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The many faces of Ceuta

Migration, geopolitics, social media and history all shaped the events in the Spanish exclave. Europe's response must reflect that complexity

Ceuta has witnessed the largest irregular border crossing ever recorded along this section of Europe's southern frontier: around 70 000 people – mostly young Moroccans – arrived within just a few days. Dozens lost their lives attempting to reach the Spanish exclave. The scale of these events invites the search for a single explanation. Yet no single factor is sufficient on its own. Ceuta has undoubtedly experienced a migration crisis. At the same time, however, it is also a political and geopolitical crisis with multiple causes, involving numerous actors with different interests and a degree of responsibility that remains difficult to determine.

The immediate trigger appears relatively clear. A recent ruling by Spain's Supreme Court found that the exceptional procedure of immediate pushbacks at the border, which applies to the exclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, cannot be used for people intercepted at sea while attempting to enter by swimming. The ruling is controversial, but its implications are clear: it neither opened the border nor prevented the return of people who had entered irregularly. It simply required the authorities to apply the ordinary return procedure, including the legal safeguards provided for by law, instead of the immediate pushbacks that had previously been carried out against those attempting to cross the border fences.

On social media, however, the court ruling quickly became something entirely different. The message spread that the border was now open and that anyone who reached Ceuta by sea could no longer be sent back. This misleading information circulated with remarkable speed, creating the impression of a unique opportunity to reach Europe. Yet even this does not explain how digitally amplified hope turned into a movement on such a massive scale. Nor is it clear what criminal smuggling networks – often portrayed as playing a central role – actually gained from border crossings that were, for the most part, undertaken independently, on foot or by swimming, without payment for illegal transport.

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Ceuta is a Spanish city on the North African coast, completely surrounded by Moroccan territory. It constitutes an external border of both Spain and the EU, although Morocco continues to claim sovereignty over it. While Ceuta is part of the Schengen Area, it is subject to a special regime. Travel from Ceuta to mainland Spain is subject to identity and document checks. As a result, those who enter Ceuta irregularly do not gain unrestricted access to mainland Europe or freedom of movement within the Schengen Area. Even during the recent crisis, there were no significant onward movements to mainland Spain or other EU member states.

This distinction is important because Schengen quickly became a political argument. Italy reintroduced checks for travellers arriving from Spain, while several European politicians warned that Spain's approach could jeopardise the free movement of people within the Schengen Area.

Most of those who reached Ceuta returned voluntarily to Morocco. There was no large-scale, state-organised return operation. Once it became clear that onward travel to mainland Spain was not possible, and they found themselves in an overcrowded city without accommodation or prospects, tens of thousands chose to return on their own through the border crossing that Spain had reopened. Morocco allowed them to re-enter. At a certain point, the Moroccan security forces also began taking stronger measures to prevent more people from reaching Ceuta.

The fact that the Moroccan security forces initially remained largely passive was evident and proved decisive in allowing the border crossings to reach such proportions. Some observers on the ground regard this as a deliberate operation, while others see it as a complete loss of control. Between these two interpretations, however, lies a wide range of intermediate explanations.

There is also an unmistakable symbolic dimension. The events began on 30 July, Morocco's Throne Day, while King Mohammed VI was marking the anniversary of his accession to the throne in Tetouan, around 40 kilometres from Ceuta. The image of tens of thousands of Moroccans moving towards a city whose Spanish sovereignty Rabat still refuses to recognise inevitably evokes memories in Spain of earlier confrontations.

This gives the events a significance that extends far beyond migration

management into the realm of geopolitics, particularly in the Mediterranean, where maritime law is already coming under increasing pressure in both the Eastern Mediterranean and the Strait of Hormuz. In Ceuta and the Strait of Gibraltar, questions of sovereignty, security and the regional balance of power intersect with migration policy, between two states whose cooperation on border management is both close and deeply asymmetrical.

A different approach

In terms of migration, Spain currently occupies a distinctive position within Europe. The government promotes a different narrative on migration from that of many other member states. It emphasises its economic and demographic benefits while also adopting an extraordinary regularisation programme for people who are already living and working in the country. At the same time, regardless of which party is in government, Spain has consistently maintained some of the strictest controls along Europe's southern border. The Spanish government also invested considerable political capital in securing the adoption of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum. Its domestic narrative is therefore not one of open borders, but of combining robust external border controls with a pragmatic approach towards migrants who have already become part of the economy and society.

Against this background, the criticism voiced by some European states of the recent regularisation scheme must be understood. It demonstrably played no role in the events in Ceuta. It applies exclusively to people who can prove they had already been residing in Spain and offers no path to legal status for those who arrived in Ceuta during the crisis. Presenting it as a 'pull factor' simply projects an already existing political controversy onto the events in Ceuta. Moreover, several of the states criticising Spain's decision have themselves introduced comparable measures.

The initial reactions across Europe were heavily shaped by national migration narratives. Some governments criticised Spain and linked the crisis either to the Spanish regularisation scheme or to the functioning of the Schengen Area, despite the fact that there had been no onward movement to other member states. It was only during the video conference of EU interior ministers on 4 August that this dynamic changed. The member states expressed their solidarity with Spain, praised the swift response of the Spanish authorities and endorsed a common European approach. By then, however, the immediate crisis had already been brought under control.

The European response must reflect the crisis's multifaceted nature.

Ceuta demonstrates how profoundly a border can be transformed through the interaction of multiple factors: the hopes of thousands of people – in this case young Moroccans – the changing behaviour of state authorities and a historically strained bilateral relationship, amplified by social media, which now allows such developments to spread with unprecedented speed and reach. There is no need to reduce this complexity to a single cause, let alone a conspiracy, in order to recognise its geopolitical dimension. Nor should its implications for migration policy be reduced to that dimension alone.

Precisely for this reason, the European response must reflect the crisis's multifaceted nature. Both in migration policy and in geopolitics, the European Union needs better mechanisms for early warning and coordination, effective procedures that fully respect the rule of law and genuinely shared responsibility for its external borders. In both areas of policymaking – internal and external affairs, which are becoming increasingly intertwined – it must reduce its vulnerabilities and strengthen internal cohesion in order to preserve the central achievements of European integration and the values on which they are founded.



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