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Talking Sovereignty, Practicing Alignment

Senegal's Expanding Migration Cooperation with the EU



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On 2–3 March 2026, two senior EU Commissioners visited Dakar for high-level meetings with President Bassirou Diomaye Faye and members of the government, as part of ongoing negotiations toward a new Strategic and Global Partnership between the EU and Senegal.¹ The visit emphasised shared priorities around investment through Global Gateway, cooperation on security and defence, and collaboration on migration and mobility. The delegation also

visited EU-supported programmes in security, anti-trafficking, and urban mobility, including the Operational Joint Programme II (POC II) and the Train Express Régional.

The prominence and tone of the visit stand in contrast to early expectations that Senegal's new sovereigntist leadership would distance itself from European partners. Instead, the engagement in Dakar illustrates how cooperation has continued – and even expanded – under the Faye–Sonko government.

In 2024, Senegal entered a new political era marked by promises of sovereignty and

¹ https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/commissioners-jozef-sikela-and-magnus-brunner-visit-senegal-deepen-strategic-cooperation-investment-2026-03-03_en

“rupture” as Bassirou Diomaye Faye assumed the presidency and Ousmane Sonko became prime minister.² During the campaign, Ousmane Sonko focused on pan-Africanism and issued strong criticism of French military presence in Senegal. Some feared that this rhetoric would lead to clear break with Western partners and a shift towards BRICS+ and the Sahel Alliance.³ European observers in particular believed it could undermine cooperation, including on migration.

However, the sovereigntist turn in Senegal has resulted in neither a rupture with Western partners nor divergence from European migration priorities. Instead, it has coincided with a deepening of collaboration on irregular migration. This commentary explores the paradox to explain why this has happened. It argues that the key is in the way in which the Faye–Sonko government has politically mobilised ‘sovereignty’.

Sovereignty is what states make of it

Paradoxically, migration policy under Faye–Sonko developed in a direction that largely corresponded with European interests. The government has taken a tough stance on irregular migration, promising to increase penalties for smugglers and dismantle criminal networks, although sovereignty remains a central concern.⁴ This approach coincides with intensified EU–Senegal cooperation, including €30 million in funding for border securitization, anti-smuggling operations, and reception

facilities.⁵ For Dakar, EU support is framed not as external pressure but as resources that help the state enforce its sovereign responsibilities. Despite very different socio-political dynamics, a similar situation can be observed in Mauritania, which signed a €210 million migration partnership with the EU in early 2024.⁶ This convergence between a sovereignty-driven domestic narrative and Europe’s deterrence agenda represents a key paradox.

Faye and Sonko came to power at a moment when departures along the Atlantic route were shifting significantly, with the Canary Islands becoming an increasingly common destination for migrants from both Senegal and Mauritania. In 2023, Senegal was identified as the main point of departure for irregular migrants, with more than 32,000 arrivals reported in Spain’s Canary Islands.⁷ Mauritania saw fewer departures that year, but this changed in 2024 as arrivals surged, driven largely by migrants from Mali, Senegal, and Morocco.⁸ Overall arrivals rose from 39,910 in 2023 to 46,843 in 2024.⁹

By early 2025 the trend reversed: arrivals fell by 41% between January and June compared to the same period in 2024,¹⁰ and Mauritania reported a 52% drop in departures between

2 In this case “rupture” means a break from the old political and economic order and move toward sovereignty and less external influence.

3 *Le Monde*, “Senegal’s new PM criticizes French military presence,” https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/05/18/senegal-s-new-pm-criticizes-french-military-presence_6671806_4.html; AP News, “Senegal’s new president sworn in,” <https://apnews.com/article/senegal-faye-inauguration-election-opposition-59a13e38d2a3957f9ea03e332996fe7e>

4 *Le Soleil*, “Emigration irrégulière: le PM Ousmane Sonko annonce un durcissement des sanctions,” <https://lesoleil.sn/actualites/emigration-irreguliere-le-pm-ousmane-sonko-annonce-un-durcissement-des-sanctions-contre-le-phenomene/>

5 Statewatch, “Exporting carceral migration management,” <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2025/exporting-carceral-migration-management-30-million-from-the-eu-to-senegal-for-migration-control/>

6 *Politico*, “EU, Spain and Mauritania sign migration deal,” <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-spain-mauritania-sign-migration-deal/>

7 <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/53388/senegal-where-disenchantment-and-disillusion-breed-migration#:~:text=Record%20numbers%20in%20irregular%20departures,for%20Europe%20%7C%20Photo%20Leslie%20Carretero>

8 <https://ecre.org/atlantic-route-and-spain-all-time-record-number-of-migrant-arrivals-on-the-canary-islands-in-2024-%E2%80%95-crossing-attempts-and-rescues-continue-on-atlantic-route-%E2%80%95-spanis/>

9 <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/2025.09%20-%20ENG%20-%20IOM%20-%20Flow%20From%20WAAR.pdf?iframe=true>

10 <https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/2024.12%20-%20ENG%20-%20IOM%20-%20Med%20Dev%20WCA.pdf?iframe=true>

January and September 2025.¹¹ More recent data show an even sharper contraction: the Red Cross recorded an 89% fall in departures from Mauritania—from 216 between April and December 2024 to just 23 in the same period of 2025 – and Spain’s Interior Ministry reported a 59% decrease in arrivals from West Africa to the Canary Islands through October 2025.¹²

Senegalese and European views on irregular migration in West Africa

Irregular migration is high on the agenda of the Senegalese government. Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko has repeatedly described it as both a national security threat and a sign of deeper socio-economic pressures, arguing that it weakens Senegal’s social fabric and undermines its sovereign capacity to protect its youth.¹³

Speaking before the National Assembly in April 2025, he stated: “No responsible country should give up in the face of illegal immigration. We are currently considering how to toughen sanctions.”¹⁴ Sonko warned smugglers of harsher penalties and accused traffickers of exploiting vulnerable youth. At the same time, he acknowledged the complexity of the phenomenon, calling irregular migration a “false solution to a real problem” and insisting “there is no justification for going to die at sea.”¹⁵ Although he emphasises repression as necessary to restore state authority, Sonko maintains that enforcement must be paired with longer-term socio-economic measures to create

opportunities for young people.¹⁶ This protective framing allows the government to present restrictive migration control as an expression of sovereign responsibility rather than a response to external pressure, facilitating deeper cooperation with the EU while asserting policy autonomy. A similar dual strategy – combining repression with development measures – was already deployed under Macky Sall.¹⁷

At the same time, the EU concluded two significant migration-cooperation agreements with Senegal and neighbouring Mauritania. Because of their similarities and parallel trajectories, these agreements should be read together. Their simultaneous emergence raises an important question: although Senegal’s new leadership has adopted a strong sovereigntist rhetoric, this has not prevented continued engagement with the EU on migration management. On the contrary, the government presents cooperation as a means of strengthening its enforcement capacities – and therefore its sovereignty – rather than a concession to external actors. Whether this cooperation reflects a deliberate strategic choice, or rather structural constraints and limited room to refuse EU initiatives, remains an open question. It nonetheless results in sustained, and potentially deepening, operational alignment.

While Senegal’s cooperation with the EU on migration control is shaped by strong structural constraints and limited room to refuse European initiatives, the government’s sovereigntist discourse helps transform this externally shaped cooperation into a domestically legitimate and purposeful state action. By portraying irregular migration as a threat to national strength and portraying enforcement as an expression of sovereign authority, the Faye–Sonko government can frame EU-backed measures as supporting

11 <https://www.canarianweekly.com/posts/Migrant-arrivals-from-Mauritania-to-the-Canaries-have-fallen-by-52-in-2025>

12 Quoted in <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/migrants-using-more-distant-riskier-departure-points-canaries-after-mauritania-2026-01-14/>

13 <https://lesoleil.sn/actualites/emigration-irreguliere-le-pm-ousmane-sonko-annonce-un-durcissement-des-sanctions-contre-le-phenomene/>

14 <https://lesoleil.sn/actualites/emigration-irreguliere-le-pm-ousmane-sonko-annonce-un-durcissement-des-sanctions-contre-le-phenomene/>

15 <https://www.rts.sn/actualite/detail/a-la-une/ousmane-sonko-sur-lemigration-irreguliere-une-fausse-solution-a-un-vrai-probleme>

16 <https://lesoleil.sn/actualites/emigration-irreguliere-le-pm-ousmane-sonko-annonce-un-durcissement-des-sanctions-contre-le-phenomene/>

17 <https://migration-control.info/en/blog/between-the-necessity-and-the-ban-on-migration-an-assessment-of-senegals-immobility-policies-in-2023/>

– rather than undermining – its sovereign priorities.

The EU partnership with Senegal

In case of Senegal–EU relations, the cooperation on migration control has steadily deepened over the past decade. According to Statewatch, this reflects “longer-term dynamics of cooperation” in which EU funding has progressively expanded Senegal’s surveillance, interception, and border-control capacities, providing the state with tools that it can readily integrate into its own sovereignty-centred security agenda.¹⁸ For example, in October 2024, the EU announced an additional €30 million to support Senegal’s efforts to prevent irregular departures. The European Commission stated that the package aims to strengthen assistance to migrants, combat smuggling of migrants and trafficking of persons, and raise awareness about the dangers of irregular migration.¹⁹ Statewatch further reports that the funding focuses on enhanced border surveillance, maritime interception, and new reception/detention-type infrastructure.²⁰

The new EU funding is implemented through a joint operational framework involving Senegalese and European institutions. While formally presented as technical capacity-building, this arrangement continues long-standing patterns of cooperation in surveillance, interception, and border-control support. Investigations show that more than €190 million has been channeled into Senegal’s migration-control sector since 2015, reinforcing a model that tends to criminalise low-level community actors rather than dismantle organised networks.

According to a detailed investigation by Follow the Money on the 2024 top-up, the €30 million

programme included plans to construct three new centres where people intercepted at sea may be held for up to 72 hours, receive humanitarian assistance, and be interviewed to identify suspected smugglers.²¹ These facilities are very similar to those that the EU builds in Mauritania and their operational scheme is also very similar. The European Commission, however, describes these facilities as non-detention “welcoming centres,” asserting that administrative procedures typically last 2–4 hours. Independent researchers interviewed in the investigation warn that the centres carry a strong risk of enabling large-scale detention despite these assurances.²²

The investigation highlights how prosecutions related to migrant smuggling have expanded: in 2023, Senegalese authorities intercepted 17,000 people and opened 671 investigations, up from 460 the previous year.²³ Many of those targeted were low-level community members involved in everyday activities such as renting rooms, selling fuel, or providing food – behaviour criminalised under Senegal’s 2005 anti-trafficking law.²⁴

This legal framework is central to understanding how EU support becomes actionable. Senegal’s 2005 law does not clearly distinguish between smugglers, accomplices, and migrants.²⁵ It criminalises “*migration clandestine organisée*” (Art. 4) without defining what constitutes organising, and treats attempts and complicity as equivalent to the principal offence (Art. 7). This broad formulation grants wide discretionary power, enabling the prosecution of individuals engaged in ordinary acts rather than organised

18 <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2025/exporting-carceral-migration-management-30-million-from-the-eu-to-senegal-for-migration-control/>

19 <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international-news/20241016-eu-announces-30-mn-euros-to-stem-senegal-irregular-migration>

20 <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2025/exporting-carceral-migration-management-30-million-from-the-eu-to-senegal-for-migration-control/>

21 <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/ordinary-people-caught-up-in-eu-migrant-crackdown-in-senegal>

22 <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/ordinary-people-caught-up-in-eu-migrant-crackdown-in-senegal>

23 <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/ordinary-people-caught-up-in-eu-migrant-crackdown-in-senegal>

24 <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/ordinary-people-caught-up-in-eu-migrant-crackdown-in-senegal>

25 <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2005/112000>

facilitation.²⁶ UNODC representatives quoted in the investigation stress that migrants should not be criminalised and that enforcement should focus on dismantling organised networks – guidance also echoed in EU-funded programming.²⁷

The investigation also notes that many cases proceed via fast-track *flagrant délit* procedures based on minimal documentation, and that pre-trial detention may last for months even when cases are later dismissed. Since 2023, all smuggling cases have been centralised in Dakar's *Pôle Judiciaire Financier*, creating additional logistical and financial burdens for defendants and their families.²⁸

Against this backdrop, civil society in Senegal warns that EU-backed measures, “embed carceral practices in West Africa under the guise of humanitarianism,” mirroring Europe’s deterrence model.²⁹

In the Senegalese context, the discourse of sovereignty does not hinder cooperation with the EU; it legitimizes it. By framing irregular migration as a threat to national strength and the loss of valuable youth, the government recasts EU-supported enforcement as an extension of sovereign responsibility rather than external interference. This narrative carries an implicit ideological message: that a sovereign people should remain at home to build the nation, which makes restrictive measures – including those backed by Europe – both politically acceptable and morally justified. Yet, this approach is also a risky, as the EU partnership with neighbouring Mauritania highlights; sovereignty understood in this way can degenerate into policy with authoritarian traces.

26 <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/ordinary-people-caught-up-in-eu-migrant-crackdown-in-senegal>

27 <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/ordinary-people-caught-up-in-eu-migrant-crackdown-in-senegal>

28 <https://www.ftm.eu/articles/ordinary-people-caught-up-in-eu-migrant-crackdown-in-senegal>

29 <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2025/exporting-carceral-migration-management-30-million-from-the-eu-to-senegal-for-migration-control/>

A EU partnership with Mauritania

In February 2024, the European Commission announced a €210 million migration partnership with Mauritania, presented as a flagship model of shared responsibility and solidarity.³⁰ The agreement aimed to strengthen Mauritania’s capacity to manage flows on the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands through enhanced border control and Frontex cooperation, anti-smuggling operations, and returns/readmission systems for Mauritanian nationals residing irregularly in the EU.

Beyond security measures, the partnership includes limited legal pathways and socio-economic initiatives, alongside support for refugees and vulnerable migrants. These measures align with the EU’s Global Gateway agenda, which combines security assistance with development-oriented components. An additional €22 million supports an anti-terrorism battalion on the Mali border, underscoring the security-heavy framing of the partnership.³¹

The EU-Mauritania partnership coincided with record-high fatalities on the Atlantic route – averaging around 1,000 deaths per month in the first months of 2024.³² In the absence of a Mauritanian national asylum legislation,³³ the increased policing and deportation raised concerns about violations of the universal right to asylum and the principle of non-refoulement.³⁴ Civil society groups cautioned that when legal pathways remain limited, such partnerships can push movement onto more dangerous routes, even as they

30 <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-spain-mauritania-sign-migration-deal/>

31 <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-spain-mauritania-sign-migration-deal/>

32 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/06/19/deaths-migration-route-canary-islands-spain-soar-1000-month>

33 UNHCR remains solely responsible for refugee status determination in Mauritania.

34 Ould Moctar, Hassan. 2024. *The EU–Mauritania Partnership: Whose Priorities?* ECRE Working Paper 21, October 2024. European Council on Refugees and Exiles, pp. 9-10.

promise protection and development.³⁵ This is mostly to emphasise that when enforcement tightens and no legal alternatives exist, people rarely stop moving – they reroute onto riskier paths.

Reuters reporting shows,³⁶ through interception data, that migrants attempting to reach the Canary Islands have increasingly departed from more distant and riskier coastal points in West Africa. After the 2024 EU–Mauritania agreement led to an almost 90% drop in intercepted departures from Mauritania, migrants began shifting southward to the Gambia and Guinea, embarking on journeys that can exceed 2,000 kilometres and last up to 11 days at sea. Although total departures cannot be estimated, interceptions demonstrate a sharp change in where boats are leaving. These routes demand more fuel and resources and expose travellers to even higher mortality risks. The pattern makes clear that enforcement does not stop movement; it displaces it.³⁷

But there is stronger link than just temporality. The EU agreement seemed to have created the political space for the Mauritanian government to tighten its own laws and enforcement practices in ways that have had severe consequences for migrants. Rights organisations link this escalation to new legal and administrative measures the government introduced after securing EU backing – law n° 2024-038/P.R. – effectively giving authorities a green light to exercise broader discretionary power over the presence and movement of foreign nationals.³⁸

Since the deal was signed, Mauritanian authorities have carried out sweeping raids in Nouadhibou, Nouakchott and border towns like Rosso. The raids focus on arresting people at construction sites, in shared housing and during night-time operations, often breaking into homes without warning.³⁹ Many of those subsequently deported had valid residence permits, with rights groups estimating that roughly 1,200 people were expelled in March alone, including about 700 who were legally registered. Inside holding centres, migrants described overcrowding, lack of food and water, and extortion by officials, while others were pushed across remote borders and left stranded.⁴⁰

Critical Assessment: Sovereignty and Alignment

Taken together, these developments reveal a central paradox: rather than constraining cooperation with the EU, Senegal's sovereigntist turn has provided the political vocabulary that makes such cooperation both acceptable and legitimate. Far from distancing Dakar from Europe's externalization agenda, the Faye–Sonko government has rhetorically recast measures such as intensified policing, enhanced interception, and EU-funded surveillance as expressions of national authority rather than concessions to external pressure.

What appears at first as ideological incompatibility – pan-Africanist rhetoric alongside deepening collaboration with European migration control – functions, in practice, as a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Sovereignty is deployed not as a barrier but as a frame that converts EU-backed enforcement into sovereign state action. By defining irregular migration as a threat to internal cohesion, territorial control, and the safety of Senegalese youth, the government presents restrictive

35 <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-spain-mauritania-sign-migration-deal/>

36 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/migrants-using-more-distant-riskier-departure-points-canaries-after-mauritania-2026-01-14/>

37 This has been already illustrated by research on Niger and the impact of the repressive measures on migration. For a detailed analysis see : Border Forensics (2023). *Mission Accomplished? The Deadly Effects of Border Control in Niger*. Available at: <https://www.borderforensics.org/investigations/niger-investigation/>

38 <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/117572/MRT-117572.pdf>

39 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/11/7/inside-mauritania-mass-deportation-campaign-targeting-african-migrants>

40 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/11/7/inside-mauritania-mass-deportation-campaign-targeting-african-migrants>

measures as steps taken in defence of the national community. This logic transforms policies that closely mirror EU deterrence priorities into domestically legitimate, even patriotic, interventions.

The government's stance resonates widely because Sonko frames irregular migration as the loss of Senegal's most valued resource – its youth – at a moment of economic uncertainty and social strain. His claims that “there is no justification for going to die at sea” and that irregular migration is a “false solution” recast sovereignty as protection: defending citizens from dangerous routes and external labour markets. In this framing, keeping young people at home becomes a sovereign imperative, making restrictive controls – and cooperation with Europe – appear as aligned with national priorities rather than imposed from outside.

Mauritania's trajectory underscores how the sovereignty–security nexus can amplify EU influence. By framing its actions as matters of national sovereignty and security, Nouakchott reassured European partners and unlocked additional EU funding, while tightening internal controls at lower political cost. As in Senegal, sovereignty discourse has expanded state authority over mobility, but in Mauritania it has enabled even harsher measures once EU backing was secured. This contrast highlights sovereignty's flexibility as a political resource: in Senegal it helps normalise EU cooperation without undermining democratic structures, whereas in Mauritania it provides cover for a more authoritarian turn. The same externalisation agenda thus produces different outcomes depending on domestic context.

The result is a double paradox. Sovereignty – often imagined as protection against external influence – becomes the language through which European externalisation advances. At the same time, the rhetoric that once unsettled European policymakers now facilitates the cooperation they seek, lending deterrence policies domestic legitimacy. Where Macky Sall aligned with EU migration agendas through technocratic pragmatism, the Faye–Sonko government

does so through the language of enforcement, protection, and national pride. In both Senegal and Mauritania, sovereignty narratives ultimately reinforce Europe's externalisation project while consolidating state authority over mobility.

These dynamics raise a wider question for EU policy: if sovereignty is becoming the primary mode through which cooperation is justified, then externalisation may increasingly rely on – and reproduce – political logics that prioritise control over mobility. In these two cases, this has fallen short of rights-based approaches. The Senegal–EU and Mauritania–EU cases suggest that sovereignty, rather than challenging externalisation, is now one of the forces accelerating it.

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www.clingendael.org
info@clingendael.org
+31 70 324 53 84

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About the author

Katia Golovko is a Research Fellow with Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. She works on migration, organised crime and security in West Africa and the Sahel. She has previously worked with humanitarian and development organisations in West Africa mainly conducting research and analysis projects on smuggling of migrants, migration governance, human rights of migrants and drug trafficking. She has experience conducting fieldwork and data collection in different settings with a large variety of local national and international actors. She is based in Dakar, Senegal.