

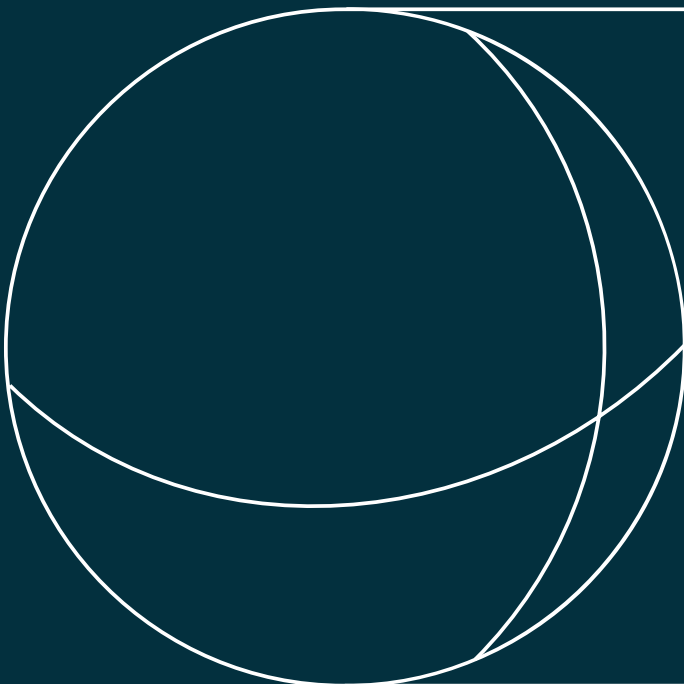
research report

Transforming Global Migration Governance Through and Beyond the Global Compacts

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Abstract

This report examines contemporary global migration governance, focusing on the recent, non-legally binding UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees. Specifically, through the lens of the ENSURED conceptual framework, we investigate the effectiveness, robustness, and democratic credentials of these compacts. The report fleshes out their achievements, such as the establishment of regularly organised platforms, which adopt a ‘whole of society’ approach to facilitate discussion and pledges on migration and refugee policies. It also delves into the compacts’ limitations, including the fact that they are non-binding and lack the permanent structures, effective accountability mechanisms, and necessary human and financial resources needed to underpin their implementation. Diminishing funds for multilateral migration and refugee cooperation exacerbate these limitations. Despite ongoing challenges to effectiveness and robustness, no major actors currently support reform of the Global Compacts – indeed, even targeted institutional adjustments seem unlikely. The compacts are therefore likely to serve only as dialogue forums, with countries prioritising unilateral or even bilateral avenues for effective cooperation around migration.

Citation Recommendation

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Introduction

This report examines contemporary global migration, with a particular focus on the effectiveness, robustness, and democratic credentials of the UN Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM, which we also refer to as the Migration Compact; UN General Assembly 2018a) and the UN Global Compact on Refugees (GCR, which we also refer to as the Refugee Compact; UN General Assembly 2018b). At a time when public discourse surrounding migration and asylum is increasingly polarised, especially in industrialised countries (see, e.g., BBC News 2016; Brunsden 2017; Parker 2025), the global migration governance framework is at a crossroads. This report inductively identifies five challenges facing global migration governance: the limited access to labour mobility opportunities; the lack of effective access to international protection; the non-binding nature of the UN Global Compacts; the lack of effective accountability mechanisms to govern compact commitments; and the decline in funding for multilateral migration and refugee cooperation (most prominently, the recently announced US funding cuts for foreign and humanitarian aid; Bruce 2025; Grandi 2025).

While the first two challenges reflect long-standing, structural issues related to the global migration governance framework as a whole, the third and fourth challenges stem specifically from the relatively new frameworks of the UN Global Compacts. Weakening international political leadership and recently announced funding cuts constitute their own challenge and also compound several of the other four challenges (Blackburn 2025; Bruce 2025). Diminishing funding for multilateral cooperation on migration and refugee policy is expected to lead to a comprehensive reform of the global migration governance framework, which, in turn, could seriously undermine that framework’s ability to function and to live up to its promises (Grandi 2019; UN General Assembly 2018a; Maina 2025).

What are the robustness, effectiveness and democratic credentials of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees?

In light of these issues, and in line with the ENSURED conceptual framework (Choi et al 2024), this report addresses the following linked research questions: What are the robustness, effectiveness and democratic credentials of the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees, and to what extent have these resulted in enhanced access to protection and labour mobility opportunities for migrants? We analyse these questions by drawing from original empirical data, namely fourteen semi-structured stakeholder interviews, seven background interviews (the latter inform the research even though we do not cite them directly), and written correspondence with an academic expert all dating from early 2025. In addition, we employ a detailed literature review as well as policy and legal analyses of the Global Compacts themselves, plus several other relevant legal and policy documents.

For the purposes of this report, and in line with the ENSURED framework, robustness refers to an organisation’s capacity to withstand existential challenges and persist over time, while maintaining its core functions

beyond mere survival (Choi et al. 2024, 14). Thus, robustness depends primarily on institutional stability, including financing and access to funding. Effectiveness refers to an organisation's ability to achieve the goals for which it was established and to address policy challenges successfully (Choi et al. 2024, 10). This concept encompasses three distinct dimensions: policy output, outcome, and impact (Choi et al. 2024, 10–13). Finally, democracy covers the extent to which relevant stakeholders can participate in an organisation's governance and decision-making, and also the extent to which stakeholders can be held accountable – that is, whether stakeholders can be made to explain and justify their conduct, and potentially face relevant consequences (Bovens 2007; Choi et al. 2024, 5–8).

Our report finds that the compacts succeed in bringing together and reaffirming – albeit in a non-binding arrangement – a wide array of existing agreements on migration and refugees. The stakeholders we interviewed also identified the establishment of regularly organised platforms, which adopt a 'whole of society' approach to facilitating discussion and pledges on migration and refugee policies (such as the International Migration Review Forum and the Global Refugee Forum), as a valuable innovation stemming from these compacts.

Nonetheless, the compacts also suffer from a number of limitations, including the fact that they are non-binding and lack the permanent structures, effective accountability mechanisms, and the human and financial resources necessary to underpin their implementation. Declining funding for multilateral migration and refugee cooperation exacerbates these limitations. Despite ongoing challenges in the areas of effectiveness and robustness, no major actors currently support reform of the Global Compacts – indeed, even targeted institutional adjustments seem unlikely. The compacts are therefore likely to serve only as dialogue forums, with countries prioritising minilateral or even bilateral avenues for cooperation around migration.

The UN Global Compacts are likely to serve only as dialogue forums.

This report proceeds in four sections. First, we identify and elaborate on the challenges facing the global migration governance framework. Second, we map the positions of the major international stakeholders in negotiating and implementing the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees. Third, we reflect on the compacts' achievements and unexploited potential, while also exploring potential alternatives to the current channels for international cooperation in the areas of migration and refugee policy. Finally, we analyse the role of the European Union (EU) in the global migration governance framework and propose steps it could take to help keep international cooperation in these areas alive.

What's at Stake: Challenges to Global Migration Governance

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines global migration governance as:¹

"[T]he combined frameworks of legal norms, laws and regulations, policies and traditions as well as organizational structures (subnational, national, regional and international) and the relevant processes that shape and regulate States' approaches with regard to migration in all its forms, addressing rights and responsibilities, and promoting international cooperation." (Sironi, Bauloz, and Emmanuel 2019, 138)

This definition speaks of 'frameworks' and 'norms' in the plural, revealing that no single treaty regulates the topic of 'migration' as such. Instead, global migration governance consists of a patchwork of binding international customary law and treaties, as well as non-binding declarations and guiding principles (Micinski 2021, 29–39). This patchwork of norms and instruments regulates some forms and aspects of migration in great detail, while leaving others completely unregulated (Chetail 2019, 6). For this reason, the global migration governance framework is sometimes described as "a giant unassembled juridical jigsaw puzzle, for which the number of pieces is uncertain and the grand design is still emerging" (Lillich 1984, 122).

Due to the absence of an all-encompassing legal framework on migration, the treatment of migrants at the international level is principally regulated by an extensive corpus of treaties that seek to protect human rights (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2024).² This body of international human rights law overlays a second set of conventions that aim to protect certain rights for specific categories of migrants, including migrant workers (International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families 1990), refugees (Refugee Convention 1951; Protocol to the Refugee Convention 1967), and the victims of human trafficking or migrant smuggling (United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime 2000; Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children 2003; Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land,

1 For a similar description, see, e.g., Global Commission on International Migration (2005), 65.

2 The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights lists a total of nine core international human rights instruments (OHCHR 2024), as follows: International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) (1965); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1966); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) (1984); Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989); International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) (2003); International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) (2006); Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006).

Sea and Air 2004). Finally, the politically sensitive nature of this topic means that most of the arrangements and norms that make up the contemporary global migration governance framework are non-binding (see, e.g., UN General Assembly 2016).

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) added two such arrangements to the framework in 2018 by adopting the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees. These Global Compacts are non-legally binding, cooperative frameworks (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 7; UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraph 4), which seek to foster international cooperation on migration and refugee policy among all relevant stakeholders. The compacts follow a ‘whole of society’ approach, meaning they seek to extend not just to states, but to all relevant stakeholders, including migrants and refugees themselves (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 15; UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraph 3). In substance, the compacts set out a common understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with international migration and refugee movements, as well as ways to address these.

The UN Global Compacts follow a ‘whole of society’ approach.

Additionally, the compacts come with institutional innovations. Part of their implementation involves the organisation of two novel international forums every four years: the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) for the Migration Compact (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 49), and the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) for the Refugee Compact (UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraphs 17 and 101). To conduct further stocktaking, high-level meetings and regional reviews take place between each IMRF and GRF (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 50; UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraphs 30 and 101–104). In addition to providing a platform for discussion, these forums are the primary spaces in which states and other stakeholders announce pledges to and contributions towards the objectives of the compacts.

As the Global Compacts are merely cooperative frameworks, they do not have their own permanently established financial structures. Instead, the GCM and the GCR – as well as the various projects related to their implementation – are financed and operationalised through voluntary pledges. The UN Network on Migration keeps track of all GCM pledges on its so-called ‘pledging dashboard,’ while UNHCR does the same for the GCR (UNHCR 2024a; United Nations Network on Migration 2024).

In the following sections, we discuss the five main challenges to global migration governance we identified through our research.

Governance of Labour Migration: Admission and Ratification

One of the still-underdeveloped areas of the current global migration governance framework is labour migration (Chetail 2019, 401). The rights of migrant workers are set out in two specialised treaties concluded under the auspices of the International Labour Organisation (ILO): the 1949 Migration for Employment Convention, and the 1975 Migrant Workers Convention (ILO Convention C097 1949; ILO Convention C143 1975). While these conventions regulate some aspects of migrant workers' rights in detail, neither contains a duty to admit migrant workers into the territories of their states of destination (Chetail 2019, 202). This is a key substantive lacuna in the global labour migration governance framework. With regard to migrant workers, states enjoy discretion when it comes to their entry and access to the labour market.³ This discretion is not unfettered, in the sense that a state's prerogatives in relation to entry and removal must be exercised in full compliance with its international obligations, which crucially include those under international human rights and refugee law.

In addition to the ILO conventions, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) entered into force in 2003. Like the ILO conventions, the ICRMW does not create a duty of admission for the benefit of migrant workers (Chetail 2019, 227). All three labour migration conventions also suffer from another common problem: low ratification rates (Chetail 2019, 212 and 240–47). They remain persistently unratified by most industrialised states (Chetail 2022, 27), which impacts the effectiveness of these instruments.

Thus, the central challenge facing the global regulation of migrant workers appears to be a complete lack of rules regarding their lawful admission, which is aggravated by a lack of acceptance and implementation of existing international norms at the national level (Chetail 2019, 399).

Governance of Refugees: Access and Responsibility-Sharing

One of the most developed aspects of global migration governance regulates the status and rights of refugees (Micinski 2021, 29). States' obligations towards these persons are set out in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (known as the Refugee Convention) and its 1967 Protocol (Protocol to the Refugee Convention). The convention's major achievements are twofold. First, the international community agreed on a common definition of who qualifies as a refugee (Refugee Convention, Article 1 (A)(2)). Second, the state parties committed to safeguarding an elaborate catalogue of refugee rights, which are incrementally awarded

3 Amuur v. France, European Court of Human Rights 19776/92 (1996), point 41; Nishirmura Ekiu v. United States, 142 US Supreme Court 651 (1892), point 659; Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs v. Khawar, High Court of Australia 14, S128/2001 (2002), point 68.

to the individuals concerned as their ties to their host country tighten (Chetail 2014, 41; see also Battjes 2006, 449).

Among the convention's major omissions is the absence of operational provisions, which results in its limited effectiveness in safeguarding access to protection and establishing equitable responsibility-sharing among states.

Unlike migrant workers, individuals who claim to need international protection must be granted (at least temporary) access to the territories of destination states. Both the Refugee Convention and a multitude of international human rights treaties offer these individuals protection from *refoulement* (Refugee Convention 1951, Article 33 (1)),⁴ which means that such individuals cannot be returned to a place where their life is threatened, or where they face a real risk of being subjected to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, or punishment. In practice, compliance with the principle of non-*refoulement* requires states to assess the protection needs of those who arrive or to establish whether they could be sent to another state where they are not at risk of persecution (Hathaway 2005, 301). Either way, compliance with the principle entails a *de facto* duty to admit those who claim to be refugees (Hathaway 2005, 301).

Individuals who claim to need international protection must be granted (at least temporary) access to the destination states.

This *de facto* duty of admission under the convention, along with numerous other protections for applicants who qualify, applies at the moment these individuals come under the jurisdiction of a destination state, for example when they present themselves at the border or on the territory of a destination state (Crisp 2019). However, the Refugee Convention does not contain any obligation for states to guarantee safe and effective access to their territories. Nor does it include an obligation to ensure effective access to protection in another way (e.g., by granting humanitarian visas). By implementing policies which prevent individuals from ever reaching their territories – so-called non-*entrée* policies – states can thus avoid their obligations under the convention with relative ease (see, e.g., Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016, 4; Crépeau 2018, 30; Spijkerboer 2018; Crisp 2019; Micinski 2021, 9; Ardalan 2025, 23). A lack of effective access to protection remains one of the main weaknesses of the contemporary international refugee regime.

A second operational problem with this framework is that the Refugee Convention fails to provide a mechanism to ensure the fair sharing of protection responsibilities between states (Hathaway 2018, 30; Micinski 2021, 8–9). On this issue, the convention's preamble merely states the need for “international cooperation” (Preamble to the Refugee Convention 1951, Paragraph 4). This failure is aggravated by the above-mentioned non-*entrée* policies of destination states; as a result, states in the Global

4 See Refugee Convention, Article 33 (1). Despite not being explicitly included in several general international human rights-law treaties, international judicial bodies generally recognise the prohibition as falling under the more general prohibition against inhuman or degrading treatment: see ICCPR, Article 7; UN Human Rights Committee (1992), Paragraph 9; UN Human Rights Committee (2018); European Convention on Human Rights (1950); *Soering v. the United Kingdom*, European Court of Human Rights 14038/88 (1989), points 87–88.

South – which are both relatively poorer and in closer proximity to most of the world's armed conflicts – continue to host the great majority of refugees (Doyle 2019, 30).

UN Global Compacts: Non-Binding Commitments

One evident, fundamental challenge for the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees is the fact that they are non-binding (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 7; UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraph 4). These compacts, especially the Migration Compact, contain elements that, if properly implemented, could help the international community to overcome some of the entrenched challenges to migration governance discussed above. An obvious example is GCM Objective 5, which reads as follows:

“[W]e commit to adapt options and pathways for regular migration in a manner that facilitates labour mobility and decent work reflecting demographic and labour market realities, optimizes education opportunities, upholds the right to family life, and responds to the needs of migrants in a situation of vulnerability, with a view to expanding and diversifying availability of pathways for safe, orderly and regular migration.” (UN General Assembly 2018a, Objective 5)

As we have already mentioned, one of the current framework's substantive lacunae is the lack of entry rights for migrant workers. Despite significant labour market needs in many industrialised countries – a shortage coupled with rapidly ageing populations – it remains incredibly difficult for migrants to access these labour markets, even if only temporarily (Chetail 2019, 227). Even in the EU, which has developed an elaborate legislative framework in certain areas related to migration and asylum, member states have retained the full right to determine admission volumes for

The EU's policy on legal migration remains the least developed aspect of its harmonised regulatory framework on migration.

the legal immigration of third-country nationals for labour purposes (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union 2012, Article 79 (5)). The EU's policy on legal migration remains the least developed aspect of its harmonised regulatory framework on migration (Tsourdi and De Buycker 2022, 8).

While GCM Objective 5 is clearly a response to the challenge of minimal access to labour mobility opportunities, the non-binding nature of the compacts means that, while in some ways they push the boundaries of existing legally binding frameworks, their substance is aspirational, and thus largely symbolic. Of course, this greatly limits the potential impact of the compacts and makes their ability to create safe, orderly, and regular migration pathways for migrants around the world entirely dependent on political will in the respective destination states. Rising anti-immigrant sentiment in many countries, especially those that are popular destination countries for labour migrants (Ruhs 2019, 57),

means that the potential impact of these compacts is likely limited; this undermines their effectiveness and robustness (Interview 13).

UN Global Compacts: No Accountability Mechanism

One way that the challenges resulting from this non-binding arrangement could be overcome (at least in part) would be to implement an effective accountability mechanism in the context of the compacts' operationalisation. Both Global Compacts include explicit sections devoted to follow-up and review (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraphs 48–54; UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraphs 101–107; see also Ferris and Donato 2019). Rather than setting out an elaborate accountability framework, however, these sections are largely devoted to the establishment of two institutional forums: the IMRF and the GRF. As we touched on above, states and other stakeholders meet at these events to discuss developments and challenges in the areas of migration and refugee policy. Yet these forums in no way operate as any kind of formal periodical review of the progress states have made in implementing the compacts (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 6, and 12). For states, these forums provide a platform where they can discuss and advertise the actions they have taken since the last forum. However, they do not need to account for what they have failed to do, nor are they pressed to follow up on promises or pledges made during a previous iteration of the respective forum (Interviews 3, 4, 6, and 12).

In the context of the compacts, follow-up and review occur almost entirely by means of self-reporting (UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraph 101; Interviews 1 and 2). From an accountability perspective, such a mechanism entails obvious challenges. The stakeholders interviewed for this report stated that self-reporting works somewhat better in the GCR context, in the sense that more stakeholders provide reports (Interviews 1 and 2). They consider this to be the case in part because both UNHCR and civil society organisations (CSOs) have institutionalised regular outreach campaigns reminding stakeholders to report (Interviews 1 and 2). In the context of the GCM, however, they generally consider accountability non-existent (Interviews 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7). This lack of effective accountability avenues is intentional, especially with regard to the GCM. One interviewee who attended the GCM negotiations explained: “they [states] did not even want to see the word accountability in the text. [...] I believe that if there had been a strong push for accountability, the whole thing would have collapsed” (Interview 4). This inability to hold states and other stakeholders accountable for their commitments undermines the democratic credentials of the compacts.

This inability to hold states accountable for their commitments undermines the democratic credentials of the UN Global Compacts.

Diminishing Funds for Multilateral Migration and Refugee Cooperation

In early 2025, the second Trump administration issued a wave of executive orders (Gómez and Bryson 2025), including the announcement that the US would halt virtually all of its foreign and humanitarian aid programmes (Bruce 2025; The Guardian 2025). These unprecedented funding cuts are expected to significantly undermine the international community's ability to effectively address migration and displacement, whether through the Global Compacts or otherwise (UN General Assembly 2018a; Interview 15). As a direct result, UN offices and agencies working on these issues have already had to downsize significantly (Blackburn 2025; Farge 2025a). For example, important elements of Brazil's responses to the Venezuelan crisis, operationalised through UNHCR and CSOs, will be compelled to shut down due to the cuts to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID; participant observation in Boa Vista and Pacaraima 2025). One interviewee even went so far as to say: "I think UNHCR will cease to exist [...]. I think it's the end" (Interview 15). Many CSOs are facing a similar struggle for survival (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 7, 12, and 15). Responding to the US announcement, Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said it "will affect our operations, the size of our organization, and, most worryingly, the very people we are called to protect" (Mersie 2025). He also warned: "[s]lashing aid will make the world less safe, driving more desperate people to become refugees or keep moving onwards" (Grandi 2025).

There is a broad trend of major actors retreating from multilateral migration and refugee cooperation.

While the 2025 US funding cuts stand out for their particular severity, they nevertheless reflect a broader trend of major actors retreating from multilateral migration and refugee cooperation (Interviews 5 and 7). Discussing this trend, one interviewee remarked: "in the not-so-distant past, say 10 years ago, we would have turned to our European partners in particular [...].

We can no longer do that" (Interview 7). This growing disengagement, and the depletion of funding that commonly accompanies it, threatens not only the operational capacity of international organisations, recipient states, and CSOs to deliver support on the ground, but also the institutional side of the global migration governance framework. Several interviewees expressed doubts about the viability of organising key events, such as the 2025 High-Level Officials Meeting (HLOM), which is the main GCR stocktaking event between each GRF (UNHCR 2025a), and the 2026 IMRF (Interviews 2, 3, 7, and 15). Even if these events go ahead, they may suffer from low levels of participation, and some of the major actors may even skip them entirely (Interviews 3 and 7). All of this will further erode the robustness of the compacts and their regularly organised forums.

Major Actors' Positions on the UN Global Compacts

Despite the vastly divergent interests of states and rising anti-immigration sentiment in many parts of the world (see, e.g., BBC News 2016; Brunsden 2017; Parker 2025), international cooperation on migration has steadily increased in recent decades (Micinski 2021, 31–32). Events around the globe, especially the displacement of more than one million Syrians in the 2010s, led to renewed momentum towards reforming global migration governance (Micinski 2021, 37–46). This impetus for reform initially led to the UNGA's unanimous adoption of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants in 2016 (UN General Assembly 2016). While this agreement added nothing new in substance, the unanimity demonstrated the international community's widespread reaffirmation of existing migrant and refugee rights.

Additionally, the New York Declaration launched the process that eventually resulted in an even more comprehensive reform of the global migration governance framework, namely the GCM and GCR negotiations. The adoption of the compacts in 2018 was celebrated as a victory for multilateralism in the areas of migration and refugee cooperation (Lajčák 2018; Türk 2019, 30; see also United Nations 2018a; United Nations 2018c). The international community described the occasion as “a historic achievement” (see, e.g., Mixed Migration Centre 2018; Grandi 2019, 57) and called for further international cooperation “based on a collective realization that no single government can effectively govern migration alone” (United Nations Network on Migration 2021). The international community hoped that the compacts would help to overcome some of the global migration governance framework's entrenched challenges (see, e.g., Lajčák 2018; Türk 2019; Grandi 2025) and could perhaps even function as a stepping stone towards future binding arrangements on migration (Interviews 4 and 15).

While the compacts were lauded in official statements, behind the scenes, the initial sense of optimism had faded significantly during the final months of the negotiations, by which point large fissures between states had begun to emerge. The US dealt the initial blow by announcing in December 2018 that it would withdraw from the GCM process (Haley 2017; Tillerson 2017). Soon after this, it was also one of only two states (the other was Hungary) to vote against the adoption of the GCR – with Eritrea, Liberia, and Libya abstaining (United Nations 2018b). Several other states soon followed the American example (see, e.g., Melin 2019, 21; Interviews 8 and 9). In the end, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Israel, Poland, and the US voted against adopting the GCM, while Algeria, Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, Chile, Italy, Latvia, Libya, Liechtenstein, Romania, Singapore, and Switzerland abstained (UN General Assembly 2018c, 15). Upon taking office in January 2019, President Bolsonaro announced that Brazil would also withdraw from the GCM process (see, e.g., Londoño 2019). However,

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when he was subsequently elected, President Lula da Silva returned Brazil to full participation in January 2023 (see, e.g., International Organization for Migration 2023).

Table 1 maps major actors’ positions on both the negotiation and the present-day implementation of these compacts, focusing on the key ENSURED concepts of robustness, effectiveness, and democracy. This provides insight into the areas in which states’ positions on the compacts diverge, while also highlighting areas of consensus. In turn, this analysis points to areas where we may find room not only for potential reform, but also for actors to pursue alternative avenues to achieve their goals in migration governance. Table 1 does not address the issue of governance autonomy (Choi et al. 2024, 15–16) because, as mentioned above, the UN Global Compacts are merely cooperative frameworks; they do not have their own budgets, but are instead financed entirely by means of voluntary stakeholder pledges.

Table 1 includes the positions of major states as well as organisations made up of multiple states (most prominently the EU). The civil society sample is made up of major CSOs based in Geneva and Brussels involved in the negotiation and implementation of the compacts, as well as academic experts. Finally, many of the insights on Brazil’s positions in particular are based on seven background interviews with national decision-makers and academic analysts, as well as participant observation of the migrant-processing infrastructure (Operação Acolhida) in Boa Vista and Pacaraima on the Brazil–Venezuela border in May 2025.

Table 1: Actors’ Positions on the UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees

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Indicator		Positions
United States		
Robustness	Institutional stability	Traditionally, one of the largest donors to the global migration governance framework (International Organization for Migration 2025a; UNHCR Global Focus 2025; see also US Department of State 2023), although recently significant cuts have been announced (see, e.g., UN General Assembly 2018a; Farge 2025b; Grandi 2025; Interviews 1, 2, and 7).
	Rule stability	Not a party to most of the binding treaties underpinning the compacts; ⁵ formally withdrew from GCM negotiations and voted against GCR adoption in 2018 (Haley 2017; Tillerson 2017; Micinski 2021, 93), although the Biden administration retroactively supported the GCM in 2021 (United States of America 2021; US Department of State 2023). The current administration is expected to revert to its previous course on this issue.

5 International Labour Organization (1949), (1975); ICRMW (2003); UNHCR (2015).

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Effectiveness	Policy output	The Biden administration adopted several policies corresponding to numerous GCM and GCR objectives (see, e.g., Center for Migration Studies of New York 2024; Frouws 2024). Under this administration, 22 US-state leaders adopted the non-binding Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection in June 2022, which seeks to foster cooperation on migration in that part of the world, “advanc[ing] the vision set forth in the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)” (UNHCR 2022).
	Outcome	No evidence to suggest that the Global Compacts have had any direct influence on US migration policy (Interview 6).
	Impact	A mixed bag (Center for Migration Studies of New York 2024; see also Martín Gil 2025, 23), with potential efforts to realise the compacts’ objectives seemingly undermined by the simultaneous imposition of restrictive policies at the US–Mexico border (Martín Gil and Norman 2023). Additionally, the second Trump administration has undone many of the policies enacted by the Biden administration in implementing compact objectives (Yousif 2025).
Democracy	Participation	Did not participate in the Global Compacts initially (Haley 2017; Tillerson 2017), but has been involved since 2021 (United States of America 2021; Interview 5). The current administration is not expected to participate, although this is difficult to predict.
	Accountability	It is difficult to assess with any clarity how the administration views accountability with regard to the compacts as a whole. No domestic mechanism exists to ensure accountability for compact commitments.
China		
Robustness	Institutional stability	Traditionally kept a low profile with regard to migration (Song 2018, 30; Tan 2017), although it is an increasingly popular transit and destination state (International Organization for Migration 2025b) and is starting to demonstrate growing interest in playing a bigger role in this area (Song 2018, 30; Tan 2017), as also reflected in its increased financial contributions (Song 2018, 30; Tan 2017).
	Rule stability	Not a party to existing treaties on labour migration, ⁶ but is a party to the Refugee Convention and its Protocol (UNHCR 2015); supported the adoption of both compacts (Micinski 2021, 93 and 120).
Effectiveness	Policy output	Government’s official line is that it will gradually implement the compacts (Interview 14), but neither the enhancement of labour mobility opportunities (except for highly skilled migrants; see Centre for China and Globalization 2017) nor access to refugee protection appears to be a priority (Interview 14).
	Outcome/Impact	Both appear to be low priorities; no objective evidence suggests that the compacts have led to changes in policy positions or affected the lives of migrants and refugees in China (Interview 14).
Democracy	Participation	Attended relevant UN meetings on the negotiation and implementation of the compacts (Interview 14).
	Accountability	No clear views on accountability for the compacts as a whole; no domestic mechanism exists to ensure accountability (Interview 14).

6 International Labour Organization (1949), (1975); ICRMW (2003).

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Brazil		
Robustness	Institutional stability	Has made more normative than financial contributions to the relevant frameworks, taking on leadership roles, particularly at the regional level.
	Rule stability	State party to the 1949 ILO Convention ⁷ as well as the Refugee Convention and its Protocol (UNHCR 2015); also an active participant in multilateral migration-related frameworks, particularly at the regional and continental levels. ⁸ Initially supported the adoption of both Global Compacts, although the Bolsonaro administration withdrew from the GCM in 2019 (see, e.g., Londoño 2019); full participant in the GCM again since 2023 (see, e.g., International Organization for Migration 2025a).
Effectiveness	Policy output	Bulk of the compacts' acquis was already reflected in pre-existing regional frameworks, such as the Cartagena Declaration (1984) and its follow-up mechanisms, as well as the Quito Process (2018) and the Brasília Declaration (Cartagena Declaration on Refugees 1984; Brasilia Declaration on the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons in the Americas 2010; Quito Declaration on Human Mobility and Venezuelan Citizens in the Region 2018); also a signatory to the 2022 Los Angeles Declaration; major progressively-oriented migration legislation (e.g., legislation that does not distinguish between documented and undocumented migrants) was implemented in 2017 (Brazil Presidency 2017).
	Outcome	Compacts have served to strengthen previously existing orientations based on regional practice.
	Impact	High priority; compacts strengthened and optimised existing practices, e.g., "interiorization" (ACNUR Brasil, n.d.), which explicitly connects migrant workers with specific demands made by Brazilian employers throughout the country and guarantees workers' rights (see, e.g., Rosati and Lu 2023).
Democracy	Participation	Overall, an active participant in numerous regional arrangements and global initiatives, such as the Global Compacts; views this participation less as progress towards an external goal, and more as a mechanism to reinforce previously existing, independent commitments.
	Accountability	Not central to engagement; in keeping with the government's commitment to Agenda 2030, it outwardly complies with stocktaking and self-reporting norms; internal accountability to affected populations is anchored in domestic mechanisms that largely predate the compacts.
European Union		
Robustness	Institutional stability	Traditionally one of the largest donors to the global migration governance framework (see, e.g., International Organization for Migration 2025a; UNHCR 2025; see also European Union 2023).
	Rule stability	Most member states have not ratified existing treaties on labour migration, ⁹ but all are parties to the Refugee Convention and its Protocol (UNHCR 2015); the EU's ability to speak as a bloc in the context of the compacts and to publicly express support for their implementation was undermined when numerous member states pulled out of GCM negotiations (see, e.g., Melin 2019; Interviews 8 and 9) and one opposed GCR adoption (Micinski 2021, 93).

7 International Labour Organization (1949). However, Brazil is not party to the 1975 ILO Convention or the 2003 ICRMW.

8 At the regional level, for example, Brazil has taken on leadership roles in implementing UNHCR (1984), (2010), (2018).

9 International Labour Organization (1949), (1975); ICRMW (2003).

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Effectiveness	Policy output	While some EU policies (such as the creation of regular protection pathways) correspond to compact objectives, others (such as externalisation efforts through safe third-country mechanisms) seem to undermine them (see, e.g., Carrera and Cortinovis 2019; Gilbert 2021; Easton-Calabria 2021; Jalali 2023).
	Outcome	No evidence that the compacts have had any influence on migration and asylum policies (Interviews 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, and 15).
	Impact	Apparently a conflicting picture; no evidence that EU and/or member-state support for the Global Compacts has enhanced protection for migrants and refugees on the ground; high support for the compacts in normative terms.
Democracy	Participation	Prioritises continued participation (Interviews 9 and 11).
	Accountability	It is difficult to assess with any clarity how the EU and its member states view accountability; overall agreement among the stakeholders interviewed that compact accountability is essentially non-existent (Interviews 4, 8, 10, and 13). ¹⁰
UN Offices and Agencies		
Robustness	Institutional stability	Content with progress in compact implementation overall (Interviews 1, 5, and 7), especially since the transition towards multi-stakeholder pledges (Interviews 1 and 7); recent funding cuts have raised concerns about the continued functionality of the compacts as well as the offices and agencies themselves (Interviews 1 and 5; see also Grandi 2025).
	Rule stability	Express concerns about decreasing support for existing rules and fears that some states are functioning as ‘spoilers’, including those that have traditionally supported multilateralism, pulling back (Interviews 3 and 7). Relevant offices and agencies do not favour any potential reopening of negotiations on either the compacts or existing binding standards (Interviews 1, 5, and 7).
Effectiveness	Policy output	Agree that the compacts have (indirectly) improved policies around the globe, yet acknowledge a lack of tangible evidence to prove this; attribute this partly to the relative newness of the compacts (Interview 1).
	Outcome	Agree that the compacts are insufficiently socialised and have not yet had a direct impact on international and/or domestic migration-related policies (especially in the Global North) (Interviews 5 and 7); pledge-making processes (UNHCR 2024a; United Nations Network on Migration 2024) and the creation of regular platforms for discussion (Interviews 1 and 5) constitute the compacts’ main contribution.
	Impact	High priority.
Democracy	Participation	Involved in the negotiation and implementation of the compacts from the very beginning; ¹¹ played a lesser role in the GCM context (Interview 3; see also Rajah and Frouws 2024). ¹²
	Accountability	Critical of the lack of compact accountability (Interviews 5 and 7), while acknowledging that the compacts were designed in this way (Interview 1); point to

¹⁰ Aside from the current system of internal stocktaking and self-reporting.

¹¹ UNHCR led the GCR negotiations. The agency regards itself, and is also regarded by the international community, as the coordinator of both the compact and the GRF.

¹² The IOM does not play an equivalent role in the GCM and the IMRF to that of UNHCR in the GCR and the GRF. As with the negotiations that led to the GCM, its operation remains much more state-led.

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		internal stocktaking, outreach campaigns (Interviews 1 and 7), and Indicator Reports as positive developments (UN Network on Migration n.d.; see also UNHCR 2022). ¹³
CSO Sample		
Robustness	Institutional stability	Among the stakeholders making pledges (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 15; UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraph 3; Interviews 2 and 15); greatly concerned about funding cuts (Interviews 2, 6, and 12); stress the need for transparency in any effort to re-evaluate or delete pledges (Interviews 2, 7, and 12).
	Rule stability	Generally content with the texts of the compacts (Interviews 2, 4, 6, and 12); attribute limited compact implementation to current lack of political ambition (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 6, and 12).
Effectiveness	Policy output/ Outcome	Express doubts about direct impact of the compacts on migration policies around the globe (Interviews 2, 4, 6, 12, and 15); view the compacts predominantly as a common starting point for (bilateral) negotiations between states (Interviews 2, 4, 6, 12, and 15).
	Impact	High priority.
Democracy	Participation	Consistently attended meetings on compact negotiation and implementation; prioritise continued participation in such forums (Interviews 2, 4, 6, and 12); indicate a significant decrease in their own levels of influence and access in recent years (Interviews 2, 4, and 12).
	Accountability	Agree that compact accountability is largely non-existent (Interviews 2, 4, and 6), while acknowledging that the compacts were designed in this way (Interviews 3, 4, and 12); favour any potential reforms to enhance accountability, but worry about the political feasibility of such efforts (Interviews 4 and 12).

The UN Global Compacts were negotiated at a time when the political appetite for multilateralism in migration and refugee policy was at a peak among all the main actors (Interviews 3, 4, 5, and 7). However, by the end of the negotiation process, and especially as implementation began, the positions held by several of the main government actors had started to shift (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 15). While the actors were broadly content with the text of the compacts, they nevertheless perceived some parts of the GCM as surprisingly progressive and ambitious, including its objectives related to labour mobility opportunities and its recognition of the effects of natural disasters, climate change, and environmental degradation on migration movements (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, and 15). This led to political rifts, with key stakeholders refusing to support the compact. Overall, the main stakeholders interviewed for this report, both governmental and non-governmental, recognise that the actual on-the-ground uptake and impact of the compacts remains limited and is not easily identifiable (Interviews 1, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 13; see also UNHCR 2024a; United Nations Network on Migration 2024).

¹³ These reports include indicators for each compact objective that can help to measure compact implementation.

Achievements, Reform, and Alternative Avenues

Despite obstacles to achieving the implementation of their objectives, the compacts are far from insignificant (see also Gammeltoft-Hansen et al. 2017; Guild and Grant 2017; Allison et al. 2019; Melin 2019). On the contrary, the major actors involved in implementation generally express contentment with the substance of the compacts. While improvements are always possible (Interviews 2, 5, and 7), the compacts have succeeded in bringing together and reaffirming, albeit in a non-binding arrangement, a wide array of existing agreements on migration and refugees, which is no small achievement given the contemporary political climate (UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraphs 2 and 5; see also Chetail 2019, 336–39; Chimni 2019, 30; Hathaway 2018). As other observers have rightly remarked: “[o]n a sensitive and polarised topic like migration, the alternative was not between a binding instrument and a non-binding instrument, but between a non-binding instrument and no instrument at all” (Chetail 2020, 16).

The UN Global Compacts have succeeded in reaffirming a wide array of existing agreements on migration and refugees.

Of the two compacts, our interviewees see the GCM in particular as having “huge potential” (Interview 3; see also Interviews 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 15). They praise the Migration Compact for its broad thematic scope, which covers migration in all its forms and along the entire migratory journey (that is from pre-departure, to transit, to destination, to potential return) (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 4). In addition, the Migration Compact introduced innovative elements that, in some cases, go beyond what existing (binding) frameworks provide, such as its objectives related to labour mobility opportunities and its recognition of the effects of natural disasters, climate change, and environmental degradation on migration movements (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, and 15). The GCR is somewhat less ambitious in this sense. Substantively, the Refugee Compact’s most innovative elements are its objectives related to operationalising the principles of global refugee responsibility-sharing (UN General Assembly, 2018b, Chap. A).

While this represents a crucial addition to the Refugee Convention and its Protocol, the GCR’s political and aspirational nature means that it includes very few concrete measures that can be implemented on the ground to enhance global solidarity (Chetail 2019, 336–39). Even on this point, the commitments are so minimal that some commentators have labelled the GCR a “global cop-out on refugees” (Hathaway 2018). In light of the challenges facing the international refugee framework (as outlined above), the Refugee Compact also fails to push existing boundaries when it comes to ensuring effective access to protection (Interviews 5, 7, 2, 4, and 15). Although CSOs pushed for the inclusion of such commitments during the negotiations, none were included in the final text of the compact (Interview 15). Instead, some of the stakeholders we interviewed think that other elements included in the compact, such as refugee inclusion or localisation

policies (strengthening cooperation with and between local actors on the ground), have ‘distracted’ the international community from discussing more fundamental questions around access to protection (Interviews 2 and 15).

Both major governmental and non-governmental stakeholders consider the establishment of regularly organised platforms to facilitate discussion on migration and refugee policies, such as the IMRF and the GRF, a valuable innovation (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 14). While similar forums had taken place before the compacts came into existence, such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development, these were not organised under the UN umbrella, nor were they devoted specifically to migration and refugee policies (Interviews 3 and 12). Akin to the compacts themselves (UN General Assembly 2018a, Paragraph 15; UN General Assembly 2018b, Paragraph 3), the IMRF and the GRF follow a ‘whole of society’ approach, which means that invitations are extended not just to states, but to all relevant stakeholders, including civil society actors and academics, as well as migrants and refugees themselves. The regular organisation events that provide a space for discussion among these diverse actors can be said to positively impact the Global Compacts’ democratic credentials. While some interviewees criticised certain institutional aspects of the compacts, such as the lack of a clear accountability function for the events (Interviews 5 and 7), major stakeholders see intrinsic value in having spaces to meet and discuss, and they prioritise continued participation in these events (Interviews 2, 9, 11, and 12).

Beyond providing a platform for dialogue, the IMRF, and the GRF also serve as primary venues for stakeholders to make pledges. Although imperfect, interviewees stated that the pledging mechanism is working well, especially since multi-stakeholder pledges were introduced in 2023 (UNHCR 2024b; see also Interviews 1, 3, and 7). A considerable number of pledges have been made, especially at the GCR (UNHCR 2024). Yet accumulating pledges will only get the frameworks so far (Rajah and Frouws 2024). Regrettably, the actual fulfilment of compact pledges remains limited. At the time of writing, only 598 of the 3,430 registered

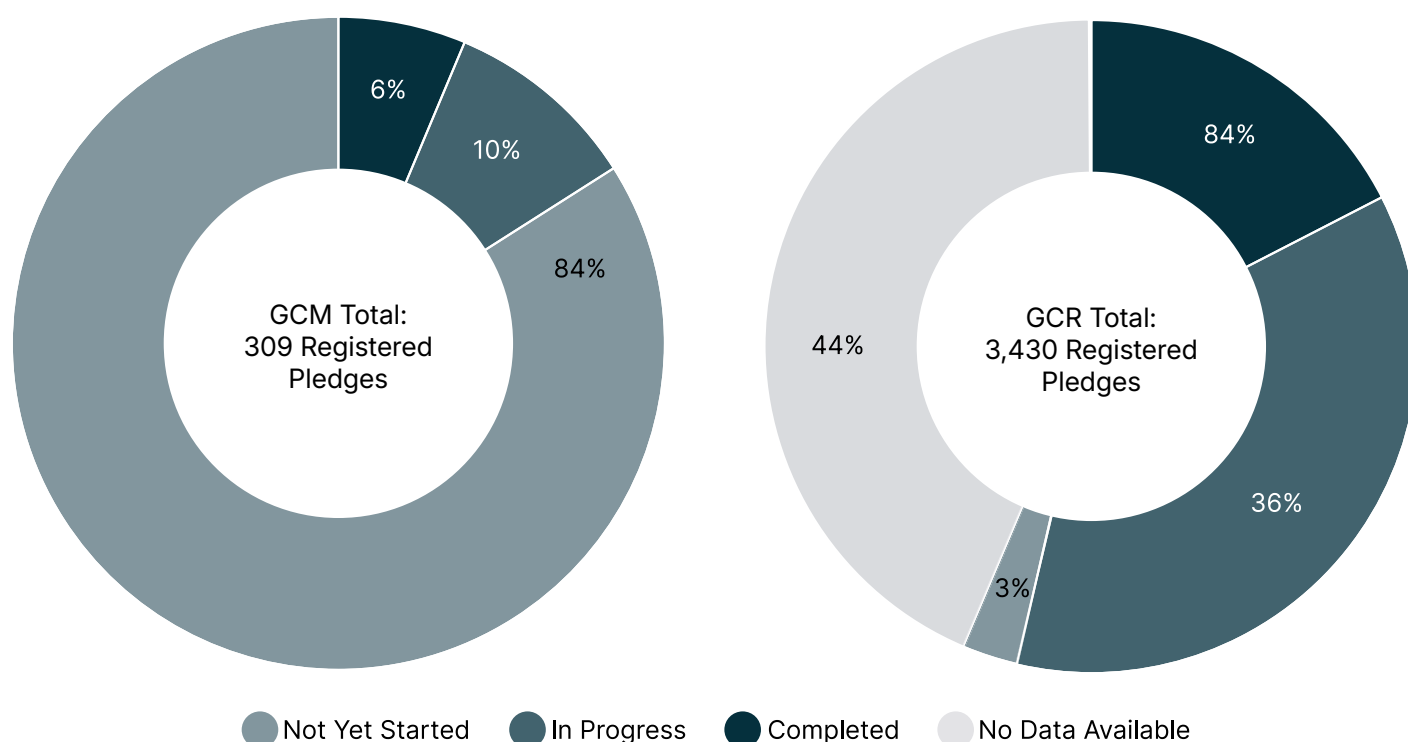
GCR pledges (~17 percent) and just 17 of the 309 registered GCM pledges (~6 percent) are listed as completed (see Fig. 1; data from UNHCR 2024a; United Nations Network on Migration 2024).

The 2025 US funding cuts raise concerns about the feasibility of pledges made during the most recent IMRF and GRF.

Additionally, the 2025 US funding cuts raise concerns about the feasibility of pledges made during the most recent IMRF and GRF (Interviews 2, 5, 7, and 12). While the announced cuts may make it genuinely impossible

for some stakeholders to live up to their prior commitments, CSOs warn that certain actors might also use the cuts as an excuse to step back from their pledges. Although some re-evaluation and potentially even deletion of previously made pledges may be necessary, civil society actors stress that such processes should not be left to states or to UN actors alone – it should be transparent and take place in good faith (Interviews 2, 7, and 12).

Figure 1: Implementation Status of Registered GCM & GCR Pledges



Future Prospects of the UN Global Compacts: Reforming a Reform?

The most direct, albeit politically ambitious way to address the challenges facing the global migration governance system would be to launch yet another far-reaching, legally binding reform process that would go well beyond what the compacts introduced in 2018. In theory, such a process could involve the adoption of a first-ever legally binding international agreement regulating all facets and types of migration, for which the GCM could be used as a source of inspiration (Interviews 4 and 15). Equally, states could decide to launch a far-reaching reform exercise in the refugee domain. This could involve either reopening the 1951 Refugee Convention framework to introduce more operational provisions, including binding arrangements on access to protection and global responsibility-sharing, or adopting a separate legal instrument specifically geared towards addressing these aspects. Such an approach would improve effectiveness across the board. A legally binding treaty would constitute a policy output and would provide the basis, at least in its design, for increased rule adherence and impact. It would also have a positive effect on robustness, both in terms of rule stability and, very likely, the availability of financial resources, given that the content of the envisaged treaty would include responsibility-sharing.

Yet none of the above ideas for reform are currently backed by major stakeholders and so they appear politically unrealistic. Many of the stakeholders we interviewed, as well as other commentators, fear that

reopening existing frameworks – the Refugee Convention, for example – would result in new agreements that are more restrictive than protective (Interviews 5 and 9; Ionta 2025; The European Correspondant 2025). This means that instead of targeting areas that remain outside the existing regulatory framework, such as responsibility-sharing, some stakeholders might prefer to curtail refugee rights and related state obligations. This potential unlocking of Pandora’s box is why several of the actors we interviewed remain firmly opposed to any initiatives aimed at amending the existing instruments (Interviews 1, 5, and 7).

For similar reasons, a radical redrafting of the UN Global Compacts is equally unlikely. Most stakeholders are already quite satisfied with the content of the compacts, particularly the GCM (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 15). As one interviewee put it: “in the Global Compact [GCM], you have everything” (Interview 4). This view of the compacts’

Targeted improvements to the
UN Global Compacts could boost
accountability and, in turn, their
democratic character.

substance is widely held, and so most stakeholders would also question the added value of reopening these negotiations. As another interviewee warned: “we [the international community] do not need to keep reinventing the wheel” (Interview 5).

Nevertheless, based on our findings, we argue that targeted improvements to the compacts – especially when it comes to their institutional aspects – could be considered in an effort to boost accountability and, in turn, their democratic character and, likely, their effectiveness. Enhanced accountability could be introduced without the need to reopen negotiations on the compacts as a whole. For example, in collaboration with the UNGA Secretariat, the yet-to-be-announced co-facilitators of the 2026 IMRF could put forward a draft modalities resolution to push for much more elaborate accountability mechanisms (Interview 5; for an example of such a resolution, see UN General Assembly 2019). As one interviewee suggested, this resolution would be introduced by the co-facilitators, meaning two member-state representatives: “it was Mexico and Switzerland when the GCM was being negotiated, but in this case, it would be representatives of two other member states who would take the lead. Together with the Secretariat, a draft resolution will then be prepared. Now that draft can start with a more robust accountability mechanism. It may not fly, but they could try” (Interview 5).

It is difficult to predict exactly what such a mechanism would consist of, as this would ultimately depend on what the Secretariat and co-facilitators deem appropriate and, perhaps more importantly, politically feasible. From an accountability perspective, an ideal scenario could be the creation of a reporting mechanism similar to those commonly applied in the context of binding international arrangements (e.g., the systems of state reporting used in the contexts of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; see ICCPR, Article 40; CEDAW, Article 18). At present, however, it is entirely unclear who stakeholders would report to under the framework of such a mechanism. Considering their roles and areas of expertise, the IOM or UNHCR could potentially take on this responsibility. However, the compacts do not foresee this type of system.

Although the creation of an enhanced accountability mechanism through the adoption of a modalities resolution would avoid revisiting the text of the compacts as a whole, such a proposal is also unlikely to be adopted, or even proposed, in the current political climate (Interviews 4 and 5).

Reforming the UN System or Pursuing Priorities Elsewhere?

Recent developments (most notably US funding cuts) suggest that the international community will move in a direction that is more inward-looking and less internationally focused, with less regard for migrant rights. While it is impossible to predict precisely what will happen, two alternative avenues to the current system of international migration and refugee cooperation appear to be gaining traction.

First, a comprehensive reform of the existing global migration governance framework is a prospect. The currently unfolding funding crisis could prompt the UN to adopt several structural changes to its current operations (UN General Assembly 2018a). According to a recently leaked internal note from the UN80 Task Force (see United Nations 2025), one of the changes under consideration involves merging various UN offices and agencies working on humanitarian issues, including UNHCR and the IOM, into a single entity (UN General Assembly 2018a). This proposed merger would likely have two major consequences.

For one, the creation of a single UN humanitarian body would likely result in the further integration of migration management priorities into other policy areas, as we have seen happen with many regional- and national-level developments in the Global North (Tsourdi and Zardo 2025, 23; Martín Gil, 2025). Increased policy linkages would likely emerge between migration and refugee policies on the one hand, and development, humanitarian aid, and perhaps even trade, climate change, and security on the other.¹⁴ From the perspective of migrants and refugees, such a development raises concerns, as this puts their rights and needs at risk of being viewed as just one among many competing priorities (see also Grundler and Guild 2023). The second likely consequence would be an overall decline in international attention to specific migration-related challenges (Interview 15).

A comprehensive reform of the existing global migration governance framework is a prospect.

Overall, such a restructuring of UN mechanisms for migration and refugee cooperation raises concerns about the international community's continued ability and willingness to address migration and displacement, whether through the Global Compacts or otherwise (UN General Assembly 2018a; Interview 15). Such a merger would aim to generate economies of scale in times of financial scarcity. Nevertheless, the deprioritisation of migration in this way would likely render migration governance less robust, divert

¹⁴ For practical examples of cooperation frameworks between the EU and third countries which link disparate policy areas, see, e.g., European Commission (2023), (2024b).

financial resources elsewhere, and minimise the autonomy of the migration-related bodies that would be subsumed into an overarching entity.

A second alternative is for migration and refugee cooperation to occur entirely outside the UN framework.

The second alternative avenue, beyond any reform of the current UN system, is for migration and refugee cooperation to occur entirely outside the UN framework. Aware of the current challenges at the global level, many states and regional actors are pursuing their migration-related objectives through more flexible arrangements, either via coalitions of the willing, a phenomenon scholars often describe as ‘minilateralism’ (see, e.g., Patrick 2015; Smith, Fray, and Russell 2023; Heiduk and Wilkins 2024, 78; Panda and Park 2024, 78), or purely bilateral action. States and regional blocs such as the EU are increasingly taking migration and refugee matters into their own hands, forging ad hoc partnerships that bypass the complicated dynamics of global migration governance (see, e.g., Rosati and Lu 2023; Ardalan 2025; Martín Gil 2025; Tsourdi and Zardo 2025; Tubakovic and Nethery 2025, 23).

One example of this is the evolving relationship between the US, Mexico, and several Central American states. Although US development aid to this region dates back to the 1950s, it was not until the 1980s that aid was tied to the prevention of immigration destined for the US (see Reagan 1984; Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016, 199). From the 1990s onwards, the US began to make its development assistance explicitly conditional on the recipients’ willingness to cooperate on migration control (Martín Gil 2025, 152; see also Associated Press 1995).¹⁵ Since then, all subsequent administrations have pursued numerous such arrangements, both cooperative and coercive – such as the threat of tariffs – (Martín Gil 2025, 153–57; Swanson 2019) to outsource US migration-control priorities and obligations to these states (see Frelick, Kysel, and Podkul 2016, 199–203; Ardalan 2025; Martín Gil 2025).

A particularly prominent example of such an arrangement was the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP), colloquially known as the ‘Remain in Mexico’ policy, implemented by the Trump administration in January 2019 (Human Rights Watch n.d.). Under the MPP, in exchange for a US \$10 billion development plan for Mexico and Central America, Mexico agreed to accept the return of asylum seekers from the US, requiring them to remain in Mexico until their US immigration court hearing had been set (Martín Gil 2025). Even after the MPP was announced, the number of Mexican and Central American migrants arriving in the US continued to increase. Under the threat of imposing a 25 percent tariff on all Mexican imports (Swanson 2019), Mexico agreed to US demands to further intensify its border-control operations, including deploying the Mexican national guard, by signing the US–Mexico Joint Declaration in June 2019 (United States and Mexico 2019). Although the MPP was formally terminated in August 2022 (Department of Homeland Security 2021), the US tendency to push for informal arrangements with Mexico and other Central American states

¹⁵ The first such instance was when the Clinton administration offered Mexico US \$40 billion in loan guarantees to address its financial woes and to prevent increased immigration towards the US as a consequence.

persists (Ardalan 2025; Martín Gil 2025). Crucially, such agreements with ‘willing’ states are entirely negotiated and operationalised outside the UN migration framework.

Another example of this independent trend in migration cooperation is Australia’s long-standing use of bilateral agreements with neighbouring Pacific Island states to achieve its migration-control objectives (Tubakovic and Nethery 2025, 126). Dating back to 2001, Australia has pursued a policy known as the ‘Pacific Solution,’ later renamed ‘Offshore Processing’ (Crisp 2019; Refugee Council of Australia n.d.-a; see also Provera 2013, 117–20). This policy involves intercepting asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat and subsequently transferring them to detention facilities in Nauru and Papua New Guinea (Gleeson and Yacoub 2021, 11). While these arrangements are confidential (Australian Parliament, Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 2023; Refugee Council of Australia n.d.-b), in return for significant financial support – estimated at AUS \$12 billion to support just 4,194 detainees between 2012 and 2023 (Refugee Council of Australia 2023) – these island states have agreed to host Australian-operated detention centres on their territory. While the Australian government funds these operations, their day-to-day administration and management has been entirely outsourced to private corporations (Tubakovic and Nethery 2025, 122).

Similar to the US arrangements with Mexico and other Central American states discussed above, the Australian Offshore Processing policy represents a form of migration externalisation under which third parties are made responsible for asylum processing and border control (Crisp 2019). Both examples also reflect the growing preference for informal, minilateral, or perhaps even entirely bilateral arrangements. These arrangements allow (usually) richer and more powerful states to avoid their international obligations while controlling their frontiers from locations well beyond their own territorial borders. The same trend also prevails in the case of the EU, as we will see in the next section.

Minilateralism and bilateralism in migration governance signal a move away from international cooperation. These moves further weaken global migration governance in terms of both its effectiveness and its robustness. Political focus, and consequently financial and human resources, are diverted instead towards regional or bilateral cooperation efforts. Such ‘minilateral’ or bilateral cooperation frameworks are (most often temporarily) robust in the sense that they are underpinned by significant financial investment and other benefits, which serve as the main motivation for states to cooperate. However, such efforts are unlikely to be sustainable in the long-term. They are not underpinned by permanent commitments or structures, and they tend to be ad hoc and volatile, shifting with the political priorities of the various actors involved.

Minilateralism and bilateralism in migration governance signal a move away from international cooperation.

The EU's Role in Global Migration Governance

The EU is one of the largest global migration governance donors. It was very active in negotiating the compacts, but, as we outlined above, political rifts among member states eventually diminished its ability to speak as a bloc within the compact framework. As a result, the EU is generally unable to refer to the compacts in its policies or its legislation (Interviews 8, 9, and 13), making only exceptional indirect references.¹⁶

Within EU institutions, the compacts also do not receive much attention (Interviews 8, 9, 10, 13, and 15). This seems equally true for most member states; only a few have publicly available national strategies on implementing the Global Compacts (see, e.g., Portuguese Council of Ministers 2019). One interviewee expressed doubt over whether EU policies “would have been significantly different if the compacts had not existed” (Interview 8).

The compacts are principally, if not exclusively, referred to when the EU and/or its member states are acting externally (Interviews 8, 9, and 11) – for example, as a common starting point in bilateral cooperation with third countries (see, e.g., Samoa Agreement, Article 63). Interviewees from EU institutions mentioned that the compacts “can be used to build more concrete binding agreements with third countries on legal migration, readmission on return, border management, human rights” (Interview 8).

The EU still considers its participation in the multi-annual Global Compact forums to be politically salient. The EU as a whole and most of its individual member states have consistently attended meetings on the implementation of the Global Compacts (Interviews 9 and 11).¹⁷ Our interviewees emphasised that the compact forums allow them to make their voices heard: “we can influence things. We can have the conversation, and that’s very important” (Interview 9). Moreover, they stated: “we now can have

a reference to a globally agreed framework, which helps us. [...] Because I explained to everybody here [in Brussels] that the Global Compact is a framework that the Global South understands, and it’s important for them” (Interview 9).

However, the EU’s ability to meaningfully participate in the implementation of the Global Compacts is undermined by the fact that not all member states have signed up to them (see, e.g., Melin 2019; Interviews 8 and 9). In the labour migration context, this is exacerbated by the EU’s limited competences (Interviews 8, 11, and

Within EU institutions, the UN
Global Compacts do not receive
much attention.

¹⁶ One example is the use of compact-inspired language: see, e.g., Partnership Agreement (2023) (the Samoa Agreement), Article 63, which uses the phrasing: “safe, orderly and regular migration and mobility.”

¹⁷ Given that the EU is not a member of the UN, special arrangements were made to allow for its involvement. See UN General Assembly (2017).

13), notably in regulating admission volumes of labour migrant workers – a responsibility which rests exclusively on member states (Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union 2012, Article 79 (5)).

As a result, despite their ongoing normative commitment to multilateralism, the EU and its member states are not concretely pursuing migration-related cooperation with third countries within the implementation framework of the Global Compacts. Instead, they are doing so at the minilateral level, most often via soft – that is, non-legally binding – cooperation frameworks. In the field of labour migration, individual member states are very often pursuing migration cooperation with third countries bilaterally. Within these cooperation frameworks, the EU is leveraging several incentives, such as visa facilitation, trade benefits, or development funding, making these conditional on cooperation with migration-management objectives.

The EU is not pursuing migration-related cooperation with third countries within the Global Compacts.

More recently, the EU has started striking partnerships with third countries, underpinned by ‘the whole of government’ approach (Tsourdi and Zardo 2025, 8), which involves multiple government departments and agencies collaborating to address complex policy issues. In the EU–third country cooperation context, this involves linking disparate policy areas – including macroeconomic stability, digital transition, environmental transition, trade, security, and migration management – while also including various sources of funding and multiple public and private stakeholders (Tsourdi and Zardo 2025, 8). Within such recent cooperation frameworks with Egypt (European Commission 2024b) and Lebanon (European Commission 2023), curbing migration is a greater priority than enabling labour mobility or creating legal pathways to access protection.

The EU has made some policy innovations that could enhance access to protection and labour mobility opportunities through its New Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2020; see also Tsourdi, Neidhardt, and Hahn 2024). This has led to the adoption of a number of legally binding instruments as well as relevant soft law outputs, such as recommendations and communications.

The first innovation under this framework is the adoption of a Resettlement and Humanitarian Admission Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2024/1350), which is a legally binding instrument. This regulation foresees a structured planning process and establishes common rules on admission and the type of status to be granted to resettled persons. However, it neither creates a subjective right to apply for admission, nor establishes binding resettlement targets or a structured dialogue-and-partnership framework with third countries. So far, resettlement remains modest, with 13,790 persons resettled to EU member states in 2024. This number represents a small drop of 1.7 percent compared with 2023, when 14,035 persons were resettled (EUROSTAT n.d.). Furthermore, very few member states participate in resettlement efforts. Germany had the highest number in 2024 (5,720, 41.5 percent of the EU total), ahead of France (2,370, 17.2 percent) and Italy (1,735, 12.6 percent), which together account for more than 70 percent of all refugees resettled in the EU (EUROSTAT n.d.).

Talent Partnerships could offer an opportunity for holistic cooperation with third countries, including co-development.

The second innovation under this pact is the Talent Partnership policy framing. These are soft, non-legally binding cooperation frameworks that aim to bring together third countries, the EU, interested member states, and the private sector to facilitate legal mobility opportunities beyond the domain of international protection (European Commission 2022). Other than generating mobility opportunities for persons to enter the EU for work, study, or training, Talent Partnerships

are meant to incorporate a capacity-building and investment-in-human-capital component in the partner countries. For example, they may foresee vocational education and training aimed at developing talent for the benefit of the third-country labour market, rather than facilitating migration to the EU. Despite the name, these partnerships are not intended to target exclusively highly-skilled workers, but are open to non-EU nationals of all skill levels.

Talent Partnerships could offer an opportunity for holistic cooperation with third countries, including co-development (Tsourdi, Zardo, and Sayed 2023). However, in order to achieve this, these programmes would need to be scalable – that is, they would need to incorporate multi-stakeholder participation, including multiple member states and also relevant private-sector stakeholders, as well as civil society actors and organisations, such as migrant and diaspora representation. Furthermore, they would need to steer away from migration-management conditionality – at the very least, negative conditionality – that could jeopardise sustainable cooperation with third countries, especially where private-sector involvement is envisaged. To date, this remains merely an interesting blueprint for the future. While the EU has launched five Talent Partnerships, these are extremely small in scale. For example, the EU–Pakistan Talent Partnership is underpinned by a budget of only €3 million (European Commission 2024a), which is not sufficient to achieve its stated policy ambitions.

Conclusion: The Future of Global Migration Governance

In this report, we have critically assessed contemporary global migration governance, focusing on the recent, non-legally binding UN Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees. We identified five critical challenges in global migration governance: the lack of access to labour mobility opportunities; the lack of effective access to international protection; the non-binding nature of the UN Global Compacts; the lack of an effective accountability mechanism underpinning compact commitments; and the declining funding for multilateral migration and refugee cooperation. We then investigated the effectiveness, robustness, and democratic credentials of these compacts, tracing the positions of influential actors in global migration governance – namely the US, China, Brazil, the EU, selected international organisations, and a representative civil-society sample.

Far-reaching reform could contribute to more effective and robust migration governance, but is unlikely in the current political climate.

Our research reveals that the compacts have succeeded in bringing together and reaffirming a wide array of existing agreements on migration and refugees, albeit in a non-binding arrangement. The Migration Compact is particularly notable for its coverage of migration in all its forms and for offering migrants protection along their entire migratory journey, while also introducing innovative elements, such as recognising the effects of natural disasters, climate change, and environmental degradation on migration movements. Stakeholders identified the establishment of regularly organised platforms, which adopt a ‘whole of society’ approach to facilitate discussion and pledges on migration and refugee policies – such as the International Migration Review Forum and Global Refugee Forum – as valuable innovations stemming from the compacts. Nonetheless, the compacts also suffer from a number of limitations, including their non-binding nature, lack of permanent structures and human and financial resources to underpin their implementation, and lack of effective accountability mechanisms.

A far-reaching, legally binding reform process could contribute to more effective and robust migration governance, but such a process is unlikely in the current political climate. Were such a reform to be pursued, it would probably lead to the curtailment of existing rights frameworks rather than the establishment of mobility- and responsibility-sharing frameworks. For the same reasons, a broad revamping of the compacts is also politically unlikely. Instead, targeted improvements – namely the introduction of a robust accountability mechanism – could be considered and introduced in the form of a modalities resolution. Such a mechanism would go some way towards boosting the compacts’ effectiveness and robustness. Yet despite being more politically palatable than more extensive reforms, the adoption of such accountability modalities seems equally unlikely.

A more comprehensive reform of the global migration governance framework, currently being considered as a response to recent US funding cuts, involves merging various UN offices and agencies working on humanitarian issues – including UNHCR and the IOM – into a single entity. Yet deprioritising migration and interlinking it with other priorities in this way would likely render migration governance less robust, diverting financial resources elsewhere and minimising autonomy.

Another trend is the increasing tendency for migration and refugee cooperation to occur entirely outside the UN framework, a tendency also illustrated by recent EU cooperation frameworks. Minilateralism and bilateralism further weaken the global system in terms of its effectiveness and robustness, and at the same time fail to provide their own effective and robust modes of governance.

The compacts do not seem to have substantively impacted the EU's asylum and migration policies. Moreover, the EU's ability to participate meaningfully in the implementation of the Global Compacts is undermined by the fact that not all member states have signed up to these agreements. In the labour migration context, this is exacerbated by the EU's limited competences. Nonetheless, the EU still considers its participation in the multi-annual Global Compact forums to be politically salient. In this context, the compacts serve as a forum for dialogue, which is beneficial when the EU and/or its member states act externally – in other words, they function as a common starting point for bilateral cooperation with third countries.

Despite their ongoing commitment to multilateralism, the EU and its member states are not concretely pursuing migration-related cooperation with third countries within the implementation framework of the Global Compacts. Instead, they are doing so at the minilateral level, most often through soft, non-legally binding cooperation frameworks. To date, migration management – in the sense of limiting mobility – is the prevalent aim within such cooperation frameworks. The EU pursues these migration management goals via conditionality modalities, and more recently through broad cross-policy linkages. Modest attempts at boosting resettlement have not led to binding resettlement targets or to a structured dialogue-and-partnership framework with third countries. To date, Talent Partnerships aimed at holistic cooperation with third countries rank low on the EU's list of political priorities. They are small in scale, limited in budget, and reflect a spirit of conditionality aimed at migration management. Nevertheless, this policy framing offers a blueprint for comprehensive and sustainable partnerships aimed at co-development, which, if meaningfully pursued, could bring about innovation in migration governance.

List of Interviews

Number	Date	Interviewee	Location
1	03/24/2025	IO representative	Geneva
2	03/24/2025	CSO representative	Geneva
3	03/26/2025	IGO representative	Geneva
4	03/27/2025	CSO representative	Geneva
5	03/27/2025	IO representative	Geneva
6	04/04/2025	CSO representative	Online
7	04/04/2025	IO representative	Online
8	04/08/2025	EU institutions representative	Brussels
9	04/08/2025	EU institutions representative	Brussels
10	04/10/2025	EU institutions representative	Online
11	04/23/2025	EU institutions representative	Brussels
12	04/23/2025	CSO representative	Brussels
13	04/24/2025	EU institutions representative	Online
14	04/25/2025	Academic expert (written correspondence)	Online
15	05/14/2025	CSO representative	Online

Fieldwork conducted by Felix Peerboom.

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