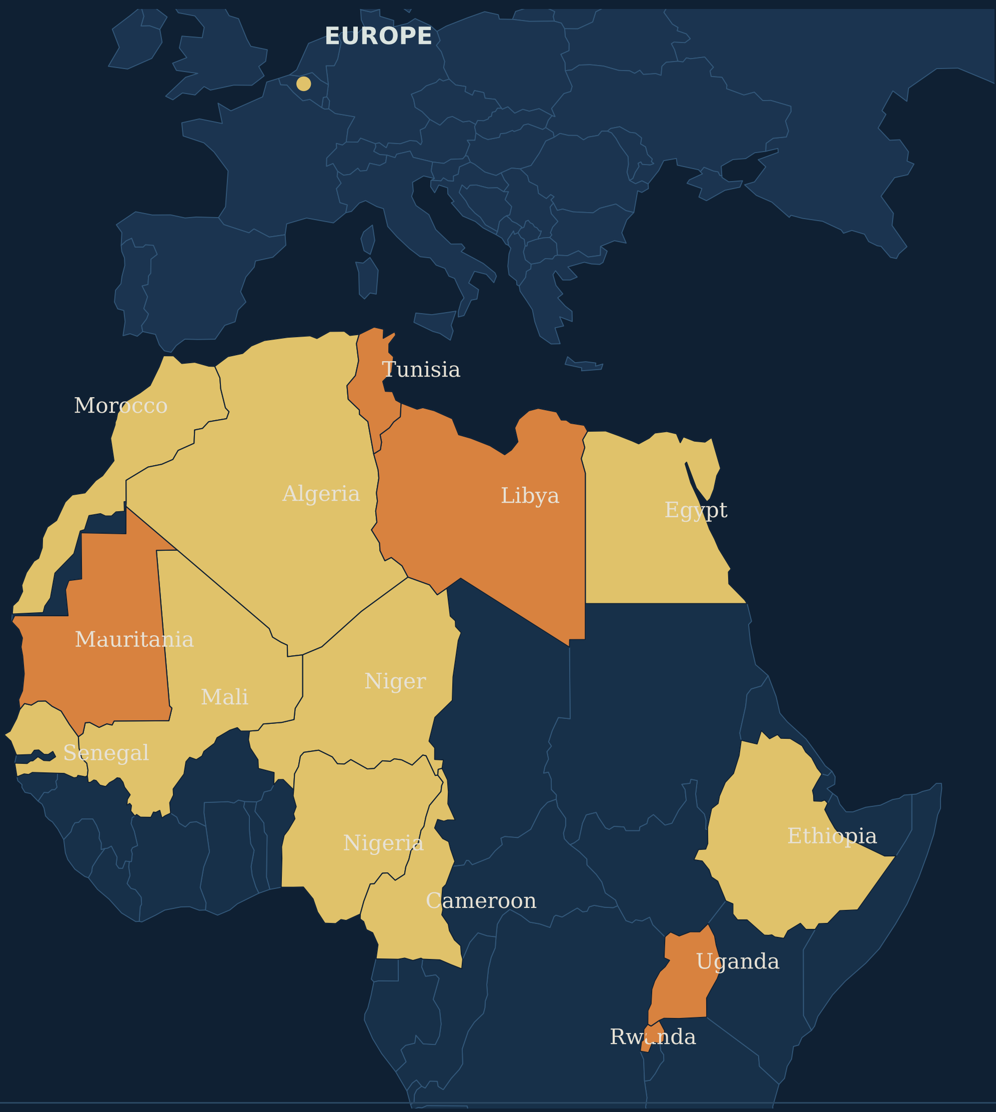
A BORDERLINE-EUROPE BRIEFING

A Million Little Deals How Europe Outsources Its Borders

Inside the EU's growing web of migration agreements with Libya, Tunisia, Mauritania and beyond, and what it costs the people caught on the other side of them.

- Case study in this briefing
- Other countries in the wider network



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AUGUST 2026

OPENING

Twenty Years After Rabat

In July 2006, representatives from Europe and Africa gathered in Rabat and signed a declaration built on a shared conviction, that migration could only be addressed through dialogue, partnership and shared responsibility. That meeting became the Rabat Process, the framework still coordinating migration policy between nearly sixty European and African states today. This year, under Switzerland's chairmanship, it marks its twentieth anniversary.

We think that anniversary is worth pausing on, not to celebrate it, but to ask what two decades of dialogue actually produced. borderline-europe has monitored human rights violations at the EU's external borders since 2009. Over that time, the border itself has moved. It no longer sits only at Europe's coastline. It now runs through the deserts of Mauritania, the ports of Tunisia, the coast guard bases of Libya, transit centres in Rwanda, and a growing list of quieter arrangements most people in Europe will never hear about.

This is externalisation, the policy of paying, training and equipping other countries to stop people before they ever reach the EU, or to hold them once they have been sent back. Forms of it have been part of EU migration policy for at least three decades. What has changed is its scale, its speed, and its increasing willingness to bypass the Rabat Process's own dialogue model in favour of direct, bilateral deals between individual states, often with minimal public accountability and a documented human cost.

> *Twenty years of so-called dialogue produced a framework. What we document below is what actually happens underneath it, cash transfers, return hubs, and third-country processing arrangements negotiated one country at a time.*

This briefing draws on primary documents where available, including European Commission and Council papers, documents published by Statewatch, court and arbitration rulings, official agency material, and direct reporting from journalists working in the countries affected. Where we rely on reporting about a primary document, or where a figure could not be independently verified, we say so.

PART ONE

What Externalisation Actually Means

The European Commission services prepare an annual update on external cooperation in migration policy for the Council's Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration. The latest update, covering activity in 2025, was submitted to the Working Party on 21 January 2026. Statewatch obtained and published the document. It is, in effect, a status update on how well Europe's borders are being held by other people's governments.

The pattern across nearly every country covered is the same. The EU offers funding, equipment, training or diplomatic support. In exchange, the partner country agrees to intercept people before they leave, accept deportees back, or share intelligence on smuggling networks. Readmission agreements, the formal term for deportation deals, sit at the centre of nearly every negotiation. As the report itself puts it, there is a very strong desire within the EU to increase deportations, and considerable diplomatic effort now goes into clearing the legal and political hurdles standing in the way.

The instruments behind the money

Three EU funding mechanisms make this possible. The European Union Trust Fund for Africa, created in 2015, was the first large-scale instrument built specifically for externalisation projects. Its successor, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument, known as NDICI Global Europe, now channels billions of EUR toward migration control measures under a broader development and neighbourhood framework. A newer Multi-Annual Measure for Migration in the Southern Neighbourhood, covering 2025 to 2027, carries its own budget of EUR 675 million.

Layered on top of the money sits Frontex, the EU's border and coast guard agency, which negotiates its own working arrangements directly with third countries, and EUNAVFOR MED IRINI. IRINI's core task is to support enforcement of the UN arms embargo on Libya. Its secondary tasks include capacity-building and training for relevant Libyan institutions responsible for law enforcement and search-and-rescue tasks at sea, particularly to prevent human smuggling and trafficking. The operation has been extended until 31 March 2027.

EUR 675 million
BUDGETED FOR SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD MIGRATION MEASURES, 2025 TO 2027

21 January 2026
DATE THE COMMISSION'S LATEST EXTERNALISATION REPORT WAS PRESENTED TO THE COUNCIL

2015
YEAR THE EU TRUST FUND FOR AFRICA, THE FIRST MAJOR EXTERNALISATION INSTRUMENT, WAS CREATED

Source, Statewatch, How the EU coordinates migration control around Africa, 19 May 2026, publishing the European Commission's January 2026 external cooperation update.

PART TWO, CASE ONE

Libya, Where the Evidence Is Clearest

No country in this network illustrates the human cost of externalisation more clearly than Libya. The so-called Libyan Coast Guard, the EU's primary maritime partner for stopping departures, is not a single coherent institution. It is a collection of militias and other armed actors, funded and trained by the EU, operating with minimal oversight and a documented record of violence toward the people it intercepts.

In August 2025, the rescue ship Ocean Viking was fired on in international waters north of Libya. The attackers were part of the Libyan Coast Guard. Civil society organisations and members of the European Parliament have repeatedly called on the European Commission to end, or at minimum suspend, cooperation with these forces. The Commission has declined. Journalists from Spiegel and Lighthouse Reports have separately published evidence that Frontex shared the real-time locations of migrant boats with Libyan officials approximately 2,200 times between 2021 and 2023, information that in many documented cases was followed by interception and return to Libya.

> *A document obtained by Statewatch in May 2026 confirmed the EU was actively discussing how to expand cooperation with Libya's eastern forces further still, deepening a partnership its own institutions already known to be violent.*

The formal justification for the EU naval operation in the central Mediterranean, the EUNAVFOR MED IRINI mission, is enforcement of a United Nations arms embargo. Its secondary tasks include maritime situational awareness, action related to illicit oil exports, and capacity-building and training for relevant Libyan institutions responsible for law enforcement and search-and-rescue tasks at sea, particularly to prevent human smuggling and trafficking. The operation has been extended until 31 March 2027. The mission holds what it describes as fruitful dialogue on a monthly basis with coast guard units in both the eastern and western halves of the country, the same units implicated in the Ocean Viking shooting and in years of documented abuse against the people they intercept.

Statewatch's summary of the Commission update reports approximately EUR 220 million in bilateral and regional NDICI actions adopted for Libya between 2021 and 2024. The figure covers multiple programmes and should not be read as a single bilateral transfer or as migration-only funding. Further funding is expected under the EUR 675 million Southern Neighbourhood measure running through 2027.

PART TWO, CASE TWO

Tunisia, Where the Money Kept Flowing

Tunisia offers a case study in how little political friction actually changes once an externalisation deal is signed.

On 16 July 2023, a Team Europe delegation led by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni signed a memorandum of understanding with Tunisian President Kais Saied. The agreement covered five areas, macroeconomic stability, trade, green energy, people-to-people contact, and migration. Within the migration pillar, EUR 105 million was allocated specifically to reduce irregular departures, funding border patrols, anti-smuggling operations, and returns.

The deal attracted controversy from the outset. Tunisian authorities have been documented abandoning migrants in the desert at the Libyan and Algerian borders without food or water. In October 2023, Tunisia returned EUR 60 million in EU budget support that it had already accepted. This followed a wider EUR 127 million Commission announcement comprising EUR 60 million in budget support and approximately EUR 67 million in operational migration assistance. A European Commission spokesperson said the episode would not change the underlying agreement. In March 2024, the Commission disbursed a further EUR 150 million in macroeconomic budget support to Tunisia, formally linked to the MoU's macroeconomic-stability pillar.

> *A government can hand money back as a political gesture and still receive more of it five months later. The gesture changes the headline. It does not change the arrangement underneath it.*

Tunisia's deal became a template. Since 2023, the EU has advanced similar partnership arrangements with Egypt, Mauritania, and reportedly Morocco. These arrangements combine financial support, diplomatic cooperation, and migration-control commitments. In Egypt's case, the March 2024 package was a broad EUR 7.4 billion financial and strategic partnership, of which migration and border cooperation was one component. Across these arrangements, public accounting of how partner governments use funds after disbursement remains limited.

PART TWO, CASE THREE

Mauritania, and the Document That Said the Quiet Part Plainly

Mauritania has become, in the EU's own internal language, a key partner for mobility restriction, owing to its long Atlantic coastline near the Canary Islands, Spain's Atlantic gateway and one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. The EU agreed to pay Mauritania EUR 210 million in its most recent deal. Commission reporting describes a subsequent decline in arrivals to the Canary Islands and attributes Mauritanian interception efforts as one contributing factor. The scale of the decline and the relevant comparison period should be read alongside the underlying Commission data.

Two migrant transit centres, refurbished with EU funding, were delivered to Mauritanian authorities at the end of 2025. Mauritania is reportedly negotiating a further working arrangement with Frontex that would give the agency greater direct influence over border operations there, and is separately pursuing new cooperation agreements with Senegal and Mali as part of what EU officials internally call a whole-of-route strategy, extending influence not just at the border itself but along the entire path people travel to reach it.

> *The Commission's own January 2026 update, obtained and published by Statewatch, acknowledges the problem directly. Many critical comments have been made against the EU in terms of alleged abuses of human rights in Mauritania, it states, before concluding, all this requires a discreet level of visibility and prudent communication.*

We want to be precise about what that sentence means. It is not a denial that abuses are occurring. It is not a commitment to investigate them. In our reading, it is an instruction to manage the visibility of the cooperation in light of acknowledged allegations. Mauritania is, at the time of writing, also requesting additional EU financial support, citing increased migration flows from Mali and the cost of expanded maritime operations. In return, the country is offering to prevent further departures. The pattern established in Tunisia repeats here in miniature, criticism acknowledged internally and funding continuing regardless.

PART TWO, CASE FOUR

Rwanda and Uganda, the Return Hubs

Rwanda's history with European return deals did not end well the first time. The UK-Rwanda treaty entered into force on 25 April 2024. After taking office in July 2024, Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government cancelled the scheme. UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper told Parliament that the policy had cost UK taxpayers more than £700 million and had resulted in four voluntary transfers to Rwanda under a separate voluntary-removals programme.

Rwanda did not let the matter drop. It filed for arbitration at the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, seeking 134 million dollars across four claims, including two £50 million tranches it said the UK owed under the treaty. On 15 May 2026, the tribunal rejected Rwanda's claims, finding that Rwanda's diplomatic notes from November 2024 amounted to an agreement that no further payments would be made.

That assessment did not hold for long. Days after the late July Ceuta crossings, Rwandan government spokesperson Yolande Makolo confirmed Rwanda was in initial discussions with several European countries, including Italy, on a new arrangement centred on what she called an emergency transit mechanism. No agreement had been finalised at the time of writing. Rwanda already hosts the Gashora Emergency Transit Mechanism, established in 2019 through an agreement involving Rwanda, UNHCR and the African Union and supported by the EU. By August 2026, more than 3,000 people had reportedly been evacuated there from Libya. The infrastructure Rwanda built for the failed UK deal has not gone away. It is simply waiting for a new customer.

> *Uganda's negotiations moved further than Rwanda's while drawing far less attention. A letter of intent was reported to have been signed in September 2025. By August 2026, five EU states were reported to be working to finalise a deal covering up to ten thousand people, and the European Commission itself confirmed it was not involved.*

The Netherlands was reported to have signed a letter of intent with Uganda in September 2025, agreed by Migration Minister David van Weel and Uganda's Foreign Minister Jeje Odongo, for a transit hub handling failed asylum seekers. Amnesty International Netherlands and Defence for Children announced plans to challenge it in court. A change of government appeared to shelve the plan in early 2026, as the Netherlands joined a broader coalition instead.

That coalition revived the talks. By 13 August 2026, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Denmark and Greece were reported to be working toward an EU-wide return-hub approach with Uganda, for a centre reported to have capacity for up to ten thousand rejected asylum seekers. European Commission spokesperson Guillaume Mercier told reporters, we are not involved in the discussions on the hubs. France and Spain remain the bloc's main opponents. Uganda hosted approximately 1.8 million refugees and asylum-seekers at the end of 2024, according to UNHCR.

PART THREE

The Whole-of-Route Strategy

Libya, Tunisia, Mauritania, Rwanda and Uganda are the most visible cases, but the Commission's own internal reporting describes a far wider network, one deliberately extended along entire migration routes rather than concentrated only at the EU's immediate frontier.

Active or advancing

Egypt. A broad EUR 7.4 billion EU-Egypt financial and strategic package announced in March 2024, including migration and border cooperation. The first EUR 1 billion instalment of a EUR 4 billion macro-financial assistance operation was disbursed in January 2026.

Senegal. The Commission update describes migration cooperation and negotiations for a broader strategic partnership. The scale and exact programme of EU funding require further verification.

Niger. Cooperation resumed May 2025 after being cut following the 2023 coup, with five new projects signed covering migration and related areas.

Nigeria. Signed deportation agreements with both the EU and UK, though Statewatch reports internal resistance within the Nigerian government to the broader externalisation agenda.

Being pursued

Morocco. Frontex's 2025 cooperation report records the deployment of a liaison officer to Morocco. The status of any broader working arrangement should be treated as unconfirmed unless a current official source is available.

Mali. Described internally as needing more support "upstream." An EU counter-smuggling programme has been extended to cover the country.

Ethiopia. Currently under EU visa sanctions for insufficient cooperation on deportations.

Cameroon. Already has separate deportation agreements with Spain, France and Belgium. An EU-wide deal is under active discussion.

Algeria remains, in the Commission's own assessment, one of the North African countries least interested in cooperating, though it has shown some openness to counter-smuggling work, provided it is framed around development rather than border control. The EU's approaches on other fronts, the Commission's own January 2026 update to the Council notes plainly, have not yielded results so far.

> *This is not a handful of isolated bilateral deals. It is a coordinated architecture, stretching from the Rabat Process's own corridors on Africa's Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts to the Khartoum Process's Horn of Africa route, both so-called dialogue frameworks now reduced in practice to bilateral deals negotiated one country at a time.*

PART FOUR

What We Could Trace in the Available Sources

We have limited this page to figures we could trace to a named source, and we note below where a figure covers a broad package rather than migration-only funding. The true total may be higher. Externalisation funding is spread across multiple instruments, several of which report only in aggregate, making a complete public accounting genuinely difficult to assemble, a difficulty that is unlikely to be accidental.

EUR 7.4 billion [1]

BROAD EU-EGYPT PACKAGE ANNOUNCED MARCH 2024, NOT MIGRATION-ONLY FUNDING

EUR 220 million [2]

NDICI BILATERAL AND REGIONAL ACTIONS ADOPTED FOR LIBYA, 2021 TO 2024, COVERS MULTIPLE PROGRAMMES

EUR 210 million [3]

EU MAURITANIA DEAL, A MULTI-SECTOR PACKAGE

EUR 105 million [4]

OF THE TUNISIA MOU EARMARKED SPECIFICALLY FOR MIGRATION CONTROL

EUR 150 million [5]

MACROECONOMIC BUDGET SUPPORT DISBURSED TO TUNISIA IN MARCH 2024, NOT MIGRATION-ONLY FUNDING

[1] Egypt disbursement, European Commission and Egyptian Ministry of Planning, see Sources. [2] Libya NDICI factsheet, see Sources. [3] EU Mauritania deal, Statewatch's summary of the Commission's January 2026 update, see Sources. [4] and [5] Tunisia MoU and March 2024 disbursement, European Parliament briefing and European Commission press release, see Sources.

A pattern holds across every figure on this page. In the cases examined here, funding and cooperation continued after the partner government's human-rights record had become publicly known. In Libya, funding continued after the Ocean Viking shooting. In Mauritania, the EU's own internal reporting names the human rights concerns directly and recommends managing visibility rather than reconsidering the partnership. In Tunisia, a symbolic repayment changed nothing about the underlying flow of money five months later.

We do not present these figures to suggest that development funding for these countries is inherently wrong. We present them because the specific portion of that funding tied explicitly to migration control, and the conditions attached to it, deserve the same scrutiny as any other use of EU taxpayer money, especially where the partner receiving it has a documented record of harming the people that money is meant to stop.

PART FIVE

Why This Matters, and What We Are Watching

Externalisation succeeds, from the EU's perspective, when it becomes invisible. A boat that never leaves a Libyan port, a family stopped at a Mauritanian checkpoint hundreds of kilometres from the Atlantic, a Tunisian patrol turning people back at the edge of the desert, none of these moments generate the images that shape European public debate on migration. That is precisely the point. The Commission's own internal language about Mauritania, recommending discreet visibility, could describe the entire strategy.

We continue to monitor several open threads. Whether the EU's expanded cooperation with Libya's eastern forces, confirmed in the document Statewatch obtained in May 2026, produces further documented abuses, and whether any EU institution responds with more than an internal report. Whether Frontex concludes its pending working arrangements with Mauritania, Morocco and the Gambia, and what independent oversight, if any, comes attached to them. Whether the remaining committed funds in the EU-Egypt package are released on the projected timeline, and what accountability mechanism, if any, tracks how they are used once they arrive.

> *A border that has been effectively outsourced does not make the news. That is not evidence it is working well. It is evidence it is working exactly as intended.*

Borderline-europe will keep documenting these agreements as they develop, drawing on the same source and verification standards applied throughout this briefing, direct reporting, leaked or published EU documents, and the accounts of the organisations and journalists working closest to the people affected.

CLOSING NOTE

A Note on Method

This briefing draws on primary documents where available, together with directly sourced reporting, leaked or published EU documents, court and arbitration rulings, and journalistic investigations. Where a figure or claim could not be independently verified, we identify that limitation rather than presenting it as settled fact.

borderline-europe is a Berlin and Palermo based human rights organisation that has monitored and documented human rights violations at EU external borders since 2009. Our work focuses on the Mediterranean, the Italian–Tunisian border, German migration policy, and the EU's externalisation deals with third countries including Libya, Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Rwanda and Uganda. We maintain active relationships with Alarm Phone, PRO ASYL, the Legal Centre Lesvos, and Flüchtlingsrat Berlin, and draw extensively on monitoring and reporting from Statewatch and ECRE.

This briefing was researched and written by the legal research team at borderline-europe. For questions, corrections, or further information, please get in touch through our website or press office.

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Senegal. The Commission update describes migration cooperation and negotiations for a broader strategic partnership. We removed a previously cited 30 million EUR figure after being unable to confirm the exact programme and primary source, and treat EU funding to Senegal as unquantified pending further verification.