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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Readmission-Dissent Apparatus

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ABSTRACT

Bilateral cooperation on readmission can serve as a mechanism of transnational repression, enabling authoritarian regimes to target political exiles under the guise of the 'fight against irregular migration'. The concept of the readmission-dissent apparatus is introduced to capture how cooperation on readmission can intersect with practices of transnational repression. Drawing on examples involving Turkey, Algeria, Tunisia, Uzbekistan and Sudan, the article analyses the dynamics underpinning this uncharted phenomenon. It argues that shifting patterns of interdependence, reverse conditionalities and European states' prioritisation of readmission have created opportunities for countries of origin to exert leverage and pursue repression abroad. Ultimately, the study identifies a critical gap in migration governance scholarship and calls for greater scrutiny of this opaque phenomenon.

KEYWORDS

Expulsion; Dissidence; Repression; International cooperation; MENA region; European Union

This article investigates how cooperation on readmission[1] (or expulsion) can be transformed into a tool of transnational repression. It identifies and conceptualises an increasingly relevant phenomenon: the readmission-dissent apparatus. This apparatus is defined as a set of interstate cooperative networks, whether intergovernmental or transgovernmental, that simultaneously structure and normalise the use of readmission to quell or discipline political dissent abroad. These networks expediate the readmission of political opponents and dissidents from countries considered democratic to repressive states. The readmission of dissidents is carried out under the guise of routine law enforcement, allowing repressive regimes to suppress dissent among their diasporas with limited public scrutiny or legal oversight. The readmission-dissent apparatus captures the heterogeneous ensemble of practices, norms, institutions and discourses through which power is exercised and normalised. It stresses the productive and disciplinary dimensions of power, showing how states and institutions work together to normalise certain behaviours, including surveillance, migration control and dissent management.

Scholarly literature has largely overlooked the repressive potential of cooperation on readmission. Existing research has focused on the legal and institutional dynamics of

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[1]Readmission refers to the expulsion of foreigners who do not or no longer have the right to stay in the territory of the European Union (EU). Readmission agreements are predominantly concluded at a bilateral level. However, since the entry into force of the 1999 Treaty of Amsterdam, the European Commission can negotiate and conclude EU-wide agreements on readmission with non-EU countries. In this article, the reference to cooperation on readmission encompasses both bilateral and EU-wide cooperation with non-EU countries.

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expelling states, the enforcement of European Union (EU) migration norms and the vulnerabilities of migrants subject to an expulsion order. Furthermore, the informal and opaque nature of readmission practices has hindered systematic inquiry into how such mechanisms may intersect with efforts to quell dissent abroad.

The analysis adopts a methodology grounded in International Relations and migration governance. Drawing on theories of asymmetric interdependence, international cooperation theories and critical constructivism, the article interrogates how readmission practices are embedded within broader patterns of international cooperation shaped by altered power relations. The research also interrogates the reasons why some EU member states (MSs) have become receptive to the leverage and influence of repressive regimes, thereby enabling practices that may contradict their official commitments to human rights and the rule of law.

First, the article situates this research within broader academic debates in the literature on readmission and repression. Second, using within-case evidence (documents, public records and case law) it illustrates how political pressure and institutional decisions led to the expulsion of dissidents under the guise of readmission cooperation. Third, it outlines the factors that have arguably contributed to the emergence of the readmission-dissent apparatus and explains how it has become an attractive instrument for authoritarian regimes and a discreet yet effective complement to other forms of transnational repression. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the factors that have contributed to the normalisation of this apparatus beneath the veneer of readmission cooperation.

The missing link

In her detailed study of the United States' (US) deportation policies during the 1920s, Emily Pope-Obeda (2018, 36) highlights that "while deportation was ostensibly not a form of criminal punishment but merely an administrative process […], many activists, potential deportees, and legal representatives argued that deportation in many cases actually served not only as punishment through removal but also as extradition". Similarly, Julia Rose Kraut's (2020) research on deportation from the US examines an array of explicit restrictions (immigration laws aimed at criminalising political activists) and implicit restrictions (decisions based on the discretionary power of public officials) adopted against some noncitizens, on the basis of their beliefs or ideological affiliations, to justify their deportation. To be sure, the history of expulsion (or deportation, in the US administrative parlance) has been primarily studied as a history of exclusion against noncitizens deemed irregular or politically subversive in destination countries.

Moreover, parallel bodies of work have analysed the repression of political dissidents abroad, highlighting how countries of origin deploy transnational mechanisms of surveillance and control (Brand 2006; Chouikha and Geisser 2010; Hibou 2011; Dedieu and Mbodj-Pouye 2018; Glasius 2018a; Dedieu 2020; Kraut 2020; Watts 2020; Dukalskis 2021; Moss 2022; Furstenberg *et al.* 2025). Countries of origin have often developed mechanisms to strengthen ties with their expatriates while policing their political activities abroad. With reference to Turkey, Eva Østergaard-Nielsen (2003, 92-3) highlights how intelligence and diplomatic services have been routinely mobilised by the Turkish

government to monitor dissent abroad, especially following the 1980 military coup and the Kurdish conflict in south-east Anatolia. Similarly, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia have supported the creation of state-sponsored associations abroad. These associations or *widadyat* (وداديات in Arabic) served not only to promote the a favourable image of their respective regimes abroad by strengthening cultural and social ties with expatriates, local society and political elites, but also as platforms for Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries to interfere in expatriates' affairs and develop mechanisms of surveillance and control over political exiles in Europe (Cassarino 2000, 24-33; Brand 2006, 18; Hibou 2011, 93-109; Tsourapas 2021, 634). Such pervasive interference in expatriates' social affairs and political engagement was viewed with suspicion by the authorities of destination countries, where these associations "were considered [by some European states] forms of home state control and intimidation" (Brand 2006, 51).

As explained below, surveillance and control mechanisms targeting political exiles have become increasingly sophisticated, adapting to changes in their external environment. Over the last two decades, this environment has changed radically, particularly in relation to international cooperation on the governance of migration. This includes cooperation on the readmission or expulsion of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers, as well as the 'fight against irregular migration'. Such cooperation has been shaped by changing patterns of interdependence between increasingly empowered non-EU countries, on the one hand, and the EU and its MSs, on the other.

Today, the history of readmission can no longer be understood as solely a history of exclusion and coercion targeting noncitizens deemed irregular. It is also a history of repression whereby readmission is used to sanction and discipline dissidents seeking protection abroad, including protestors, demonstrators, intellectuals or human rights activists. Some authoritarian regimes[2] have skilfully devised mechanisms to quell dissent in their own diasporas, sometimes with the tacit acquiescence and, at times, active support of destination countries. As illustrated in the next section, they have used cooperation on the readmission of their nationals – ostensibly framed as part of the 'fight against irregular migration' – to suppress dissenting voices within their own émigré communities.

The readmission-dissent apparatus

The readmission-dissent apparatus under investigation constitutes a new sophisticated mechanism for suppressing political dissent abroad. Before examining this apparatus in detail, it is useful to consider concrete examples that illustrate its defining features. The readmission-dissent apparatus is observable at a global level, for it constitutes a direct offshoot of the extraordinary expansion and transformation of the EU readmission system discussed below. Cases abound and MENA countries are far from being *sui generis*.

The *D. v. Bulgaria* case (European Court of Human Rights 2021) fully illustrates the grave human rights implications resulting from the readmission-dissent apparatus. D., a

[2]For the sake of clarity, authoritarian regimes presuppose practices "embedded in an organized context, sabotaging accountability to people ('the forum') over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by disabling their access to information and/or disabling their voice" (Glasius 2018a, 527).

Turkish journalist affiliated with the opposition newspaper *Zaman*, fled to Bulgaria on 13 October 2016 following the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July of that year. Upon crossing the border, D. intended to seek asylum within the EU. However, the Bulgarian authorities denied that any asylum request had been made, contradicting D.'s own account. During this period, the Turkish Consulate in Bulgaria repeatedly contacted the local police, alleging that D. had been involved in the coup attempt (Ibid). Despite the politically sensitive nature of the case, D. was afforded no hearing and no procedural safeguards (Ibid). On 15 October, only two days after his arrival, he was summarily expelled to Turkey under the framework of the May 2016 Bulgaria-Turkey Implementing Protocol to the EU-Turkey readmission agreement. The readmission was carried out without notifying any institutional body in Bulgaria (Ibid). In Turkey, D. was detained in Edirne prison, a facility known for holding political dissidents. In its judgment, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) condemned Bulgaria for violating Article 3 (prohibition of torture) and Article 13 (right to an effective remedy) of the European Convention on Human Rights (Ibid). To this day, D.'s exact whereabouts remain uncertain, though it is suspected he may still be held in Kandira prison.

Another case involves M.B., a former Algerian military officer, blogger and whistleblower, who fled to Spain with a valid Schengen visa and applied for asylum in February 2020. In Spain he became a vocal campaigner against the corruption of the Algerian military regime together with other dissidents. In January 2021, the Algerian judiciary accused M.B. of terrorism and sentenced him to death *in absentia* (Amnesty International 2025). On 23 August, he received a summons to appear at the police station in Bilbao, just two days after another Algerian whistleblower had been expelled from Spain to Algeria. Apprehensive that he may also be expelled to Algeria, he fled to France but was immediately returned to Spain. As a result of his escape, the Spanish authorities opened an administrative file of expulsion for infringement of Art. 54.1.a. of Spanish immigration law 4/2000, alleging that M.B. took part in "activities[3] contrary to public security or which may be harmful for Spanish relationships with foreign states or being implicated in activities contrary to the public order classed as very serious."[4] On 14 March 2022, M.B. was arrested at a police check in Spain. He was informed that his application for asylum had been rejected in July 2021 (which he and his lawyers were not aware of). His second application for asylum was rejected on 24 March 2022. A few hours later, he was expelled to Algeria under the bilateral agreement on readmission between Spain and Algeria. M.B. is currently held in detention in the Blida military prison (50 km south of Algiers) where he has been reportedly subjected to torture, sexual violence and ill-treatment (Guellali 2024; Amnesty International 2025). Importantly, the swift expulsion of M.B. to Algeria took place a few days after Spain decided to politically endorse Morocco's autonomy plan to administer Western Sahara, heightening tensions with neighbouring Algeria (Fuentes 2022). Some observers argued that the expulsion may have served to appease Algeria (Iñigo 2022). At the time,

[3]Amnesty International (2022, 2) explained that "the Spanish authorities justified the opening of an expulsion file based on M.B.'s alleged association with political opposition group Rachad, which was listed as a terrorist group by Algeria on 6 February 2022. The Spanish authorities claimed that Rachad's objective was to infiltrate radical youth into Algerian society to protest against the Algerian government and concluded that the activist was a member of a terrorist group".

[4]Translation from Spanish of Article 54.1.a: "Participar en actividades contrarias a la seguridad nacional o que pueden perjudicar las relaciones de España con otros países, o estar implicados en actividades contrarias al orden público previstas como muy graves." See https://www.boe.es/eli/es/lo/2000/01/11/4/con

Algeria threatened Spain with severe sanctions and retaliatory measures in response to the latter's position on the Western Sahara conflict (Schulze 2022). Although the available empirical evidence does not establish a link between these coincidental facts, the possibility of such a connection warrants consideration.

Initially a marginal issue in domestic politics, cooperation on the re-acceptance of Tunisian nationals expelled from Europe came to be viewed as a key concern by the regime of former President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011), particularly after 2008 when political dissent began to gain momentum abroad. This shift followed the violently repression of social movements in Tunisia's southwestern mining area, encompassing the cities of Gafsa, Metlaoui, Redeyef, M'dhila and Um Al-Araayes (Allal 2010; Chouikha and Geisser 2010). Confronted with the growing popularity of the social protests, the Tunisian regime sought to contain their potential consequences, domestically and internationally. In Tunisia, numerous protestors were harassed, arrested and prosecuted. Abroad, the foreign sections of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (Ben Ali's political party), established in France and Italy, were mobilised to curb mounting dissent, particularly in Nantes and Paris (Dumont 2011), where many Tunisian immigrants originated from the southern cities affected by the 2008 unrest. On 28 January 2009, Tunisia and Italy concluded a new bilateral agreement aimed at accelerating the readmission of irregular Tunisian migrants.[5] This agreement was unique compared with earlier readmission agreements between the two countries,[6] as it introduced "simplified or accelerated procedures of identification"[7] in close collaboration with Tunisian consular authorities based in Italy. At the time, the involvement of Tunisian consular officials in the identification of migrants detained in Italy was unprecedented, if not anomalous. Italian authorities justified their participation as essential to ensuring the swift identification and readmission of Tunisian migrants deemed irregular (Parliament of the Italian Republic 2009). This practice raised serious concerns given its implications for the fundamental rights of migrants, including due process, their right to an effective remedy and to a fair trial. Concerns were also expressed over the fate and safety of Tunisian migrants and rejected asylum-seekers, especially those who had taken part in the repressed social movements in 2008. The signature of the informal arrangement, including the involvement of Tunisian consular officials in the screening process, undoubtedly responded to the convergence of two distinct national security interests. On the one hand, the Italian authorities positively viewed and rewarded the proactive involvement of the Tunisian government in combating illegal migration as a response to a so-called state of emergency on the Italian territory (Cassarino 2018, 404). On the other hand, the Tunisian regime managed to contain the ripple effects of the 2008 social unrest

[5]The January 2009 bilateral arrangement was signed by the then Italian Minister of the Interior Roberto Maroni and the then Tunisian Minister of the Interior Rafik Belhaj Qacem.

[6]On 6 August 1998, Tunisia concluded a bilateral deal, based on an exchange of letter, with Italy. The deal was aimed at facilitating the expulsion of irregular Tunisian migrants from Italy. For reasons that remain unknown, this agreement was not reactivated by the parties in 2008-09.

[7]On 11 March 2009, during a hearing before the Italian Parliament, Rodolfo Ronconi, then Head of the Central Directorate for Immigration and Border Police, stated that the conclusion of the January 2009 bilateral arrangement between Italy and Tunisia was the result of negotiations that began in late 2008. He further explained that "the Tunisian Government accepts the readmission of its citizens through a simple procedure: the alleged Tunisian citizen or illegal immigrant must be heard by the Tunisian consular authorities, after which the person's fingerprint record is sent, via the [Tunisian] consular authorities, to the Central Directorate of the Scientific Police in Tunis" (Parliament of the Italian Republic 2009, 3).

while limiting its impact abroad. Furthermore, it sent a clear signal to Tunisian dissidents abroad: the Ben Ali regime had the power to forge strategic alliances with major European actors, thereby reinforcing its own legitimacy and leverage in European political circles. This convergence highlights the ambivalence of a systemic international collaboration which, under the guise of the 'fight against illegal migration', also served to suppress political dissent, both domestically and abroad.

Other cases involving non-MENA countries should be mentioned to further illustrate how the readmission-dissent apparatus operates, especially when considering that MENA countries should not be regarded as fundamentally distinct from other contexts.

On 15 November 2023, M.A. – an Uzbek asylum-seeker who left his country because of police harassment, torture and intimidation – was expelled from France to Tashkent, five hours after his application for asylum was rejected by the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (Ofpra) (Simon 2023). A few months earlier, in March 2023, the ECtHR had issued an interim measure stating that M.A.'s readmission to Uzbekistan should be suspended, as it would result in "irreparable harm."[8] In violation of this measure, the French Ministry of the Interior ordered M.A.'s readmission to Uzbekistan just a few hours after his second hearing. In Uzbekistan, M.A. was exposed to torture and sentenced to several years of incarceration in the region of Fergana. In December 2023, the Council of State and Administrative Justice in France ordered the French Ministry of the interior to take all necessary measures to return M.A. to France as soon as possible at the expense of the state (Council of State 2023). Neither the order of the Council of State and Administrative Justice nor M.A.'s appeals have been successful. M.A.'s illegal expulsion coincided with the first official visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Uzbekistan in early November 2023, amid Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's strategic shift away from economic self-sufficiency towards greater openness to foreign investment in sectors such as energy, raw materials extraction and processing (uranium and rare earth minerals), agriculture and infrastructure development. This French-Uzbek *rapprochement* culminated in the adoption of a Joint Declaration in March 2025 establishing a strategic partnership that included the 'fight against irregular migration' (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2025). A few months later, stricter rules and severe sanctions were adopted by Uzbekistan against its own citizens expelled from abroad.[9] Ultimately, a bilateral readmission agreement with France was ratified by Uzbekistan on 8 July 2025.

In September 2017, based on a secretive verbal agreement, Belgium began to cooperate with Sudan, under the rule of former dictator Omar Al-Bashir, who was accused of war crimes and genocide by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2009. The agreement was aimed at accelerating the redocumentation and ensuing

[8]Under Rule No. 39 of the Rules of the ECtHR, interim measures can be adopted. Interim measures are aimed at suspending expulsion or readmission orders with a view to protecting a person from "an imminent risk of irreparable harm to a Convention right," namely a "harm which, on account of its nature, would not be susceptible to reparation, restoration or adequate compensation." See Rules of the ECtHR: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/rules_court_eng

[9]Under Government Resolution No. 303, dated 13 May 2025, Uzbek citizens expelled from abroad must reimburse the Uzbek administration for the costs of their own expulsion. Moreover, they are barred from obtaining a biometric Uzbek passport for a period of two years. Finally, they are registered in a Unified Electronic Database of citizens who have "negatively affected the prestige and reputation of the Republic of Uzbekistan," see https://www.lex.uz/ru/docs/7520845

expulsion of Sudanese nationals, including dissidents seeking protection in Europe. These individuals were readmitted to Sudan after being identified by a delegation of Sudanese officials, allegedly agents of Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) (Amnesty International 2018; Debeuf 2020). The delegation was invited to Belgium to interview and screen migrants. On 12 October 2017, a Belgian court prohibited the expulsion of the Sudanese nationals with a view to further examining their cases. However, the day after, Belgian law-enforcement quickly escorted them to Brussels airport for a flight to Khartoum. Upon their return to Sudan, the individuals were reportedly subjected to ill-treatment and torture (Amnesty International 2018; Schreuer 2018). In October 2020, the ECtHR condemned Belgium for having violated Article 3 (prohibition of torture) and Article 13 (right to an effective remedy) of the ECHR (see case *M.A. v. Belgium* in European Court of Human Rights 2020).

One of the common features across the abovementioned cases is the speed with which dissidents' readmission back to their countries of origin occurred. Readmission or expulsion procedures often took place within hours, facilitated by the proactive cooperation of those countries. This proactiveness starkly contrasts with the notoriously lengthy administrative procedures that typically hinder the readmission of ordinary irregular migrants and rejected asylum-seekers (Cassarino 2010; Trauner 2014; Stutz 2025).

Indeed, a key attribute of the readmission-dissent apparatus lies in the swift responsiveness and active participation of the state security bodies in dissidents' countries of origin. The whole readmission procedure takes place in a very short time, with the aim of avoiding media visibility, public mobilisation and any legal action that may prevent the readmission of dissidents. In several cases, even court decisions and ECtHR's interim measures have been violated with impunity. Their suspensive effects all too often carry little weight against the determination of some European governments to present their *modus operandi* as a sovereign political action aimed at 'fighting against irregular migration' or as an 'effective' technique to coerce non-EU countries into being more 'cooperative' on the readmission of their nationals. At best, this framing is cynical; at worst, it is deliberately deceptive. For dissidents, activists and informed observers, this situation barely conceals the extent to which some EU MSs are exposed to the powerful leverage and influence of repressive regimes seeking to criminalise dissent and silence critical voices within their own diasporas. MSs' exposure to external influence and leverage constitutes another common feature across the abovementioned case studies.

Deflection and avoidance constitute two additional attributes inherent in the readmission-dissent apparatus. First, it skilfully diverts policy and media attention from the actual reasons motivating the readmission (or expulsion) of an individual from abroad. The person in question may be dissident, yet they are technically treated and perceived as irregular migrant or a rejected asylum seeker, namely someone who is not or no longer entitled to remain on European territory. Second, the readmission of such a dissident is lost among the countless routine readmission orders carried out by EU MSs as part of their efforts to combat irregular migration. This blending into the mass renders the case invisible, avoiding both public indignation and mobilisation. This invisibility results not only due to the speed with which the readmission-dissent apparatus operates, as discussed above, but also because of the bureaucratic and routinised nature of the drive for readmission itself. In sum, the readmission-dissent apparatus is fundamentally

premised on a logic of disavowal: recognising that an individual is seeking protection from oppression while refusing to acknowledge the political significance of their dissidence. Ultimately, the rationale underpinning the readmission-dissent apparatus reinforces the perception that no place of safety exists for dissidents and political opponents, even when such protection ought to be available.

Which sequence of factors has contributed to the emergence of this apparatus?

Tracing the readmission-dissent apparatus: Implications for theory and policy

Arguably, the readmission-dissent apparatus would never have acquired such significance without the drive for cooperation on readmission. This long-standing and well-documented phenomenon has gained momentum over the past three decades. By December 2025, EU MSs had concluded 378 bilateral agreements related to readmission with non-EU countries, twice as many as in the early 2000s (see Figure 1).

Despite the notable increase in the number of bilateral agreements, the return rate (that is, the ratio between the number of foreigners subject to an order to leave the European territory and the number of foreigners actually expelled from the EU) has decreased. It was only 24 per cent in 2024, compared to 45 per cent in 2016 and 40 per cent in 2008, according to statistical data published by Eurostat.[10] Importantly, as illustrated in Figure 1, while a significant number of bilateral agreements have been concluded between EU MSs and non-EU countries globally, this trend merely reflects the

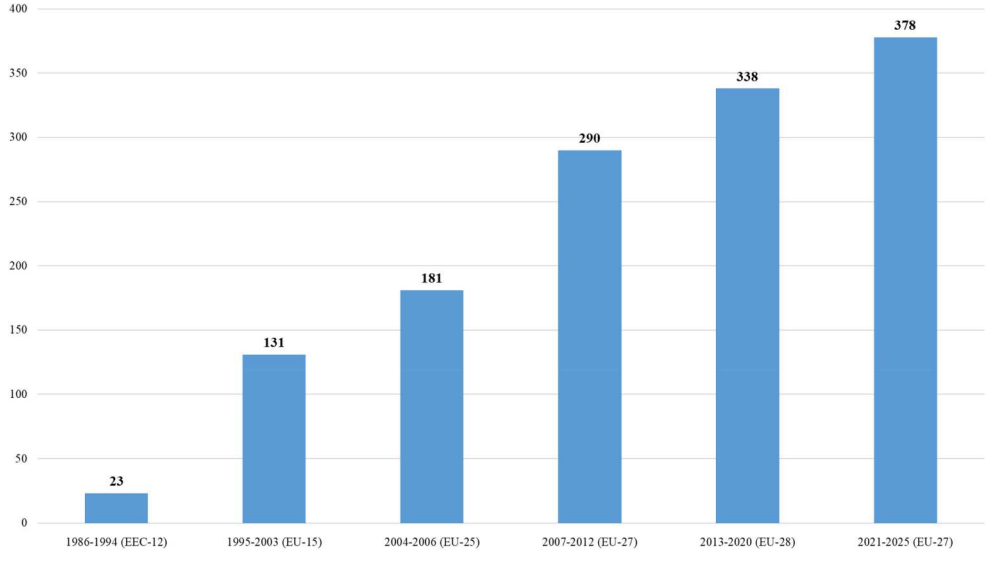


Figure 1. Growth in the number of bilateral agreements linked to readmission, concluded between the EU MSs and non-EU Countries.

Source: Governments' official bulletins/gazettes and internal documents collected by the author. https://www.jeanpierrecassarino.com/datasets/ra/analysis/ Harvard Dataverse, DOI: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VKBCBR

[10]See Eurostat database: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database

conclusion of these agreements rather than their practical implementation. Empirical research consistently highlights the inherent uncertainties characterising cooperation on readmission (Cassarino 2007; Trauner 2014; El Qadim 2015; Stutz 2025). Such cooperation is marked by asymmetries in costs and benefits, often reflecting divergent strategic logics: whereas one state may perceive readmission cooperation as an end in itself, another may engage instrumentally, leveraging migration cooperation to pursue unrelated geopolitical or economic objectives. These differing strategic outlooks are central to understanding the unstable and often contingent nature of readmission deals as well as the unprecedented capacity of many non-EU countries to articulate and assert their own agendas within the evolving architecture of global migration governance and readmission practices.

Altered patterns of interdependence in migration cooperation

We know that cooperation on migration governance between the EU and non-EU countries reflects entrenched interdependencies that extend far beyond the migration domain. Yet, as David Baldwin (1980, 488) noted decades ago, studying interdependence is distinct from assessing its consequences on global politics. Cooperation often persists, not due to its effectiveness, but because discontinuation may lead to higher political costs (Stein 1992, 204). The persistence of cooperation despite inefficiencies can be explained by 'loss avoidance', a useful analytical lens introduced by Janice Gross Stein (Ibid), which highlights the political costs associated with the interruption of international cooperation.

Moreover, how state actors frame issues is far from static: mutual understandings evolve with time, shaped by learning processes and shifting political conditions. This dynamic is central to understanding EU-MENA cooperation on the readmission of irregular migrants and rejected asylum-seekers. To be clear, MENA countries have never been motivated by mutual interests to engage in readmission cooperation which is invariably premised on a zero-sum game (Cassarino 2007; Trauner 2014; El Qadim 2015; Stutz 2025). Rather, their engagement with the EU and its MSs has occurred within a broader framework of interactions that reshapes incentives and dependencies. European emphasis on the externalisation of migration controls has, in effect, reinforced the bargaining leverage of some MENA (and non-MENA) countries. This embeddedness of cooperation within broader political frameworks – coupled with increased awareness of strategic leverage – has gradually redefined the contours of migration governance over the last three decades.

A key outcome of this evolving relationship is the emergence of reverse conditionalities (Cassarino 2007; Cassarino 2025) – a phenomenon wherein actors traditionally seen as 'norm recipients' (for example, MENA states) acquire the capacity to shape, condition and at times reverse the flow of influence in cooperation frameworks. These conditionalities manifest when an empowered actor (Actor B) sets the terms of cooperation in ways that Actor A must accommodate to preserve at least a modicum of cooperation. In this context, Stein's (1992) notion of 'loss avoidance' acquires particular analytical relevance. This shift away from a unidirectional model of policy diffusion challenges prevailing Eurocentric assumptions and invites greater recognition of non-Western agency in *global* international relations (on this critical matter, see, among others, Badie 2018;

Bilgin 2018; Cassarino 2018; Acharya and Buzan 2019; Qin 2020; Hill *et al.* 2023; Yudan 2023).

Indeed, the informalisation of migration governance, which has been widely documented (Cassarino 2007; Coleman 2009; Carrera 2016; Giuffré 2016; Basilien-Gainche 2020; Slominski and Trauner 2021; Wessel 2021; Moreno-Lax 2022; Cardwell and Dickson 2023; Perrin 2023; Ganty and Kochenov 2024, 108-23; Koinova 2024; Stutz 2025), illustrates how EU MSs and institutions have increasingly internalised the preferences of some non-EU countries. Informal tools – such as exchanges of letters, memoranda of understanding (MoU) and administrative agreements – may officially be presented as 'flexible instruments' to lower transaction costs and enable EU actors to navigate politically sensitive terrains without formal legal commitments. However, informalisation has also functioned as a mechanism to accommodate MENA countries' strategic preferences, particularly where formal cooperation on migration control has been insufficient or politically unviable. This reflects a broader pattern of accommodation where EU actors recalibrate their engagement to align with the demands of some increasingly empowered non-EU countries. Crucially, these instruments often bypass parliamentary oversight and human rights safeguards, thereby weakening democratic accountability and further undermining existing legal protections.

In this context, reverse conditionalities do not simply emerge from interdependence *per se* but rather from iterative learning processes. Through repeated interaction in consultative platforms and bilateral frameworks, countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, or Egypt have come to recognise their value as strategic partners. Their newfound leverage is then deployed to extract material and political concessions from EU counterparts; concessions that can include development aid, trade preferences or geopolitical recognition.

Moreover, the clustering of highly diverse issue-areas (for example, trade, development, security, migration, intelligence) has further deepened these dynamics. When distinct policy areas are clustered, states gain opportunities to link issues and enhance bargaining (Keohane 1984, 244). Thus, migration becomes a currency for negotiations in broader geopolitical frameworks. Ultimately, reverse conditionalities encapsulate a broader transformation in the governance of international migration: from hierarchical imposition to negotiated interdependence. They underscore the fact that MENA countries are no longer passive recipients but active agents capable of influencing EU external action.

In sum, contemporary migration cooperation reveals how shifting power dynamics, learning processes through repeated interactions and the growing relevance of informal practices have redefined the boundaries of international cooperation. Reverse conditionalities offer a conceptual tool to understand these shifts, capturing the changing nature of agency, leverage and influence in a system where diffusion is no longer unidirectional and where cooperation must constantly be recalibrated to reflect an evolving strategic balance.

To be sure, these developments – including reverse conditionalities and exposure to foreign influence as well as the clustering of various issue-areas – raise a host of concerns. They point to the potential vulnerability of some EU MSs to the influence of newly empowered non-EU countries and to the diffusion of repressive practices (Glasius 2018b). While existing scholarship has examined how repressive practices spread

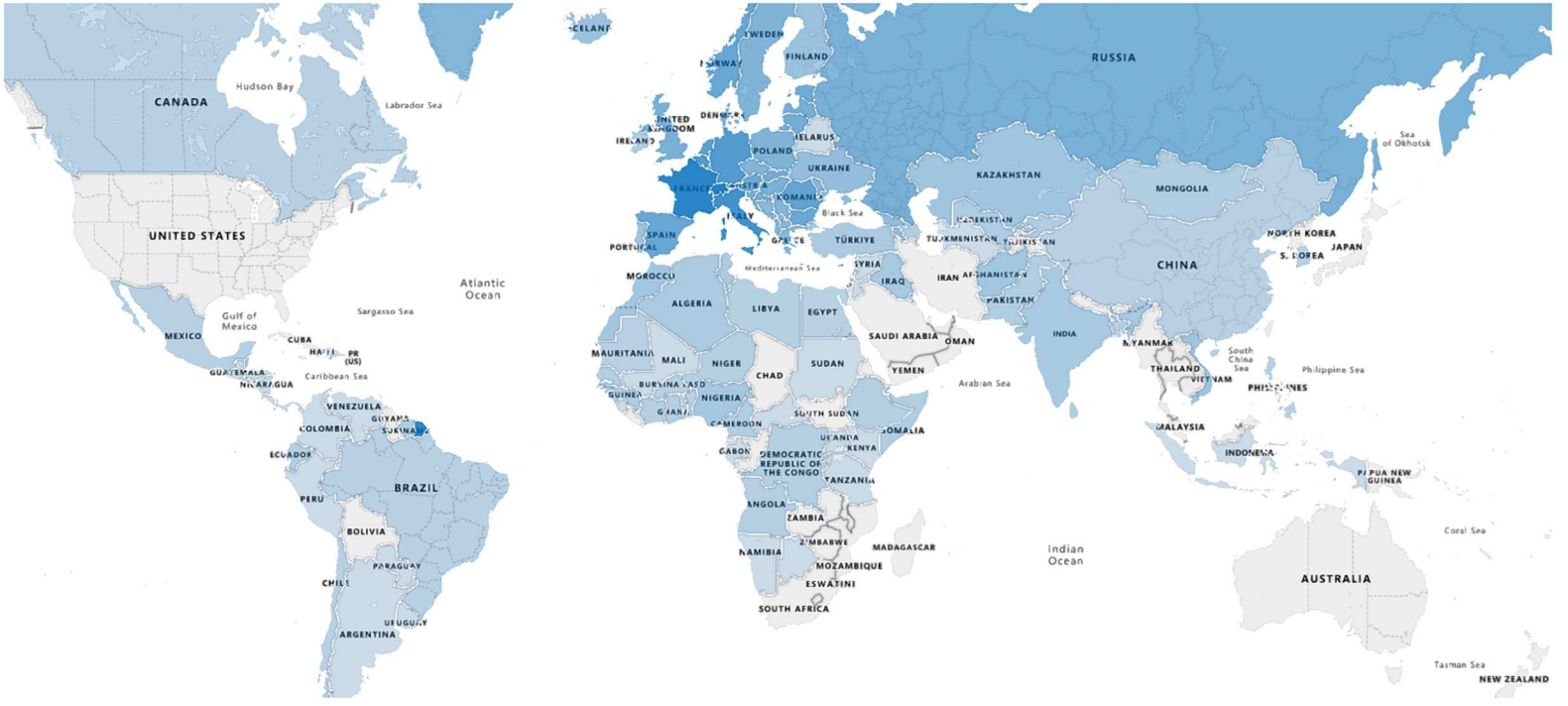
across states, often in the same regional setting (Ambrosio 2010; Burnell 2010; Whitehead 2014; Tansey 2016; Kneuer and Demmelhuber 2021), extending this line of inquiry to European countries opens a new empirical and conceptual horizon for the study of authoritarian diffusion. The central puzzle is not simply why authoritarian regimes seek to externalise repressive practices across borders, but why some European democratic countries may become institutionally receptive to these attempts (see the cases of D., M.A. or M.B., among others). Hence, studying the readmission-dissent apparatus requires a reversal of our analytical lens.

True, EU MSs need to deliver domestically on the 'fight against irregular migration' by enhancing their cooperation on readmission with non-EU countries. The performative dimension of cooperation is so critical that interrupting it might bring more losses (both internationally and domestically) that European leaders would prefer to avoid (Stein 1992, 204) leading to a process of accommodation, as explained earlier. Showing European constituencies that their governments have the means to deter irregular migration constitutes a major objective of the cooperation, irrespective of its effectiveness. Indeed, today the drive for readmission has acquired so much political traction that cooperating with non-EU countries with abysmal records on human rights violations and systematic torture has become normalised and ethically acceptable. It is under these circumstances that the EU and its MSs have developed a powerfully inclusive readmission system (see Map 1). It is inclusive because its expansion rests on the political neutralisation of concerns relating to the abovementioned violations. What is so unsettling about the European drive for readmission is that it has been premised on a seemingly impeccable system that openly disregards the nature of political regimes regardless of whether the latter comply with human rights standards. For decades, this system has mobilised a wide range of countries, whether democratic or authoritarian.

Against this backdrop, some non-EU countries have exploited Europe's prioritisation of readmission cooperation and the 'fight against irregular migration'. Combined with their empowered position in the migration governance, this has enabled these states to intensify their interference in expatriates' affairs and exert political control over political opponents abroad. The apparatus under investigation may thus be viewed today as a more discreet channel of transnational repression, complementing the well-documented politically motivated abuse of Interpol's Red Notice system discussed below.

A complementary and more discreet mechanism

Terrorism, threat to state security, embezzlement, drug-trafficking, hooliganism, disinformation and cybercrime constitute the most common allegations that repressive regimes make to suppress opponents and dissidents abroad. Techniques of intimidation include denying the issuance or renewal of official documents (birth certificates, identity cards, passports) to undermine dissidents' access to basic rights in their destination country. The non-renewal of official documents by diplomatic missions is commonly practiced. For example, Egyptian authorities are known for denying official documents to individuals suspected of being critical of Abdelfatah El-Sisi's regime (Human Rights Watch 2023). Those who are unable to provide the required certificates to their destination country's authorities may become vulnerable if their immigration status becomes



Map 1. The expansion of the European readmission system (December 2025).
Key: The darker the colour the more engaged the country in the European readmission system.

Source: Governments' official bulletins/gazettes and internal documents collected by the author. https://www.jeanpierrecassarino.com/datasets/ra/analysis/ Harvard Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VKBCBR

irregular, potentially facing detention and expulsion. This marks the point at which the readmission-dissent apparatus begins operating at full capacity.

If authoritarian regimes have long relied on other instruments of transnational repression, an important question arises: why has the readmission-dissent apparatus become attractive? Answering this question requires an examination of the growing constraints placed on one of the most widely used instruments of cross-border repression: the Red Notice system of the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol). Red Notices are generally used to seek the location and provisional arrest of individuals wanted by the police and law-enforcement authorities of another country for prosecution or to serve a sentence. International cooperation on criminal matters, in compliance with internationally recognised standards, is central to this process.

However, over the past decade, increasing evidence has emerged that authoritarian regimes have exploited the Red Notice system for political purposes (Fair Trials 2018; Wandall *et al.* 2019; Harth and Chen 2023). Civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights organisations (HROs) have documented numerous cases in which governments have issued Red Notices not to pursue genuine criminal suspects, but to harass or silence political opponents, independent journalists and civil society activists in exile (Rotella and Berg 2021).

International concern over this trend has been steadily mounting. In July 2014, the Baku Declaration, adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), explicitly warned about the risks associated with the political misuse of Red Notices.[11] The declaration urged participating states to support reforms of Interpol, highlighting that Red Notices were increasingly being deployed to target political dissidents rather than to advance legitimate law-enforcement objectives.

In response to growing criticism, Interpol adopted a new policy in 2015 requiring its General Secretariat to delete any Red Notice if the individual concerned has been granted refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention. While this represents a significant step forward, its implementation has been deeply flawed. Only MSs can inform Interpol of an individual's refugee status, yet many are reluctant to disclose such sensitive information (Wandall *et al.* 2019). This procedural gap has limited the policy's effectiveness. Moreover, the policy itself is not publicly accessible and knowledge of it has largely depended on secondary sources, such as the legal advocacy group Fair Trials. Additionally, in 2016, the Notices and Diffusions Task Force (NDTF) was established within Interpol to ensure Red Notices comply with Interpol's constitution and its rules on the processing of data.[12]

Further international action followed in 2017, when the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) passed a resolution calling on MSs to "refrain from carrying out arrests on the basis of Red Notices when they have serious concerns that the notice in question could be abusive" (Parliamentary Assembly 2017, Point 9.3). The

[11]Chapter 3 of the July 2014 Baku Declaration urged "all OSCE participating States to encourage the reform of Interpol to avoid the political use of Red Notices, which are currently being used in some countries to round up political opponents instead of for legitimate law enforcement purposes". See Baku Declaration and Resolutions adopted by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly at the 23rd Annual Session: https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/annual-sessions/2014-baku/declaration-2/2540-2014-baku-declaration-eng/file

[12]For more details about these reforms, see https://www.interpol.int/How-we-work/Notices/Compliance-and-review

resolution also proposed stricter safeguards and emphasised the need to strengthen "Interpol's internal vetting procedures before Red Notices are published" (Point 7.1). Two years later, the PACE adopted another resolution calling on Interpol to further improve transparency by disclosing data and statistics on the management of Red Notices requests, whether they are accepted or rejected (Parliamentary Assembly 2019, Point 10.1). Finally, in November 2025 the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on the EU MSs "to exercise the utmost caution when considering requests for arrest and extradition from regimes that have in the past abused Red Notices" (European Parliament 2025, Point 34).

To be sure, these developments reflect a broader shift in how Interpol has been confronted with rising criticisms over the abuse of Red Notices and extradition measures. More importantly, they signal increasing public scrutiny from CSOs, HROs, United Nations bodies and intergovernmental institutions. Such international actions highlight the potential political manipulation of Red Notices and underscore the need for adequate safeguards aligned with international law (especially the 1957 European Convention on Extradition[13]) and the principles of justice and due process as enshrined in international treaties.

At the same time, these developments have progressively reduced the political utility of abusive Red Notices for authoritarian regimes worldwide. As international scrutiny increased and vetting procedures expanded, authoritarian regimes had stronger incentives to rely on other forms of cooperation capable of achieving similar objectives, while attracting considerably less public and institutional attention. The readmission-dissent apparatus should therefore be understood less as a replacement for Interpol's Red Notice system than as a complementary channel of transnational repression operating under the guise of 'the fight against irregular migration'. Precisely because it unfolds within routine administrative cooperation, it is able to achieve similar objectives while avoiding much of the scrutiny now associated with politically motivated Red Notices. In other words, unlike extradition, readmission procedures are embedded in migration governance rather than criminal justice. They are routinely implemented by administrative authorities, often receive limited judicial scrutiny, and are officially perceived as technical instruments rather than repressive measures directed at political opponents. These characteristics may make the apparatus under investigation particularly attractive to authoritarian regimes seeking to secure the readmission of their own dissidents *from* Europe without hindrance.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the existence of the readmission-dissent apparatus. Scholars across disciplines have extensively examined readmission as a functional instrument of exclusion. While the literature offers crucial insights into the coercive nature of readmission, this article has highlighted the repressive nature of readmission, as well as the conditions under which some origin countries are able to externalise forms of

[13]Article 3 of the 1957 European Convention on Extradition stipulates that extradition shall not be granted by a requested state to prosecute "a person on account of his race, religion, nationality or political opinion, or that that person's position may be prejudiced for any of these reasons". See the text of the Convention: https://rm.coe.int/1680064587

authoritarian practices in the European context, under the veneer of readmission cooperation. Undoubtedly, further research is needed to capture the complex workings of the readmission-dissent apparatus including its differentiated patterns. We still need to understand its profound implications for the safety and fundamental rights of political exiles, the conditions of dissidents in authoritarian countries of origin, the rule of law and the reasons why some European countries have become receptive to this apparatus.

This article has outlined the sequence of events and factors that have been conducive to the readmission-dissent apparatus. At its heart lies a deeper structural transformation: the emergence of reverse conditionalities resulting from altered patterns of interdependence and the consequent exposure of some EU MSs and their administrative bodies to foreign interference. These developments reflect the growing capacity of some empowered non-EU countries to reshape the terms and modalities of cooperation. This dynamic fundamentally alters the power balance in international cooperation, allowing regimes with abysmal human rights records to embed their repressive practices within technocratic frameworks. Moreover, the drive for readmission and the stigmatisation of migrants and asylum-seekers (Huysmans 2006; Kalir 2023) constitute two additional factors that have gradually contributed to the emergence of this apparatus (see Figure 2). The apparatus also thrives in a global context marked by rising populism, ongoing tensions between the executive and judicial powers, the erosion of internationally recognised standards which were viewed as solid and sound, the reshaping of the neoliberal state's role in the economy, rising social inequalities and post-democratic challenges (Crouch 2003). Combined, these elements may directly or indirectly feed into the workings of the readmission-dissent apparatus, though further research and evidence are needed.

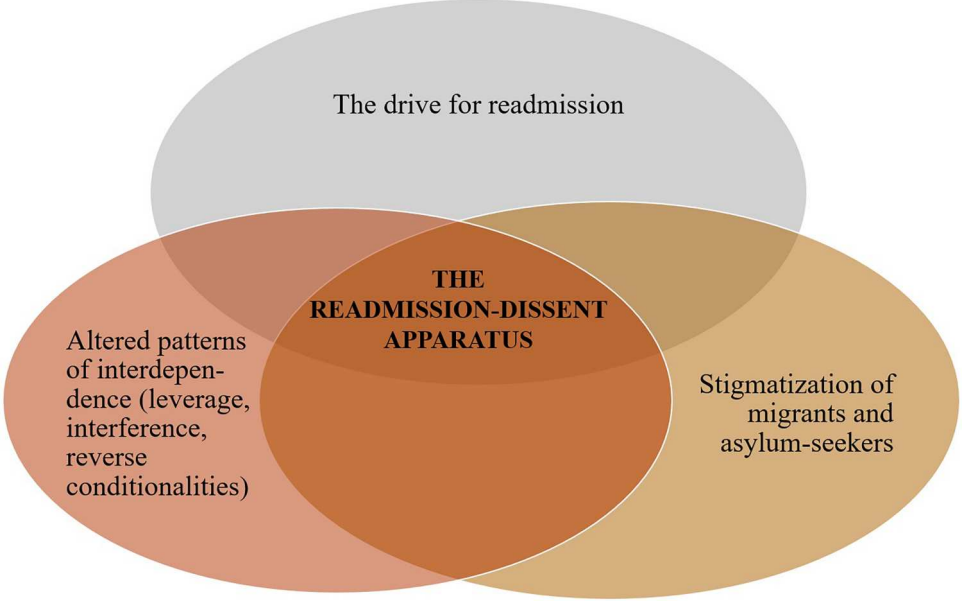


Figure 2. The core drivers of the readmission-dissent apparatus
Source: author's own elaboration

If left unchecked, the readmission-dissent apparatus may become an acceptable component of the EU's and its MSs' external action legitimised by the 'fight against irregular migration' and normalised by the drive for "containment through refoulement" in both EU and non-EU countries, as Lisa Marie Borrelli *et al.* (2026, 17) cogently demonstrate. In other words, it may become a hidden infrastructure of repression operating beneath the veneer of migration governance where, for example, accelerated procedures for refugee status determination and designations of 'safe third countries' serve as convenient tools to expedite expulsions while obfuscating responsibility for human rights violations.

Hence, recognising the existence of this apparatus and understanding how it operates constitute a decisive and concrete step towards the protection of dissidents' rights. It also represents a litmus test of democratic resistance against repressive mechanisms that today permeate political regimes. Admittedly, calls for enhanced judicial oversight and the indivisibility of protection are important. However, they pale in comparison to demands for reinforced state interventionism in the governance of migration. This interventionism materialises through decrees or executive orders issued by political leaders, whether or not they are classified as populist. In fact, the readmission-dissent apparatus thrives under these circumstances where governments publicly acknowledge the values of internationally recognised standards and constitutional safeguards without consistently respecting them (on this specific matter, see Hurd 1999, 381; Lavenex 2024, 9; Goddard *et al.* 2024). It also thrives when some European leaders explicitly seek to reinterpret the absolute nature of the right enshrined in Article 3 (Prohibition of torture) of the European Convention on Human Rights in the name of general interests deemed "sovereign" (De Londras and Dzehtsiarou 2018, 27-34; Mavronicola 2021; Hibou 2024).

The cases discussed in this article illustrate the capacity of executive authorities to disregard court rulings and their international obligations when they deem it necessary. Such disregard is often framed as a necessary evil to meet the demands and reverse conditionalities imposed by some empowered non-EU countries. We now know that court decisions or interim measures issued by the ECtHR can be readily violated when cooperation is publicly portrayed in Europe as a sovereign political act (Hibou 2024), reinforcing executive authority at the expense of human rights observance and refugee protection.

Failing to address the workings of this apparatus and its democratic consequences risks eroding the principles enshrined in international legal instruments, whether these apply to migrants or citizens, dissidents or others. History suggests that, sooner or later, the consequences extend to everyone.

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