



Research Paper

No. 192

August 2026

**Migration Pressure from the Sahel to Southern Europe:
Ceuta, Russian Destabilization, and the Emerging Security
Risks for Spain, Italy, and Greece**

**Prof. Darko Trifunovic,
(RIEAS Senior Research Fellow)**

ISSN: 2241-6358

**RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN STUDIES
(RIEAS)**

1, Kalavryton Street, Alimos, Athens, 17456, Greece

RIEAS: <http://www.rieas.gr>

Migration Pressure from the Sahel to Southern Europe: Ceuta, Russian Destabilization, and the Emerging Security Risks for Spain, Italy, and Greece

**Prof. Darko Trifunovic,
(RIEAS Senior Research Fellow)**

Introduction

Migration from Africa toward Europe is often presented primarily as a humanitarian, economic, or border-management issue. While all these dimensions are important, such an approach remains incomplete. Contemporary migration flows are increasingly shaped by the interaction of armed conflict, state collapse, organized crime, climate-related pressures, foreign interference, private military actors, and geopolitical competition.

The instability spreading across the Sahel is particularly important for European security. Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and neighboring states are experiencing a combination of jihadist violence, military coups, communal conflict, institutional weakness, and large-scale displacement. By the end of April 2025, approximately 4.3 million people were forcibly displaced across the Sahel, almost twice the number recorded at the end of 2020. UNHCR expects the broader Sahel region to host as many as 5.6 million forcibly displaced and stateless persons by the end of 2026.

This study argues that the migration challenge facing Southern Europe should be understood as a connected security system extending from the Sahel through Nigeria and North Africa toward three principal European destinations:

1. the western route through Morocco toward Spain;
2. the central route through Libya and Tunisia toward Italy;
3. the emerging eastern-central route from eastern Libya toward Crete and mainland Greece.

Russian intelligence-linked networks, former Wagner structures, and the Russian Africa Corps should be examined as important aggravating factors within this system. There is substantial evidence that Russian-associated armed actors have supported authoritarian governments, participated in violent operations, and contributed to cycles of insecurity in the Sahel. However, the stronger claim that Moscow has directly initiated conflicts for the specific purpose of producing migration toward Europe has not yet been conclusively established in publicly available evidence. It is therefore methodologically more accurate to treat the deliberate generation of migration as a serious strategic hypothesis rather than as a proven fact.

Ceuta as a Model of Instrumentalized Migration

The events in Ceuta in May 2021 provide one of the clearest European examples of how migration can be transformed into an instrument of interstate pressure.

Approximately 8,000 people, including a significant number of minors, entered the Spanish territory after Moroccan border controls were relaxed. The crisis occurred amid tensions over Spain's decision to provide medical treatment to Brahim Ghali, the leader of the Polisario Front. European institutional and academic analyses subsequently described the event as an example of instrumentalized migration. It is important to correct the frequently repeated figure of 60,000 entrants. The documented Ceuta crisis involved approximately 8,000 people, not 60,000. Nevertheless, the strategic importance of the event does not depend on the larger figure. Within a very short period, the temporary withdrawal or reduction of effective border control placed Spain under considerable operational and political pressure.

Ceuta demonstrated that a transit state does not need to organize, arm, or physically transport migrants to weaponize migration. It may be sufficient to:

- suspend effective border enforcement;
- tolerate the activities of smuggling networks;
- circulate or permit misleading information;
- direct migrants toward a politically sensitive border;
- or make migration cooperation conditional on unrelated diplomatic concessions.

The European Union already recognizes the instrumentalization of migrants as a form of hybrid pressure. It has condemned the practice in the context of Belarus and has also formally identified the instrumentalization of migration as part of the wider spectrum of hybrid threats facing Europe. Ceuta should therefore be interpreted not as an isolated border incident but as a warning about the strategic dependency created when European border security relies heavily on the political cooperation of neighboring transit states.

The Sahel as a Generator of Displacement

Several mutually reinforcing factors drive the current displacement crisis in the Sahel.

Jihadist organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda and Islamic State have expanded their geographical reach. Local communities are exposed to attacks, forced recruitment, extortion, reprisals, and destruction of livelihoods. Military governments have often responded through highly coercive counterinsurgency operations that may produce further civilian victimization.

Climate-related pressures, desertification, competition over land and water, food insecurity, and population growth intensify existing political and communal tensions. State institutions are increasingly unable to provide security or basic services outside major cities.

The consequences extend beyond the directly affected states. Most displaced people remain within their country or neighboring African states, rather than immediately moving toward Europe. IOM reporting indicates that a large majority of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa remain within their own region. Nevertheless, prolonged displacement can gradually produce secondary migration. A person may initially flee from Burkina Faso to Mali, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Algeria, or Mauritania. Only after livelihoods, protection, or legal status fail in the first destination may that individual attempt to move toward North Africa and Europe.

This means that European migration pressure is often the final stage of a longer displacement chain, not the immediate consequence of a single conflict.

The Russian Security Architecture along the Sahel–Mediterranean Migration Corridor

Russia's role in African instability should not be analyzed only through the activities of isolated mercenary formations. What has emerged is a broader Russian security architecture extending across several states located either at the origin of displacement or along the principal migration corridors toward Europe.

This architecture has included the Wagner Group, its successor formations under the Russian **Africa Corps**, military instructors, intelligence personnel, political advisers, information-operation networks, arms deliveries, and agreements with governments seeking external security assistance without the political and human-rights conditions commonly attached to Western cooperation.

The significance of this presence lies in its geographical continuity. Russian-associated structures have operated or developed influence in **Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Libya**. Together, these countries form a strategic belt connecting conflict zones in sub-Saharan Africa with the principal transit and departure areas of the Mediterranean.

Russia therefore possesses access, relationships, or influence at several critical points of the displacement chain:

- in states where violence initially forces populations from their homes;
- in neighboring countries absorbing refugees and internally displaced persons;
- along trans-Saharan trafficking and smuggling corridors;
- in Libya, which serves as one of the principal departure platforms toward Italy and Greece;

- and within information environments in which migration can be exploited to polarise European societies.

This does not establish that Russia organizes every migration movement. It does, however, demonstrate that Russia is increasingly positioned to influence the security conditions from which such movements emerge.

Mali: Counterinsurgency, Civilian Harm, and the Reproduction of Displacement

Mali provides the clearest documented example of how cooperation with Russian-linked forces can deepen civilian insecurity.

The Malian authorities invited Wagner-linked personnel after relations with France and other Western partners deteriorated. Russian forces were presented as an alternative capable of delivering rapid and unrestricted counterterrorism assistance. Yet their operations have been associated with serious allegations of abuses against civilian communities.

A United Nations investigation concluded that Malian forces and foreign military personnel killed more than 500 people during the March 2022 operation in Moura. The UN documented executions and other grave violations during the operation.

Such operations may temporarily eliminate suspected militants, but they can also produce the opposite long-term effect. Indiscriminate or collective violence undermines trust in the state, drives affected communities away from government-controlled areas, enables jihadist recruitment, and generates new displacement.

This creates a self-reinforcing security cycle:

terrorist violence → coercive counterterrorism → civilian victimization → displacement and radicalization → further insurgent expansion.

Russia may therefore claim to provide stability while the operational methods of its partners contribute to the reproduction of the insecurity that justifies their continued presence.

Burkina Faso and Niger: Expansion toward the Central Sahel

Russian influence has also expanded in Burkina Faso and Niger following military coups, anti-Western mobilization, and the weakening or termination of previous security arrangements with France, the European Union, and the United States.

The new military-led governments have increasingly framed Russia as a sovereign alternative to Western influence. Russian security cooperation offers political protection, military assistance, and regime-support capabilities. In return, Moscow gains diplomatic influence, access to security institutions, possible economic concessions, and additional strategic depth in Africa.

The security danger is that regime protection and population protection are not necessarily the same objective. Russian assistance may strengthen the survival of military authorities without resolving the structural causes of insecurity: weak governance, unemployment, communal conflict, corruption, limited state presence, and jihadist expansion.

The wider Sahel already contained approximately 4.3 million forcibly displaced persons by April 2025, almost twice the number recorded at the end of 2020. UNHCR expects the broader Sahel Plus region to host around 5.6 million forcibly displaced and stateless people by the end of 2026.

Under these conditions, Russian involvement does not need to organize migration to increase pressure on Europe directly. It is sufficient for Moscow-backed security systems to fail to protect civilians, prolong conflict, displace Western stabilization mechanisms, and leave populations with no durable security or economic alternatives.

The Central African Republic: A Model of Regime Security and Strategic Penetration

The Central African Republic represents an earlier model of Russian engagement that has subsequently been adapted elsewhere.

Russian-linked personnel provided direct protection to the political leadership, trained security forces, supported military operations, developed influence over strategic resources, and participated in information activities. Western governments and human-rights organizations have accused Wagner forces of serious abuses against civilians in both the Central African Republic and Mali.

Although the Central African Republic is not a principal direct departure state for Mediterranean migration, instability there contributes to broader displacement across Central and West Africa. Refugees may initially move into Chad, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Sudan. Some later enter longer migration chains through Chad, Niger, Sudan, and Libya.

The importance of the Central African Republic is therefore not simply geographical. It illustrates the Russian model:

1. enter through a security agreement;
2. protect the ruling elite;
3. gain access to state institutions and resources;
4. marginalize Western or UN actors;
5. control the political and information environment;
6. and maintain dependency through persistent insecurity.

This model may create tactical regime stability while weakening the prospects for accountable institutions and sustainable human security.

Sudan: Conflict, Displacement, and Access toward Libya

Sudan occupies a central position between the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, Egypt, Chad, and Libya. Its civil war has created one of the world's largest contemporary displacement crises and has placed additional pressure on all neighboring states.

Russian interests in Sudan have included political relations, gold networks, military contacts, and long-standing ambitions connected to access on the Red Sea. Wagner-linked commercial and security networks had previously developed ties with Sudanese actors.

The continuation of conflict in Sudan sends refugees westward toward Chad and Libya, northward toward Egypt, and eastward toward neighboring countries. These movements can eventually feed both the central Mediterranean corridor toward Italy and the eastern-Libyan route toward Greece.

The strategic point is not that Russia created the entire Sudanese conflict. Rather, Russia's relationships with armed and political actors provide Moscow with access to another major zone of displacement and another link in the chain connecting African conflict with European borders.

Libya: The Critical Junction between Russian Influence and European Migration Routes

Libya is the most important point at which Russian military influence and European migration security directly intersect.

Russian forces and Wagner successor structures established a durable presence in areas controlled by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army. Eastern and southern Libya provide strategic access to military bases, airfields, energy infrastructure, the Mediterranean, and routes leading toward Sudan, Chad, Niger, and the Sahel.

This presence gives Russia strategic reach across two migration directions:

- westward and northward departures toward Italy and Malta;
- departures from eastern Libya toward Crete and Gavdos in Greece.

The existence of Russian influence in eastern Libya does not prove that Moscow currently directs boats toward Europe. However, it creates the potential capacity to affect migration pressure indirectly or directly through relationships with local authorities, armed formations, transport networks, and territorial-security structures.

Control does not have to take the form of placing migrants aboard vessels. Influence may be exercised through:

- selective enforcement against smugglers;
- temporary tolerance of departures;
- withdrawal of coastal surveillance;
- manipulation of detention facilities;
- pressure on local authorities;
- dissemination of information about supposedly open routes;
- or the use of migration cooperation as leverage in negotiations with European states.

Libya should therefore be viewed not only as a failed-state migration platform but as a geopolitical space in which Russian, Turkish, European, Egyptian, Gulf, and local interests compete.

For Italy and Greece, the crucial question is no longer whether Russia commands every migration route. The relevant question is whether an actor with a demonstrated record of hybrid coercion has acquired sufficient influence near departure areas to manipulate migration flows during a future political confrontation.

Morocco, Algeria, and the Western Route

Russia's direct security presence in Morocco is far more limited than its position in Mali or Libya. Nevertheless, Russian influence in the wider Sahel may still affect the Moroccan route.

Displaced persons from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and other countries may move through Mauritania or Algeria before reaching Morocco. Increased insecurity in the Sahel therefore creates greater pressure on western transit corridors even without Russian operational control inside Morocco.

Algeria is also strategically important. It borders Mali, Niger, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, making it a central transit and containment state. Russia maintains long-standing defense relations with Algeria. These relations do not mean that Algeria participates in migration weaponization, but they reinforce Moscow's diplomatic and security access across another state connecting the Sahel with the Mediterranean.

The western migration route must consequently be analyzed as the product of several interacting layers: Sahel insecurity, trans-Saharan criminal networks, Algerian and Mauritanian transit controls, Moroccan policy, and Spain–Morocco political relations.

Information Operations and the Political Weaponization of Migration

Russia's greatest advantage may not lie in physically moving migrants but in exploiting the political consequences of migration once they reach Europe.

Russian information operations routinely seek to deepen political divisions, undermine trust in institutions, weaken support for the European Union, and amplify polarising narratives. The EU has established a sanctions framework responding to Russian destabilizing and hybrid activities against the Union and third countries.

Migration offers particularly fertile ground for such operations. The same event can be simultaneously manipulated through contradictory narratives:

- migrants are portrayed as proof that European governments have lost control;
- humanitarian incidents are used to depict Europe as morally bankrupt;
- border enforcement is framed as evidence of European hypocrisy;
- social tensions are amplified to support extremist political forces;
- and disagreements among EU member states are presented as proof of European disintegration.

Thus, the strategic value of African instability for Russia may be indirect but substantial. Migration pressure can consume European resources, divide governments, strengthen anti-EU parties, undermine social cohesion, and distract political attention from Ukraine and European defense.

From Destabilization to Strategic Exploitation

For analytical purposes, the Russian role should be divided into five stages:

Stage One: Political penetration.

Russia builds relations with military governments, isolated regimes, and armed actors by presenting itself as an alternative to Western conditionality.

Stage Two: Security dependency.

Russian personnel enter national security systems through training, protection agreements, intelligence cooperation, and combat assistance.

Stage Three: Institutional displacement.

Western military missions, UN mechanisms, and European political influence are reduced or expelled.

Stage Four: Conflict persistence and population displacement.

Security operations fail to produce sustainable stability, while civilian abuses, jihadist violence, economic decline, and weakened governance generate further displacement.

Stage Five: Geopolitical exploitation.

The resulting pressure is used or amplified through diplomacy, information operations, criminal networks, and potential manipulation of transit or departure areas.

The first four stages can be supported by substantial evidence from several African states. The fifth should be treated as a strategic warning and intelligence requirement. A comprehensive public evidentiary record proving a single Russian master plan to drive migrants toward Spain, Italy, and Greece does not currently exist. Yet waiting for such proof before preparing countermeasures would be a serious strategic error.

Implications for Spain, Italy, and Greece

Russia now possesses varying degrees of presence or influence across much of the wider corridor linking the Sahel to the Mediterranean. For Southern Europe, this produces three different but connected vulnerabilities.

Spain is exposed to the consequences of Sahel destabilization through Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, the Canary Islands, Ceuta, and Melilla. Moscow does not need direct control over the Moroccan border to benefit from increased pressure on Spain.

Italy faces the highest direct exposure through western and central Libya. Any disruption of Libyan enforcement, conflict among armed groups, or political manipulation of departure zones can rapidly increase arrivals toward Lampedusa and Sicily.

Greece faces the newest and potentially most strategically sensitive corridor. The route from eastern Libya toward Crete originates in an area where Russian-associated military actors maintain significant relationships and access. This creates a credible future possibility of migration pressure being integrated into a broader hybrid operation against Greece or the European Union.

The central risk is therefore not merely a higher number of migrants. It is the emergence of a **Russian-influenced arc of instability** extending from the Central African Republic and Sudan through the Sahel and into Libya—an arc capable of producing displacement, protecting authoritarian partners, weakening Western influence, and generating security consequences at Europe's southern borders.

Russia should not be described merely as one among many external actors operating in Africa. It is building a strategically connected position across states that generate, receive, channel, or launch migration movements.

There is no conclusive public evidence that Moscow currently operates a central command structure deliberately sending Sahel migrants toward Europe. Nevertheless, Russia has already acquired several of the capabilities required to exploit such movements: military presence, intelligence access, relations with local regimes and armed groups, influence near smuggling corridors, positions in Libya, and an extensive apparatus for information warfare inside Europe.

The appropriate analytical conclusion is therefore stronger than stating that Russia only indirectly contributes to instability.

Russian engagement is creating and consolidating a geopolitical infrastructure through which African insecurity and migration pressure could be transformed into strategic leverage against Europe.

For Spain, Italy, and Greece, this possibility must become a permanent subject of intelligence collection, strategic warning, maritime surveillance, and coordinated European contingency planning. The question is not whether Russia controls every migrant route. The question is whether Europe is prepared for the moment when one or more of those routes may be deliberately influenced as part of a wider hybrid confrontation.

The Movement toward Nigeria, Libya, and Morocco

The Sahel displacement system does not follow a single northward line. It operates through multiple corridors.

Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea

Nigeria may function as both a destination and a transit space. Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin, violence by jihadist groups, organized crime, communal conflict, and severe economic pressure already generate internal displacement within Nigeria itself.

Additional arrivals from neighboring Sahel states could place further pressure on northern Nigeria and on coastal West African states. The EU has already established new security initiatives with Gulf of Guinea countries because threats originating in the Sahel are moving southward. ([European External Action Service](#))

From Nigeria and neighboring states, migrants may move westward toward Senegal and Mauritania, northward through Niger and Algeria, or toward Libya through trans-Saharan smuggling corridors.

Libya

Libya remains the most important transit and departure platform for the central Mediterranean. Its fragmented governance, competing armed formations, extensive smuggling economy, and geographic position make it a critical junction between the Sahel and Europe.

Migrants arriving in Libya may originate from Sudan, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Somalia, Egypt, Bangladesh, and other states. Many are exposed to detention, extortion, forced labor, trafficking, and violence.

Libya now feeds two distinct European directions: the established route toward Italy and Malta and the rapidly developing route from eastern Libya toward Crete and Gavdos.

Morocco

Morocco is simultaneously a country of origin, transit, and destination. Migrants from West and Central Africa may travel through Mauritania, Algeria, or Atlantic routes before reaching Morocco.

From Morocco, movement toward Europe can occur through:

- Ceuta and Melilla;
- the western Mediterranean toward mainland Spain;
- the Atlantic route toward the Canary Islands.

Morocco's proximity to Spain means that migration cooperation remains strategically important. Yet the Ceuta episode showed that the same cooperation can become a source of political leverage.

Three Strategic Routes toward Europe

1. The Western Route: Morocco–Spain

Spain faces pressure through Ceuta, Melilla, the Strait of Gibraltar, the western Mediterranean, and the Canary Islands.

The principal risk is not necessarily a constant rise in numbers. The more serious security problem is the possibility of sudden, concentrated movement produced by a political dispute, temporary withdrawal of border enforcement, or coordinated activity by smuggling networks.

Spain can therefore expect:

- periodic pressure on Ceuta and Melilla;
- greater use of the Atlantic route when Mediterranean controls become stronger;
- political linkage between migration cooperation and disputes involving Western Sahara;
- increased arrival of migrants originating in the Sahel and West Africa;
- and disinformation designed to create the impression that particular borders are temporarily open.

The western route registered a modest increase during 2025, while Morocco remained a central departure or transit point for movements toward Spain.

Spain's strategic vulnerability lies in its dependence on cooperation with Morocco. Madrid must therefore combine partnership with Rabat with independent surveillance, contingency planning, and EU-level mechanisms capable of responding to abrupt instrumentalization.

2. The Central Route: Libya and Tunisia–Italy

Italy will remain the principal destination for the central Mediterranean route. In 2025, the central Mediterranean was still the busiest irregular migration route into the European Union. Italy recorded 66,316 sea arrivals during that year, a level broadly similar to 2024.

Italy should expect:

- continued departures from western Libya and Tunisia;
- periodic increases following conflict, economic collapse, or changes in coastguard activity;
- a growing share of migrants from Sudan, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, and parts of Asia;
- more adaptive smuggling operations;
- pressure on reception systems and local governments;
- and repeated disputes within the EU regarding relocation and burden-sharing.

The presence of multiple foreign actors in Libya complicates Italy's challenge. Russia has developed a significant military and political position in eastern Libya, while Turkey remains influential in western Libya. This creates a security environment in which migration routes can potentially be affected by geopolitical bargaining among external powers and Libyan factions.

Even without an explicit decision to weaponize migration, instability around Libyan ports, detention facilities, smuggling centers, and security institutions can quickly influence departures toward Italy.

Rome must therefore treat Libya not merely as a migration-policy issue but as an intelligence, maritime-security, energy-security, and geopolitical priority.

3. The Eastern-Central Route: Eastern Libya–Crete and Greece

Greece can no longer view African migration primarily through the traditional Turkey–Aegean route.

During 2025, crossings from eastern Libya toward Crete more than tripled, and the Libya–Crete corridor became one of the most significant new developments in European migration. Frontex reported that the corridor remained highly active, while UNHCR data indicate that nearly 20,000 people arrived in Crete from Libya during 2025.

In the period from May to August 2025, 52 percent of arrivals in Greece reportedly departed from Libya, compared with 48 percent from Türkiye. This represents a fundamental change in the geography of Greek border security.

Greece should expect:

- continued or increased departures from eastern Libya toward Crete and Gavdos;
- a higher proportion of Sudanese, Egyptian, and other African nationals;
- greater pressure on reception infrastructure in Crete;
- longer and more dangerous maritime journeys;
- increased activity by smuggling networks connected to eastern Libya;
- and possible attempts by foreign or Libyan actors to use the corridor as political leverage.

In 2025, the majority of refugees and asylum seekers reaching Greece arrived in the Crete region, while arrivals there increased sharply compared with the previous year.

This development has major strategic implications. Eastern Libya is closely connected to forces under Khalifa Haftar and is also an area of considerable Russian military influence. That does not prove that Russia is directing migration toward Crete. It does mean, however, that a migration route now reaches Greece from a space in which Russian military and intelligence-linked actors possess access, relationships, and potential influence.

For Athens, this is no longer only a coastguard challenge. It is a matter of strategic intelligence.

What Greece Can Expect

Greece is likely to face a dual migration system.

The first component will remain the eastern Mediterranean route through Türkiye, the Aegean islands, and the land border at Evros.

The second will be the Libya–Crete route, which may expand if smugglers conclude that it is more profitable, less controlled, or politically advantageous than routes toward Italy.

Greece should prepare for several scenarios.

Scenario One: Persistent Elevated Pressure

Arrivals from Libya remain above historical levels but do not overwhelm national capacity. This is the most likely near-term scenario.

Scenario Two: Sudden Surge from Eastern Libya

A breakdown in local controls, a conflict between Libyan factions, or deliberate tolerance by authorities could produce a concentrated movement toward Crete and Gavdos.

Scenario Three: Coordinated Hybrid Pressure

Migration flows are combined with disinformation, diplomatic threats, maritime incidents, or political demands. This would resemble a broader hybrid operation rather than an ordinary migration spike.

Scenario Four: Simultaneous Pressure from Türkiye and Libya

This would be the most difficult scenario for Greece. Parallel increases in the Aegean, Evros, Crete, and Gavdos could stretch border, reception, intelligence, and naval capacities.

Greece must therefore expand surveillance south of Crete, improve liaison with Italian and Egyptian services, deepen its understanding of eastern Libyan networks, and integrate migration indicators into national strategic-warning systems.

What Italy Can Expect

Italy will continue to bear the greatest numerical burden on the central Mediterranean route. Still, the redistribution of departures between Italy and Greece may change according to the behavior of Libyan actors and smugglers.

Italy should expect:

- recurring arrivals rather than a permanently stable decline;
- pressure generated by Sudanese and Sahel displacement;
- increased competition between smuggling networks;
- the use of smaller or less seaworthy vessels to avoid detection;

- humanitarian emergencies at sea;
- and continued political conflict inside the EU over solidarity mechanisms.

A further risk is that stronger controls on one route may redirect movement rather than stop it. Increased enforcement toward Italy could push departures toward Greece, while pressure on the Libya–Crete route could redirect boats back toward Lampedusa, Sicily, or Malta.

Italy and Greece therefore cannot protect themselves through uncoordinated national policies. Their routes form part of the same central Mediterranean security system.

Migration as a Security Problem and a Humanitarian Reality

The recognition that migration can be instrumentalized must not erase the distinction between migrants and the actors exploiting them.

Migrants are not weapons. They are human beings who may be refugees, victims of persecution, people escaping conflict, or individuals seeking economic opportunity. Weaponization occurs when a state, armed group, intelligence structure, or criminal organization deliberately manipulates their movement to produce political or security effects.

This distinction is essential. A security response that treats all migrants as hostile actors would be legally, ethically, and operationally mistaken. Conversely, a purely humanitarian approach that ignores smuggling networks, foreign influence, intelligence activity, and strategic manipulation would also be inadequate.

Security Science must therefore analyze simultaneously:

- the vulnerability of migrants;
- the intentions of state and non-state actors;
- the structure of migration routes;
- the resilience of border states;
- and the political consequences inside the European Union.

Policy Recommendations

Spain, Italy, and Greece should establish a permanent Southern European Migration Intelligence Coordination Mechanism. It should combine information from border police, coastguards, military intelligence, civilian intelligence, Europol, Frontex, diplomatic missions, and open-source monitoring.

The three states should develop a shared early-warning model based on:

- conflict escalation in the Sahel;
- population displacement;
- activity of Russian or other foreign security actors;
- changes in Libyan and Moroccan border enforcement;
- vessel purchases and movement;
- social-media messaging about open routes;
- smuggling prices;
- weather conditions;
- and sudden concentrations of migrants near departure areas.

The EU should monitor the activities of the Russian Africa Corps and other foreign armed actors not only from a counterterrorism perspective but also in relation to displacement and migration consequences.

Greece and Italy should create a joint operational picture for the entire Libya–Italy–Crete maritime space. Separating the Italian and Greek routes into different analytical categories is increasingly unrealistic.

Spain should reduce its vulnerability to abrupt changes in Moroccan cooperation by strengthening independent technical surveillance and EU contingency support for Ceuta, Melilla, the Canary Islands, and the western Mediterranean.

European policy should also invest more heavily in stabilization, local resilience, food security, and civilian protection in the Sahel and coastal West Africa. Border enforcement alone cannot neutralize displacement generated by persistent conflict and institutional collapse.

Finally, the European Union must develop clear political and legal consequences for any state that deliberately facilitates migration to coerce a member state. Without credible consequences, the Ceuta and Belarus models may encourage future repetition.

Conclusion

The migration pressure emerging from the Sahel is no longer a purely humanitarian phenomenon. It has evolved into a multidimensional security challenge in which armed conflict, organized crime, state fragility, geopolitical competition, intelligence activity, information warfare, and migration intersect within a single strategic environment.

The traditional European assumption that migration begins at the Mediterranean coastline is no longer analytically sustainable. The contemporary migration system begins thousands of kilometers further south, in the conflict zones of the Sahel and Central Africa, where instability, terrorism, military coups, weak governance, and external geopolitical competition interact to

generate large-scale displacement. By the time migrants reach Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, or Mauritania, the security process has already entered its final operational phase.

One of the principal findings of this study is that Russia has established a strategically significant security footprint across several countries located along this displacement corridor. Through military cooperation agreements, intelligence penetration, political influence, the Wagner Group, the Africa Corps, information operations, and security assistance to military regimes, Moscow has acquired influence across a broad geographical arc extending from the Central African Republic and Sudan through Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Libya. This does not, in itself, prove the existence of a centrally directed Russian strategy designed specifically to generate migration toward Europe. However, it demonstrates that Russia has progressively positioned itself within the critical geographical spaces where migration crises originate, expand, and eventually reach European borders.

From a Security Science perspective, this distinction is important. Strategic risk analysis is not based solely on proven hostile intent but also on the existence of capability, opportunity, and strategic benefit. Russia already possesses all three components. It has developed the capability to influence security conditions across major migration corridors; it operates in geographical areas through which migration routes pass; and it has a clear strategic interest in increasing political fragmentation, social polarisation, and institutional pressure within the European Union. Under these circumstances, the possibility that migration could become an element of future Russian hybrid strategy can no longer be dismissed as merely theoretical. It should instead be incorporated into European strategic planning as a credible risk scenario.

The events in Ceuta demonstrated that migration can rapidly become an instrument of interstate political pressure. Belarus demonstrated that migration may be deliberately instrumentalized as part of a hybrid campaign against the European Union. The expanding Russian military and intelligence presence in Libya, combined with growing influence across the Sahel, raises an important strategic question: could similar mechanisms emerge on Europe's southern flank in the future? This study argues that the answer cannot be excluded and should become a permanent intelligence requirement for European and NATO security institutions.

The implications for Southern Europe are profound.

Spain is likely to remain exposed to simultaneous pressure generated by Sahel instability, organized criminal networks, political disputes involving Morocco, and information operations intended to amplify domestic political divisions. Italy will continue to face the principal burden of the Central Mediterranean route while simultaneously operating in a geopolitical environment increasingly shaped by Russian, Turkish, and regional competition inside Libya. Greece, meanwhile, is entering an entirely new strategic reality. The emergence of the Eastern Libya–Crete corridor represents not merely another migration route but the creation of a new southern

security front for the European Union, originating in an area where Russian military structures and affiliated actors maintain substantial operational access and political relationships.

The central strategic implication is therefore broader than migration itself. Europe is increasingly confronted with an interconnected **Arc of Instability** extending from the Gulf of Guinea and the Sahel to the Mediterranean. Within this arc, terrorism, organized crime, military juntas, external powers, private military organizations, irregular migration, energy competition, and information warfare interact to produce cumulative strategic effects. Treating these developments as separate policy problems risks obscuring their systemic character.

Accordingly, this article proposes that European security institutions abandon the traditional separation between migration management and strategic security analysis. Migration should be incorporated into early-warning systems alongside indicators of armed conflict, foreign military activity, intelligence penetration, organized criminal networks, political destabilization, and hybrid operations. Only an integrated Security Science framework can explain the complex interaction between these variables.

Ultimately, the greatest strategic danger for Europe is not migration itself. Migrants are not adversaries; they are frequently the first victims of armed conflict, state collapse, terrorism, and geopolitical competition. The real danger lies in the increasing ability of state and non-state actors to manipulate displacement, exploit humanitarian crises, and transform human mobility into a strategic instrument capable of influencing European political decision-making, weakening institutional cohesion, and reshaping the continent's security environment.

Europe therefore faces a defining strategic choice. It can continue to perceive migration primarily as a border-management problem, responding only after crises reach its shores, or it can recognize that the defense of Europe's southern frontier now begins in the Sahel. Failure to adopt this broader strategic perspective will leave the European Union vulnerable not only to recurring migration crises but also to the gradual emergence of a permanent hybrid pressure system stretching from Central Africa to the Mediterranean.