practices such as illegal pushbacks, arbitrary detention, collective expulsions or the criminalisation of solidarity. These measures may be justified as exceptional responses to “crisis”, but they often persist beyond acute emergencies and extend to other groups. Social science work on the “governmentality of immigration” has traced how such practices normalise regimes of surveillance, suspicion and racialised bordering in the everyday administration of migration and asylum¹⁵.

On the other hand, migration politics has become a central arena through which democratic norms and practices are contested and reshaped. High-visibility debates about asylum, irregular crossings or labour migration are used to mobilise electoral support, reframe socio-economic grievances and draw lines between “insiders” and “outsiders”. Political entrepreneurs may link migration to broader narratives about cultural decline, security threats or welfare abuse, legitimising restrictive policies that target non-citizens but also alter expectations about equality and rights more broadly¹⁶.

Research on democratic erosion and resilience shows how incumbents and political coalitions can gradually undermine institutional checks, concentrate power and limit pluralism while retaining electoral processes¹⁷. In such contexts, migration governance often becomes a testing ground for rights-restrictive policy innovations: emergency measures, expanded surveillance, fast-track procedures, or exceptional legal regimes are trialled at the border and later normalised.

1.2 Instrumentalisation – and the underlying incentives

The notion of instrumentalisation of migration has gained prominence to describe situations where states or non-state actors deliberately use movements of people as tools for foreign-policy leverage, deterrence or domestic agenda-setting. Examples include threats to “send” migrants towards neighbouring countries, sudden transfers of people to border regions or symbolic relocations to politically sensitive locations.

From a democracy and multilateralism perspective, it is important to acknowledge these practices without letting them fully structure the analysis. Focusing only on instrumentalisation risks suggesting that, absent such intentional manipulation, migration politics would be relatively straightforward. In reality, structural incentives make the politicisation of migration highly likely:

- Electoral cycles and media logics reward highly visible gestures and “tough” signalling, even when measures are ineffective or harmful¹⁸.

¹⁵ Fassin, 2011; Faist, 2019; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

¹⁶ IOM, 2024; International IDEA, 2017a; Faist, 2019; Fassin, 2011.

¹⁷ International IDEA, 2017a; Urwin, Foedit & Krause, 2025; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018.

¹⁸ IOM, 2024; Collrin & Bauder, 2025; Faist, 2019.

- Responsibility for migration is fragmented across ministries, levels of government and international partners, facilitating blame-shifting and reducing clear lines of accountability¹⁹.
- Socio-economic inequalities and anxieties about welfare, jobs and housing create fertile ground for scapegoating, especially where redistributive and social-protection policies are weak or contested²⁰.

Recent work in migration and refugee studies highlights how legal and bureaucratic categories – such as the distinction between “refugee” and “migrant”, or “economic” versus “forced” migration – are historically contingent, politically contested and morally charged, yet central to determining who is recognised as deserving of protection and support²¹. This suggests that struggles around mobility, welfare and belonging cannot be fully understood if “migrants” and “non-migrants” are treated as separate, self-evident groups, rather than as differently positioned actors within broader hierarchies of inequality²².

Against this background, the key question is not whether instrumentalisation occurs – it does – but what institutional and normative arrangements can change the pay-off structure, making rights-violating approaches less attractive and rights-respecting ones more politically sustainable.

1.3 Externalisation and accountability across levels

One of the most visible trends in contemporary migration governance is the externalisation of border controls and protection responsibilities. States seek to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from reaching their territory through measures such as carrier sanctions, offshore processing, “safe third country” arrangements, joint patrols beyond their borders or funding for containment in transit countries. As recent research on the Central Mediterranean shows, these environments can also turn criminalised actors – smugglers, militias and other armed groups – into de facto components of migration governance, blurring lines between state and non-state control²³. Ethnographic work on migrant smuggling likewise shows that many facilitators are small-scale, community-embedded actors, and that enforcement-led responses tend to displace routes, increase costs and heighten migrants’ vulnerability rather than dismantling the underlying market²⁴.

Externalisation raises several democratic concerns:

- Distance and opacity. When key decisions are implemented at sea, in transit zones or in third countries, it becomes harder for parliaments, courts, national human-rights institutions and the public to scrutinise what is being done in their name²⁵.
- Asymmetries of power. Bilateral or mini-lateral deals often involve unequal partners. Less-resourced states may accept arrangements that strain their own protection capacities in exchange for financial or political concessions, with limited avenues for redress²⁶.

¹⁹ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019; Lebon-McGregor & Micinski, 2021; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

²⁰ Faist, 2019; de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020; IOM, 2024.

²¹ FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Yarris & Castañeda, 2015.

²² Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018.

²³ Achilli, 2024; Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023.

²⁴ Sanchez, 2014.

²⁵ Lavenex, 2019; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

²⁶ Ibid.

- Limited voice for affected people. Migrants, refugees and local communities in partner countries typically have little say in designing or monitoring such arrangements, despite bearing significant risks²⁷.

Scholarship on the transnationalized social question underlines that these dynamics are not only about territorial control, but also about how social risks, labour markets and welfare responsibilities are distributed across borders²⁸. Externalisation can function simultaneously as migration management and as “performance politics” aimed at domestic audiences, signalling control while shifting costs and rights claims elsewhere. The resulting gap between multilateral commitments and concrete practices is therefore not simply technical; it is a matter of democratic accountability: who decides, who benefits, and who is exposed to harm²⁹.

1.4 Migrants and diasporas as political actors

Standard migration debates often depict migrants as passive recipients of policy or as targets of integration measures. Research on transnational migration, diaspora engagement and migrant rights advocacy offers a more complex view, showing how migrants participate in and reshape politics in both origin and destination contexts³⁰.

This participation takes multiple forms:

- Formal channels: external voting rights, eligibility for office, dual citizenship regimes, local political participation, advisory councils and consultative bodies at national or municipal level³¹.
- Transnational engagement: campaigning, lobbying, party financing, remittances linked to political projects, involvement in media and digital publics that span borders³².
- Grassroots and movement-based politics: protests, occupations, petitions, strategic litigation and other collective initiatives through which migrants and their allies contest exclusionary policies and advance claims to rights, membership and recognition³³.

These practices complicate conventional assumptions that democracy is confined to territorially bounded citizenries. They also show that migrants and diasporas are not a homogeneous “pro-democracy” bloc: they may align with a wide range of political agendas, including ones that reinforce exclusionary, nationalist or authoritarian projects. But in all cases, they are political subjects, whose agency needs to be considered when thinking about legitimacy and inclusion in multilateral migration governance³⁴.

A particularly striking illustration comes from refugee and migrant protest marches and encampments documented in Europe and elsewhere over the past decade. Building on radical democratic and autonomy-of-migration perspectives, scholars have interpreted these mobilisations as democratic practices from below: collective enactments of equality and voice by people who often lack full formal

²⁷ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Piper & Rother, 2015.

²⁸ Faist, 2019; Fassin, 2011.

²⁹ UNGA, 2018a, 2018b; Pécoud, 2024; Faist, 2019; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

³⁰ de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020; Bauböck, 2017; Lafleur, 2013; Kapur, 2010; Piper & Rother, 2015; Pécoud & Thiollot, 2023; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018.

³¹ Lafleur, 2013; Bauböck, 2017; Kapur, 2010.

³² Kapur, 2010; Meseguer, Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2022; Piper & Rother, 2015.

³³ Nyers, 2015; Oliveri, 2015; Sager, 2018; Schwiertz, 2022.

³⁴ Bauböck, 2017; Meseguer, Escribà-Folch & Wright, 2022; Nyers, 2015; Schwiertz, 2022

rights³⁵. Rather than treating such actions only as security problems or as “disorder”, they can be understood as invitations to rethink who is recognised as part of the demos and how institutions respond to claims that cross borders.

1.5 Adopting a non-EU-only lens

The links between democracy, multilateralism and migration are not confined to the European or transatlantic space. Cross-regional evidence shows that similar tensions – between security and rights, sovereignty and cooperation, inclusion and exclusion – emerge across diverse governance settings³⁶.

Examples include:

- Latin America and the Caribbean, where large-scale movements from Venezuela and Haiti have triggered regional responses combining protection, temporary regularisation and, at times, restrictive turnarounds – often in formally democratic but institutionally fragile contexts³⁷.
- Africa and Asia-Pacific, where regional economic communities and sub-regional groupings have experimented with free-movement protocols, labour-migration schemes and social-protection portability, with uneven but instructive results³⁸.
- Intra-African and South–South mobility, which remains numerically significant but often less visible in global debates dominated by North–South imaginaries³⁹.

Looking beyond an EU-centred lens helps identify both common patterns – such as securitisation, externalisation and politicisation – and innovative practices that may offer inspiration for more inclusive and rights-based approaches. It also foregrounds the diversity of multilateral and regional projects, and the need to take context seriously when thinking about democratic resilience in migration governance⁴⁰.

2. MECHANISMS: WHAT ALREADY EXISTS

If migration governance is a test for democracy, multilateralism offers both resources and constraints. A dense web of global, regional and local mechanisms is in place to shape how rights, responsibilities and voice are distributed. The challenge is less to invent new instruments than to use existing ones in ways that are more consistent with democratic principles and human-rights obligations⁴¹.

2.1 Global architecture

Early work on “global migration governance” highlighted a landscape marked by fragmentation, informality and state dominance, with a proliferation of consultative processes, soft-law initiatives and overlapping mandates among international organisations⁴². Since 2018, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) have become

³⁵ Nyers, 2015; Mezzadra, 2011; Schwiertz, 2022; Oliveri, 2015.

³⁶ de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020; Faist, 2019; IOM, 2024; International IDEA, 2017b.

³⁷ IOM, 2024; International IDEA, 2017b.

³⁸ Lavenex, 2019; Pécoud, 2024; Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023.

³⁹ de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020; IOM, 2024.

⁴⁰ Faist, 2019; Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023.

⁴¹ Betts, 2011; Newland, 2010; Pécoud, 2024

⁴² Betts, 2011; Newland, 2010; Lavenex, 2019.

central reference points in this architecture. They do not replace existing treaties, but seek to organise cooperation around a set of shared objectives and principles⁴³.

For migration, the GCM in particular:

- Articulates 23 objectives covering issues from data, regular pathways and labour mobility to border management, returns, diaspora engagement and remittances.
- Calls for a “whole-of-government” approach — coordinating multiple ministries and levels of administration — and a “whole-of-society” approach that involves local authorities, social partners, civil society and migrant-led organisations.
- Is accompanied by an implementation and follow-up system that includes the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF, every four years, started in 2022), regional reviews, a pledge-and-review mechanism and a capacity-building structure⁴⁴.

The UN Network on Migration serves as the main institutional platform for coordinating UN entities around the GCM, supporting states in implementation and facilitating stakeholder engagement. It brings together agencies such as IOM, UNHCR, OHCHR, ILO, UNICEF and others, and has encouraged the creation of national and regional networks that mirror this set-up⁴⁵. In parallel, the Global Compact on Refugees has its own follow-up mechanism, centred on the Global Refugee Forum and “support platforms” for specific situations⁴⁶.

Legal and governance scholarship has stressed that the GCM is non-binding, but not normatively empty: it is a form of “soft law” that can influence expectations, shape administrative practice and guide the interpretation of existing obligations without creating new hard-law duties⁴⁷. Some authors describe the compacts as a form of “experimentalist” governance: broad principles and goals, combined with cycles of reporting, review and peer exchange⁴⁸.

From a democracy perspective, several features of this global architecture are noteworthy:

- It offers common frames (e.g. human rights, non-discrimination, child best interests, gender-responsiveness) against which national policies and bilateral arrangements can be assessed⁴⁹.
- Its review and pledge mechanisms can, in principle, enhance transparency and accountability by making commitments visible and encouraging monitoring by parliaments, courts, national human-rights institutions and civil society⁵⁰.
- The process remains strongly state-driven, and the degree to which migrants, diasporas and local authorities can influence agendas and outcomes depends on how far states are willing to open deliberative spaces⁵¹.

Recent work on the institutions of global migration governance underlines that this architecture is not limited to states and UN bodies. It encompasses a wide variety of institutions – including international

⁴³ UNGA, 2018a; UNGA, 2018b.

⁴⁴ UNGA, 2018a; UNGA, 2024; IOM, 2024.

⁴⁵ UN Network on Migration, 2024; UNGA, 2024; IOM, 2024.

⁴⁶ UNGA, 2018b.

⁴⁷ Lavenex, 2020; Chetail, 2025.

⁴⁸ Lavenex, 2020; Pécoud & Thiollot, 2023.

⁴⁹ UNGA, 2018a; UNGA, 2024

⁵⁰ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Lebon-McGregor & Micinski, 2021; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

⁵¹ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019.

organisations, regional bodies, city networks, trade unions, religious organisations, private firms, criminalised actors and migrant networks – whose interactions help determine how norms are implemented or circumvented in practice⁵².

2.2 Rights standards as common baseline

Long before the GCM and GCR, a set of human-rights and labour standards already applied to migrants and refugees, regardless of status. These include:

- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966).
- Specialised treaties on racial discrimination, torture, the rights of the child, discrimination against women and the rights of persons with disabilities⁵³.
- The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW, 1990).
- Key ILO conventions on migrant workers, private recruitment agencies and domestic work⁵⁴.

These instruments are monitored by UN treaty bodies (committees of independent experts reviewing state reports and individual complaints), by the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which regularly examines all UN member states' human-rights records, and by “special procedures” mandate-holders, such as the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, who carry out country visits, receive communications and issue thematic reports on specific concerns. Through country reviews, general comments, communications and thematic reports, these mechanisms have developed a substantial body of practice on issues such as immigration detention, collective expulsions, access to justice, labour exploitation, social protection and political participation⁵⁵.

From the vantage point of democracy and multilateralism, these standards can be seen as part of the infrastructure of democratic governance in a globalised world:

- They specify minimum guarantees – such as the prohibition of torture and refoulement, non-discrimination, due process, freedom of association and core labour rights – that set limits on what elected majorities and governments can do, even when a measure is popular or politically convenient⁵⁶.
- They create institutionalised channels of scrutiny, where state practices can be evaluated and criticised not only by other governments, but also by independent experts and civil-society actors⁵⁷.

⁵² Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023; Achilli, 2024.

⁵³ For example the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, 1965), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT, 1984), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006)

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97); Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143); Private Employment Agencies Convention, 1997 (No. 181); Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) (UN OHCHR 2006; ILO 1949, 1975, 1997, 2011).

⁵⁵ See, for example, OHCHR, 2006; UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, 2012, 2014, 2018.

⁵⁶ UN, Guidance Note on Democracy 2009; UNGA, 1993; International IDEA, 2017a.

⁵⁷ OHCHR (n.d.); International IDEA, 2017a.

- They provide shared reference points that can orient regional and bilateral cooperation, making it harder to justify arrangements that shift responsibilities in ways incompatible with basic rights⁵⁸.

At the same time, implementation remains uneven and selective. Some states have ratified few of the relevant instruments (notably the ICRMW), while others combine treaty ratification with restrictive domestic practices⁵⁹. The democratic challenge is therefore not simply to restate norms, but to strengthen the links between international oversight, domestic accountability mechanisms (courts, parliaments, human-rights institutions) and public spheres where these issues can be debated⁶⁰.

2.3 Regional/route-based and “mini-lateral” cooperation

Between the global and national levels lies a crowded field of regional and route-based initiatives that play a significant role in migration governance⁶¹. These include:

- Regional organisations with formal or informal mandates on mobility, asylum and labour migration (e.g. the European Union, the African Union, ECOWAS, MERCOSUR, SADC, ASEAN).
- Regional consultative processes (RCPs) such as the Puebla Process (launched 1996), the Bali Process (launched 2002), the Budapest Process (launched 1991), and the Rabat (launched 2006) and Khartoum (launched 2014) Processes, which bring together origin, transit and destination states around specific routes or themes.
- Sub-regional or mini-lateral frameworks, often focused on particular corridors or issues – for example arrangements around the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkans routes, or cooperation on specific South–South corridors in West Africa and Central America – covering matters such as joint patrols, readmission, labour schemes and anti-smuggling cooperation⁶².

Many of these initiatives emerged before the Global Compacts, but they have increasingly been plugged into the GCM and GCR review cycles, for instance through regional reviews coordinated by UN regional commissions and the UN Network on Migration⁶³. This creates opportunities for vertical linkages between regional practices and global standards, though the extent to which these are used varies widely⁶⁴.

From a democratic perspective, regional and route-based mechanisms are ambivalent: On the one hand, they can facilitate burden- and responsibility-sharing, mutual learning and region-specific innovations – for example regional residence arrangements, portability of social-security rights, joint labour-inspection initiatives or temporary protection schemes in response to large-scale displacement⁶⁵. Yet, some RCPs and mini-lateral formats operate with limited transparency, weak involvement of parliaments or courts and little participation from civil society or migrant representatives. In such cases, they may function as

⁵⁸ OHCHR (n.d.); IOM, 2024.

⁵⁹ IOM, 2024; OHCHR (n.d.) “Status of Ratification” dashboard.

⁶⁰ International IDEA, 2017a; UN, Guidance Note on Democracy, 2009.

⁶¹ Lavenex, 2019; Pécoud, 2024; IOM, 2024.

⁶² Betts, 2011; Lavenex, 2019. Research on EU–North Africa cooperation shows that many of these anti-smuggling initiatives rest on simplified assumptions about “organised crime” and tend to criminalise everyday facilitation practices, while leaving the structural drivers of irregular mobility untouched (Sanchez, 2018).

⁶³ UNGA, 2024; UN Network on Migration, 2024.

⁶⁴ Lavenex, 2019; IOM, 2024.

⁶⁵ Faist, 2019; International IDEA, 2017a; Pécoud & Thiollot, 2023.

spaces where restrictive practices and externalisation strategies are coordinated away from public scrutiny⁶⁶.

Regional migration governance is therefore not inherently more or less “democratic” than global governance. Its contribution to democratic resilience depends on whether it is embedded in rights-based frameworks, subject to multi-level accountability, and open to meaningful participation by affected actors, rather than being driven solely by interior and security ministries⁶⁷.

2.4 Beyond states: municipalities, civil society, migrant-led/diaspora actors

Migration governance is not the monopoly of national governments. Cities and municipalities are often on the front line in receiving newcomers, organising shelter and services, mediating tensions and fostering everyday practices of inclusion or exclusion. Local authorities have also become increasingly active in transnational city networks that share experiences, adopt common principles and sometimes lobby for more recognition in national and global forums⁶⁸.

At the same time, civil-society organisations, trade unions, faith-based groups, diaspora associations and migrant-led collectives play crucial roles in implementing, contesting and reimagining migration governance:

- They provide direct support and information, monitor rights violations and bring strategic litigation⁶⁹.
- They participate in national and regional consultative platforms, including those linked to the GCM and GCR, where they can propose alternatives and raise concerns about implementation gaps⁷⁰.
- They organise campaigns and protests that bring migration-related issues into the public sphere and challenge narratives or policies perceived as unjust⁷¹.

Within global processes, civil-society and migrant actors have developed parallel and intersecting spaces, from the “Civil-Society Days” of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) to stakeholder consultations in the GCM negotiations and follow-up. These have helped put issues such as migrant rights, regularisation, labour standards and access to services on the agenda⁷². The GCM’s explicit endorsement of a “whole-of-society” approach, and its recognition of migrants as stakeholders, reflect these advocacy efforts⁷³.

However, participation remains uneven and often under-resourced. Many migrant-led groups and local authorities lack the capacity to engage regularly in national, regional or global processes. Moreover, questions of representation and accountability arise: which actors can credibly speak for whom, and how are internal differences and power imbalances within “civil society” and “diaspora” fields addressed⁷⁴?

For democracy and multilateralism, the central issue is therefore not only whether non-state actors are included, but how. Meaningful participation requires stable channels, clear mandates, accessible

⁶⁶ Lavenex, 2019; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023; IOM, 2024.

⁶⁹ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Nyers, 2015; Mezzadra, 2011; Schwiertz, 2022; Oliveri, 2015; Sager, 2018.

⁷² Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023.

⁷³ UNGA, 2018a; UNGA, 2024.

⁷⁴ Nyers, 2015; Sager, 2018; Schwiertz, 2022.

information and attention to the risks of tokenism and co-optation. When these conditions are met, involving cities, civil society and migrant-led actors can enhance the legitimacy, problem-solving capacity and rights sensitivity of migration governance⁷⁵.

3. POLICY POINTERS AND DISCUSSION OPENINGS

Parts 1 and 2 showed that the democracy–multilateralism–migration nexus is populated by dense governance arrangements, contested narratives and unequal opportunities for political agency across borders⁷⁶. The question is how to steer this landscape in ways that strengthen democratic resilience, rather than erode it.

The policy pointers below translate the analysis into axes for collective discussion, rather than a blueprint. They invite readers to reflect on how to align existing practices with rights-based standards, how to discourage political and media rewards for sensationalist, anti-migrant framing, how to treat inclusion as governance capacity, and how to connect migration politics to the broader “social question” of inequality and welfare⁷⁷.

3.1 Re-anchor practice in existing standards

A first priority is to re-centre existing human-rights, refugee and labour standards as the baseline for migration governance, including in areas where bilateral deals, deterrence and externalisation have become politically attractive⁷⁸.

Concretely, this implies:

- Systematic compatibility checks for new bilateral and mini-lateral arrangements. Before concluding agreements on readmission, “safe third country” designations, joint border patrols or offshore processing, states should commit to ex ante assessments of their consistency with international human-rights law, refugee law and the Global Compact commitments⁷⁹. This screening should explicitly address the risks of refoulement, arbitrary detention, collective expulsions, labour exploitation and denial of essential services (OHCHR; UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants). Policy analysis of counter-smuggling initiatives, for instance, warns that responses built on assumed “smuggler networks” rather than empirical evidence tend to displace harms onto migrants and communities and can undermine the implementation of the GCM’s rights commitments⁸⁰.
- Transparency and parliamentary oversight. Many externalisation schemes and operational deals are concluded through diplomatic channels or executive arrangements with limited public scrutiny⁸¹. Requiring publication of key terms, parliamentary scrutiny and, where appropriate, judicial review would align these practices more closely with democratic accountability standards⁸².

⁷⁵ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023; Nyers, 2015.

⁷⁶ Betts, 2011; de Haas et al., 2020; Faist, 2019.

⁷⁷ Faist, 2019; International IDEA, 2017a; IOM, 2024.

⁷⁸ Fassin, 2011; Lavenex, 2019; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018.

⁷⁹ UNGA, 2018a; UNGA, 2018b; UNGA, 2024.

⁸⁰ Sanchez, 2018.

⁸¹ Fassin, 2011; Achilli, 2024

⁸² International IDEA, 2017a; Collrin & Bauder, 2025

- Rights-sensitive design of deterrence and enforcement. States' resort to measures aimed at discouraging irregular entry or stay should be designed and monitored in ways that respect non-refoulement, proportionality and due process⁸³. Alternatives to detention, legal aid and independent monitoring mechanisms are crucial components of such an approach (OHCHR; UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants).
- Using multilateral fora to “lock in” safeguards. Global and regional platforms (IMRF, Global Refugee Forum, regional reviews, human-rights bodies) can be used to articulate minimal safeguards for cooperation arrangements, including commitments to independent monitoring, complaint mechanisms and access to justice⁸⁴.

The guiding principle is that multilateral standards should travel with migration governance practices, including when these are operationalised through bilateral deals and ad hoc arrangements. “Returning to standards” is not about going back to an idealised past; it is a forward-looking way of limiting the democratic and human costs of punitive border and enforcement practices that are designed to signal toughness but have very real, dramatic, as well as deadly consequences on the ground⁸⁵. Recent examples span lethal xenophobic attacks against migrants in South Africa⁸⁶, heightened risks of statelessness and prolonged detention linked to India's Citizenship Amendment Act⁸⁷, and preventable deaths in U.S. immigration detention (2025 registering the highest annual death toll in more than two decades)⁸⁸.

3.2 Reduce toxic incentives in public debate

Part 1 showed how political instrumentalisation of migration corrodes democratic debate: sensationalist framings and mis/disinformation make evidence harder to hear, justify exceptional measures and normalise exclusionary hierarchies of belonging⁸⁹. At the same time, politicians often face strong incentives to perform “control” regardless of policy effectiveness⁹⁰.

Policy pointers here concern the information and incentive environment in which democratic decisions are made:

- Strengthen transparent, independent data ecosystems. Regular, accessible reporting on migration trends, asylum decisions, return rates, labour-market participation and contributions to welfare systems can undercut panic narratives and provide a common factual baseline⁹¹.
- Encourage responsible political communication. Codes of conduct for election campaigns and parliamentary debates, combined with independent oversight, can help reduce explicit incitement to discrimination and dehumanising language targeting migrants and minorities⁹², and be supported through cross-party initiatives, regional peer learning and engagement with media regulators.

⁸³ Lavenex, 2020; IOM, 2024

⁸⁴ UNGA, 2024; Pécoud & Thiollot, 2023.

⁸⁵ Fassin, 2011; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018.

⁸⁶ Misago, Landau, & Monson, 2009.

⁸⁷ Amnesty International, 2024, March 11. OHCHR, 2019, December 13.

⁸⁸ American Civil Liberties Union, Physicians for Human Rights, & American Oversight, 2024. Singh, Murphy, & Simmonds, 2026, January 4.

⁸⁹ Fassin, 2011; Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; IOM, 2024.

⁹⁰ Faist, 2019; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

⁹¹ de Haas et al., 2020; IOM, 2024; FitzGerald, 2022

⁹² International IDEA, 2017a; UN, 2009.

- Support media literacy and counter-disinformation. Initiatives that combine fact-checking with critical media literacy and community-based dialogue can help citizens distinguish between evidence-based debate and disinformation, particularly on highly emotional topics such as border incidents or criminality⁹³.
- Use multilateral forums to share narrative strategies. States, cities and civil-society actors can use global and regional platforms to exchange ways of reframing migration debates around dignity, reciprocity and shared interests rather than fear⁹⁴. This includes narratives that acknowledge migrants' contributions and foster alliances among differently positioned but similarly disadvantaged groups instead of pitting them against each other⁹⁵.
- Research on migrant smuggling warns against “single stories” that reduce complex facilitation practices to a simple morality tale of ruthless smugglers, innocent migrants and heroic states; narratives that can legitimise harsh enforcement while obscuring structural drivers and state responsibilities⁹⁶.

Here the underlying idea is that democratic maintenance work includes changing the political and media incentives that encourage actors to instrumentalise migration for short-term gains, while leaving both migrants and broader democratic institutions more vulnerable to long-term damage.

3.3 Inclusion as governance capacity

Part 1 stressed that migrants and diasporas are not only objects of policy and narratives; they are also political actors whose practices can deepen or contest democracy across borders⁹⁷. From a governance perspective, inclusion is not just a matter of values and norms, but also of capacity: institutions that systematically exclude those most affected by their decisions lose relevant knowledge, legitimacy and problem-solving potential⁹⁸.

Policy options include:

- Institutionalised channels for migrant and diaspora participation. Advisory councils, consultative platforms and standing forums at national and sub-national levels can provide structured ways for migrant and diaspora representatives to contribute to policy design and evaluation⁹⁹. These mechanisms can be linked to GCM implementation and review processes¹⁰⁰.
- Involving cities and local authorities in multilateral processes. Given their central role in reception, integration and everyday conflict mediation, cities are key laboratories of democratic innovation in migration governance¹⁰¹. Including municipal representatives in national delegations to regional reviews and global fora can help connect global compacts with local realities.
- Resourcing migrant-led and community-based organisations. Participation requires time, skills and organisational infrastructure. Targeted funding, capacity-building and simplified access to

⁹³ IOM, 2024; International IDEA, 2017b.

⁹⁴ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023.

⁹⁵ Faist, 2019; Fassin, 2011.

⁹⁶ Sanchez, 2014, 2022.

⁹⁷ Kapur, 2010; Nyers, 2015; Simoni & Voirol, 2021; Schwiertz, 2022

⁹⁸ Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023; Piper & Rother, 2015.

⁹⁹ Likić-Brborić et al., 2018; Piper & Rother, 2015.

¹⁰⁰ UNGA, 2018a; UNGA, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023; IOM, 2024.

consultation processes can help ensure that migrant-led associations, trade unions and grassroots groups are not confined to symbolic roles¹⁰².

- Addressing representation and internal inequalities. Democratizing participation also means acknowledging hierarchies within migrant and diaspora fields (by gender, class, status, ethnicity, for instance) and creating mechanisms that broaden representation beyond a small group of established, professionalised organisations and spokespersons who tend to dominate formal consultation processes¹⁰³. Rotating mandates, transparent selection procedures and feedback loops to broader constituencies are important here.

From this angle, including migrants, diasporas and cities is less about “giving a voice” and more about recognising existing democratic practices – from refugee protest marches to transnational campaigning and local solidarity initiatives – and channelling them into institutionalised governance spaces¹⁰⁴.

3.4 Linking to the “social question”

Part 1 also highlighted how migration politics often serves as a proxy battlefield for wider conflicts over inequality, welfare and perceived “deservingness”¹⁰⁵. When social protections are weak, labour markets segmented and public services under strain, it becomes easier for political entrepreneurs to cast migrants as competitors and to frame restrictive measures as acts of solidarity with “nationals”¹⁰⁶. Migration, development and transnationalisation are part of shared regimes of accumulation and deprivation, so conflicts around “who deserves what” increasingly cut across, rather than simply oppose, migrant and non-migrant populations¹⁰⁷.

Policy pointers in this register shift attention to the material underpinnings of democratic tensions around migration:

- Strengthen transnational social protection. Instruments such as bilateral and regional agreements on portability of pensions and social security, health-care coordination and recognition of contributions can reduce zero-sum perceptions between “here” and “there”¹⁰⁸. They also acknowledge that workers who move and those who stay put are often tied into the same transnational circuits of contribution and dependency.
- Improve labour standards and enforcement across sectors. Weak labour inspection and high levels of informality create environments where both migrants and non-migrants are exposed to exploitation, fuelling resentment and undercutting trust in institutions¹⁰⁹. Strengthening labour-inspection cooperation, preventing abusive recruitment and enforcing minimum standards can mitigate downward pressure on wages and conditions¹¹⁰.
- Address territorial inequalities. In many contexts, both internal and international mobility intersect with sharp geographical disparities in access to jobs, services and political voice¹¹¹. Investments in

¹⁰² Nyers, 2015; Oliveri, 2015; Sager, 2018.

¹⁰³ Schwiertz, 2022; Sager, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Nyers, 2015; Schwiertz, 2022; Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023

¹⁰⁵ Faist, 2019; Fassin, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Faist, 2019; International IDEA, 2017a; Collrin & Bauder, 2025.

¹⁰⁷ Glick Schiller & Faist 2010; Çağlar & Glick Schiller 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Faist, 2019; Pécoud & Thirollet, 2023; Lavenex, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ Fassin, 2011; IOM, 2024.

¹¹⁰ ILO conventions; Achilli, 2024.

¹¹¹ Faist, 2019; IOM, 2024.

underprovided regions, coupled with inclusive local governance, can reduce the appeal of narratives that pit “abandoned” peripheries against “cosmopolitan” urban centres welcoming migrants.

- Integrate migration into broader social-policy debates. Rather than treating migration as a self-contained policy silo, democratic deliberation on taxation, housing, health care and education can explicitly consider how different options affect both newcomers and long-term residents, and how burdens and benefits are shared¹¹². This also opens space to think in terms of alliances among differently positioned but similarly exploited groups, rather than fixed divisions between “migrants” and “locals”.

The core message is that democratic stress around migration will persist if underlying inequalities and welfare anxieties are not addressed. Multilateral cooperation on social protection and labour standards can be one way of easing these tensions, while also improving migrants’ rights and well-being¹¹³. This implies analysing how migrants and non-migrants are jointly positioned within unequal regimes of deprivation and welfare, rather than treating “migrants” as a separate problem group¹¹⁴.

3.5 Questions and openings for a policy dialogue

To make the brief directly usable for a policy dialogue, this final subsection proposes questions rather than prescriptions.

Some possible questions and openings:

1. Standards and practice

- Where do existing standards (human-rights law, refugee law, labour norms, GCM/GCR commitments) still shape migration governance in meaningful ways, and where are they being sidelined by bilateral or ad hoc arrangements?
- What would it mean, in practice, to subject major migration agreements and deterrence measures to systematic compatibility checks with these standards?

2. Coordination and levels of governance

- In your context, where is the main bottleneck: global standard-setting, regional coordination, national implementation, or local capacity?
- Are there regional or route-based initiatives that could be scaled up or better connected to global review processes to improve accountability and problem-solving?

3. Resources and political incentives

- How do current funding patterns for migration governance, such as border militarisation and surveillance, detention and offshore facilities, reception, integration, return, and development cooperation, align with democratic and human-rights priorities?
- Where are substantial resources being invested in measures that expose people to violence, long-term confinement or death, and where are investments going instead into safeguards, oversight and rights-based alternatives?

¹¹² International IDEA, 2017a; Faist, 2019; Glick Schiller & Faist, 2010.

¹¹³ Faist, 2019; Glick Schiller & Faist, 2010; Pécoud & Thiollet, 2023.

¹¹⁴ Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018

- What kinds of political and media incentives currently reward governments for visibly harsh enforcement measures even when these lead to systematic mistreatment or loss of life?
- What would need to change for elected officials to gain more credit, domestically and internationally, for reducing harm and upholding rights than for inflicting suffering in the name of “control”?

4. Inclusion and representation

- Which migrants, diaspora actors and cities are already involved in shaping migration policies in your setting, and through what mechanisms? Who is missing?
- What would count as meaningful participation for these actors at local, national and multilateral levels, beyond tokenistic or purely symbolic consultation?
- In your context, how can processes be designed so that migrant, diaspora and city representatives have timely access to information and a real possibility to shape agendas and outcomes, rather than simply being invited to endorse decisions already taken?
- Where do you see possibilities for coalitions or joint fora that bring together migrant, refugee and non-migrant residents affected by similar issues (housing, wages, policing, welfare conditionality), rather than separating them into parallel processes?

5. Narratives and public trust

- Which narratives about migration and democracy are most influential in your public sphere today? Which ones are missing but needed?
- What concrete steps could be taken—by governments, media, educators, civil society—to reduce the role of mis/disinformation and fear-based framing in migration debates?
- Where do you see promising examples of public narratives that frame migrants and long-term residents as sharing common interests and vulnerabilities, rather than as competitors?

6. The social question

- In what ways do debates about welfare, housing, labour conditions or territorial inequalities become displaced onto migration?
- Are there examples of policies that have successfully combined improved social protection with more relaxed and rights-based migration governance?
- How could social-policy discussions (on taxation, welfare, minimum wages, regional development, etc.) be organised so that they address precarious conditions across different groups—migrants and non-migrants alike—without erasing important differences in status and rights?

These questions are intended as entry points. They invite readers to consider not only what should be done, but also who should be involved, where multilateral fora can add value, and how democratic resilience can be strengthened in an area where inequality, mobility and cross-border interdependence are deeply entangled.

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