

POLICY PAPER

BEYOND CEUTA

MIGRATION DYNAMICS, STRUCTURAL DRIVERS AND LONGER-TERM RESPONSES ACROSS SPAIN, EUROPE AND AFRICA

Report 7/2026

Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis (IEAM)

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Executive summary

On 30–31 July 2026, more than 70,000 people entered Ceuta from Morocco, according to Spain's Ministry of the Interior. The episode exposed a migration governance model still largely organised around emergency response rather than sustained institutional preparedness.

This Policy Paper draws on an IEAM webinar held under the Chatham House Rule, which brought together researchers, journalists and civil society actors offering both African and European perspectives. Using the Ceuta events as a starting point, it identifies the institutional and operational gaps that perpetuate a reactive approach and sets out recommendations to strengthen preparedness before, during and after periods of pressure. The analysis is structured around three dimensions: anticipation, coordination and cooperation, and continuity.

Strategic messages

1. Anticipation depends on acting on warning signs, not just detecting them.
Early-warning signals are rarely conclusive on their own, but several indicators considered together can justify action. Monitoring is effective only when it is connected to a decision-making process able to act before a crisis escalates.

2. National trends are not a reliable indicator of local pressure.
An overall decline in arrivals can coexist with rapidly increasing pressure in a particular territory. Periods of lower arrivals should be used to strengthen preparedness, not taken as evidence that future pressure is unlikely.

3. Responsibilities and resources need to be allocated before pressure increases.
Contingency plans should define in advance who is expected to act, what each institution must provide, within what timeframe and with what resources. They should also involve regional and local authorities, which often face the greatest pressure.

4. European solidarity must translate into tangible contributions.
Contributions under the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum are mandatory but flexible: Member States may provide relocation, financial contributions or alternative support. These have different operational effects. Funding alone does not immediately create accommodation or redistribute reception responsibilities, and support allocated to Spain must reach the territories and services bearing the immediate costs.

5. Cooperation with third countries is essential but creates dependencies.
These differ across bilateral relationships, giving partner governments different degrees of negotiating leverage. External cooperation should be built on more balanced partnerships that integrate African perspectives and priorities, while resilience mechanisms help reduce excessive dependence on individual partners.

6. Preparedness must be sustained between crises.
Structured post-crisis reviews, a stable core workforce and predictable funding are needed to retain institutional knowledge and maintain essential capacity over the long term.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Ceuta crisis as a recurring challenge for migration governance

On 30 and 31 July 2026, more than 70,000 people crossed into Ceuta from Morocco, according to the Spanish Ministry of the Interior, placing considerable pressure on Spain's reception, administrative and security capacities. The episode was widely framed as a migration crisis, although sudden surges in arrivals are not new to the Spanish enclave.[1]

The public and political debate that followed focused largely on the immediate circumstances of the arrivals. Much of the discussion centred on responsibility, border management and the speed of the Spanish government's response. These are important questions in assessing an emergency, but they capture only one part of the problem. Assessing performance requires evidence on staffing, decision-making, reception conditions and subsequent follow-up, alongside the government's account of its response. Focusing on the moment of arrival can obscure what happens before and after it, including whether the system can anticipate pressure, coordinate a response across different levels of government and maintain sufficient capacity between crises.

The July events raise two distinct questions: how effectively Spain mobilised resources during the emergency, and whether adequate capacity and decision-making arrangements were in place beforehand. A full assessment should examine both, rather than treating emergency mobilisation as evidence of lasting institutional preparedness.

The webinar, organised by Spanish Institute for Migration Analysis on 14 September 2026, aimed to move beyond the immediate circumstances of the Ceuta events, using them as a starting point to bring participants together around a shared assessment of the institutional and operational gaps that shape the current system. It sought to examine how Spain and the EU could move from a predominantly reactive approach towards a more coherent and sustainable model of migration governance, drawing on Spanish, European and African perspectives.

1.2 Methodology

This Policy Paper is based on the discussions held during the webinar, which was conducted under the Chatham House Rule. The ideas are therefore presented without individual attribution, in order to preserve the participants' freedom of expression.

The webinar brought together a group of stakeholders offering both African and European perspectives, including researchers, journalists and civil society actors specialised in migration governance and mobility dynamics.

[1] Spanish Ministry of the Interior, statement of 4 August 2026, reporting 72,000 arrivals.

Three dimensions discussed during the webinar are integrated throughout this paper:

- Anticipation, as the capacity to connect early-warning indicators of rising pressure to a decision-making process before a crisis escalates;
- Coordination and cooperation, as the effective allocation of responsibilities among national, regional and local authorities, across the different stages of the response;
- Continuity, as the capacity to sustain a functioning system and retain institutional knowledge over the long term.

2. Anticipation: from emergency response to institutional preparedness

Once a situation escalates, a rapid response is crucial. Its effectiveness needs to be assessed against the resources deployed, the timeliness of decisions and conditions in reception services. Even an effective emergency response would not, on its own, demonstrate adequate preparedness.

The analysis should therefore extend beyond the most visible phase of the crisis and consider how the system performed in the period leading up to the peak in arrivals. Particular attention should be given to preparatory measures that could have been initiated earlier, including institutional decisions, staffing arrangements and resources that would allow the system to better absorb the pressure.

Without this clear distinction, responses to increased migration flows risk relying primarily on short-term emergency measures, with resources mobilised only once existing capacities are already under strain. This can contribute to a recurring cycle of crisis management rather than sustained institutional preparedness.

2.1 Connecting warning signals to early action

Anticipating a crisis effectively depends first on having a warning system capable of identifying signals of a developing emergency. Early-warning signals are rarely conclusive on their own, but several indicators considered together can provide a sufficient basis to justify action. Among these, attention should be given to:

- Growing pressure on reception facilities;
- Changes in the volume and patterns of arrivals;
- Information emerging from border areas.

The government's publication on 9 September 2026 of 40 reports and communications provides a basis for reconstructing the warning chronology. In particular, the notices issued on 27–29 July should be examined to establish which authorities received them, when decisions were taken and what preparations followed before the crossings.[2]

[2] Government of Spain, Reports and communications on the situation in Ceuta, published 9 September 2026.

However, collecting and monitoring information is not sufficient. The key issue is how this information is assessed and translated into decisions. Knowing the exact timing or scale of future arrivals is not necessary. Rather, what matters is ensuring that warning signals promptly reach those responsible for mobilising resources and that they can act by strengthening border preparedness, reception capacity, service provision and coordination before existing capacities are stretched to their limits.

A warning system is therefore effective only when information collection is connected to an institutional decision-making process. Otherwise, institutions may have a relatively good understanding of the developing situation while still failing to act before it escalates.

2.2 National trends and local capacity

Monitoring an evolving situation requires connecting developments at the border with the capacity of local reception services to respond. The same volume of arrivals may be manageable in one context but place significant pressure on services in another, depending on available staffing and resources.

Additionally, national trends alone cannot provide a reliable indication of the pressure faced by local services. An overall decline in arrivals can coexist with rapidly increasing pressure in a particular territory, where local capacities may already be stretched.

This highlights the need to organise preparedness around both national trends and local conditions. Periods when arrivals are lower should be treated as an opportunity to review procedures, reinforce capacity and address existing gaps in local services, rather than as evidence that future pressure is unlikely.

3. Cooperation, coordination and institutional capacity

The pressure created by a sudden increase in arrivals exposes how responsibilities, resources and coordination are organised across the system.

3.1 Reception capacity under pressure

The webinar discussions highlighted several capacity challenges facing migration systems, particularly during periods of sudden and significant pressure:

- **Concentration of responsibility**

First-entry countries bear a disproportionate share of responsibility during the initial stages of reception, when needs for accommodation, healthcare, information and registration are most acute. Yet the responsibilities and resources needed to address these needs extend beyond the country of arrival's capacity.

- **Fragmentation between different stages of the response**

The different stages of the response, from rescue and disembarkation to initial reception, assessment and relocation, are closely interconnected. A delay at one stage can therefore affect subsequent stages.

For instance, when onward arrangements are delayed, people may remain longer in initial reception facilities, increasing pressure on the system and limiting its ability to accommodate new arrivals.

- **Capacity to respond to individual needs**

Reception systems must respond to people with different circumstances and needs, which may require interpretation, urgent medical care, child protection or legal support. Under pressure, limited staff, time or specialised services can hinder the identification of these needs, which can in turn affect both the speed and quality of the response.

- **Sustaining capacity over time**

Rapid increases in arrivals can place simultaneous pressure on physical, administrative, institutional and professional capacity. A further challenge is maintaining reception capacity beyond periods of immediate pressure, with arrangements that allow services to expand when necessary.

3.2 Multi-level coordination and institutional interdependence

Multi-level governance is inherent to migration management, since responsibilities are distributed across different institutions and territorial levels. Effective coordination therefore has two dimensions:

- **Vertical** coordination, between national, regional and local authorities;
- **Horizontal** coordination, across ministries and departments.

A lack of coordination can lead to a fragmented response, with each institution addressing its own part of the process without sufficient connection to the others. In such cases, an institution may be prepared to act but unable to do so because it is waiting for information, funding or a decision elsewhere. This can lead to administrative paralysis, even when the necessary capacity exists within the system.

What is therefore needed is an allocation of responsibilities that supports coherent action across the different levels of government, both vertically and horizontally, so that decisions can be taken and implemented before a crisis escalates.

Ceuta already provides a concrete precedent. Royal Decree 681/2026 of 25 August designated the Minister for Territorial Policy as the functional authority coordinating the response to the crisis, while preserving existing responsibilities and chains of command. This arrangement applies to the Ceuta emergency. A permanent national authority would need a mandate to prepare and act before such emergency arrangements become necessary.

Spain should establish that permanent authority as a state agency with administrative autonomy and a dedicated budget. Its remit should connect reception and border preparedness with employment, integration and cooperation with countries of origin and transit.

Its founding legislation should expressly empower it to declare migration alerts, activate agreed reinforcement plans and coordinate implementation across ministries and territorial administrations. It should define how disputes are resolved and how the agency accounts for decisions and expenditure, while preserving the statutory responsibilities of participating institutions. The test of the reform would be whether an alert leads to funded action within an agreed deadline.

3.3 Advance planning: allocating responsibilities and resources

Article 32 of the recast Reception Conditions Directive already requires Member States to prepare contingency plans for the reception of applicants for international protection, including unaccompanied minors. The question is therefore whether plans are funded, tested and capable of activation. Responsibilities and resources need to be clearly allocated before pressure increases. A contingency plan should establish in advance:[3]

- **The institutions** expected to act and what each is required to provide;
- **The timeframe** within which each response should be delivered;
- **The staff, funding and information** attached to each responsibility;
- **The authority** responsible for resolving disagreements when responsibility is unclear or shared between institutions.

The Directive provides for consultation with local and regional authorities, civil society and international organisations, as appropriate. Their involvement is essential to operational readiness: regional and local authorities often face the greatest pressure during sudden increases in arrivals and are best placed to identify their own operational limits. National planning should reflect those limits and specify how additional capacity will be provided.

A standing protocol should initially cover the Canary Islands, Ceuta, Melilla and the Balearic Islands, with provision for activation elsewhere. Each territorial plan should set alert thresholds using arrivals, occupied and available reception places, and processing delays. It should maintain an updated roster of reinforcement teams and identify who releases emergency funding, arranges transport and confirms onward reception. Territorial authorities should be able to request activation before capacity is exhausted and receive a decision within an agreed timeframe. Regular exercises should test whether the promised staff and places can actually be made available.

3.4 Making European solidarity operational

Sustainable capacity cannot rely on national arrangements alone. Migration management is not solely the responsibility of Member States at the EU's external borders, making European cooperation an essential component of preparedness.

[3] Directive (EU) 2024/1346, Article 32, contingency planning for reception.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, whose main rules became applicable on 12 June 2026, establishes a mandatory but flexible solidarity mechanism to address the uneven distribution of responsibilities among Member States. Member States must contribute, while retaining a choice between relocation, financial contributions and alternative measures, including operational support. Responsibility offsets also apply under specified conditions, with another Member State assuming responsibility for examining applications that would otherwise fall to the beneficiary.[4]

For these arrangements to provide effective support, commitments must respond to the needs and timing of the territories under pressure, including: additional reception places; operational staff and specialised personnel; multi-year funding; timely transfers and relocations.

These contributions are not operationally interchangeable. Financial support may strengthen capacity over time, but it does not immediately provide accommodation or relieve a local reception service. Relocation and additional personnel also depend on timely decisions, transport and arrangements at the receiving end. The form and delivery timetable of support should therefore match the pressures identified.

Spain is eligible to benefit from the 2026 solidarity pool. European support allocated to Spain also requires domestic arrangements that direct funding, personnel and reception responsibilities towards the territories and services bearing the immediate costs. Effective solidarity depends on responsibility-sharing both between Member States and within Spain. National participation in European mechanisms can otherwise coexist with persistent local overload.[5]

3.5 Coordinating specialised expertise

The effectiveness of migration management also depends on how specialised expertise is coordinated across its different stages. Reception teams, including interpreters and cultural mediators, healthcare professionals, psychologists, social workers, child-protection specialists and legal advisers, play an important role in identifying, assessing and supporting individual needs.

Their involvement therefore needs to be coordinated between services, particularly when people move between facilities. Relevant information on individual needs should be shared in line with data protection requirements to ensure continuity of support.

This requires stable National Police and Guardia Civil staffing and equipment at the principal points of pressure, including Ceuta, Melilla, the islands, the Strait of Gibraltar and major airports.

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[4] European Commission, Effective system of solidarity and responsibility for managing asylum and migration in the EU, 26 October 2026.

[5] Council of the European Union, Migration and asylum: member states agree on solidarity pool, 8 December 2025; Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2025/2642.

Permanent posts should be complemented by designated reinforcement teams, with deployment and logistics agreed in advance. Staffing plans should cover border surveillance, identification and investigations, alongside sufficient interpreters, healthcare staff, legal advisers and child-protection specialists. More officers will not clear a registration backlog if interpretation or onward reception is unavailable. Each territorial plan should therefore identify the staff and equipment needed at every stage, including asylum processing and return documentation.

4. The external dimension of migration management

Cooperation with third countries is an increasingly important part of migration management for Member States, particularly those at the EU's external borders in Southern Europe. It takes several forms, including:

- Border and police cooperation;
- Readmission and return;
- Information-sharing and operational coordination.

These arrangements operate at different levels, with EU frameworks existing alongside a growing number of bilateral agreements between individual Member States and non-EU countries.

Border management has therefore become an integral part of foreign policy, and migration a central dimension of EU–Africa relations.

4.1 Externalisation as a central instrument of border management

Externalisation has become a widely used instrument of migration management across the European Union. It involves transferring some border management responsibilities to authorities in third countries in order to prevent or manage migration movements before they reach EU territory.

Spain and Italy illustrate this approach, although through distinct bilateral arrangements. Spain relies largely on cooperation with Morocco, while Italy has developed extensive cooperation with countries such as Libya and Tunisia. Their geographical positions and political contexts differ significantly, yet both Member States have made external cooperation a core component of their border management.

This suggests that externalisation has become part of the broader architecture through which the EU manages migration pressure at its external borders.

4.2 Dependency and leverage in external cooperation

External cooperation creates dependencies that vary between bilateral relationships. Spain's reliance on Morocco differs from Italy's relationships with Libya and Tunisia, and partners' negotiating leverage depends on geography, available alternatives and wider political interests. A transit country may use its role in migration management to negotiate its own terms, a dynamic often described as "reversed conditionality".

In Spain's case, cooperation with Morocco also operates within a wider diplomatic relationship shaped by Ceuta and Melilla and Madrid's 2022 position on Western Sahara. Such relationships can strengthen border management while creating vulnerabilities when cooperation becomes uncertain or is linked to other diplomatic priorities.[6]

4.3 From external dependence to operational resilience

The webinar discussions highlighted the continued importance of cooperation with African governments, while also stressing the need to develop resilience mechanisms for when such cooperation is insufficient or disrupted.

The objective is therefore to maintain strong partnerships without creating excessive dependence. In this sense, resilience can be strengthened through:

- Predictable bilateral arrangements, to provide greater stability in cooperation with African partners;
- Effective information-sharing, to better anticipate emerging situations and coordinate responses;
- Contingency planning, to ensure that disruptions do not immediately translate into operational gaps.

At the same time, more sustainable cooperation requires addressing the structural drivers of migration and incorporating African perspectives and priorities. The African Union's Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action 2018–2030 promotes mobility within Africa and cautions that return and readmission arrangements should not undermine it. Partnerships should therefore assess whether measures intended to reduce Europe-bound irregular migration also restrict legitimate regional labour mobility, trade or family connections.[7]

Police cooperation should include sustained liaison in countries of origin and transit and joint investigations into smuggling networks. Information from maritime, aerial and satellite surveillance should inform preparations when routes change. Investigations should follow organisers, financial flows and suppliers knowingly supporting criminal operations through boats, engines, fuel or communications equipment. Prosecutors and investigators need the capacity to preserve testimony, recordings and financial evidence for use in court. This work requires continuity between arrival peaks and agreed procedures for exchanging evidence with partner countries.

The effects of external cooperation should be assessed across routes and over time, including its consequences for safety and access to protection. A decline in arrivals at one location may reflect reduced movement, delayed journeys or displacement towards another route. These possibilities have different implications and should be distinguished before a local reduction is treated as evidence of success.

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[6] Spain–Morocco joint declaration, 7 April 2022.

[7] African Union, Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action 2018–2030, section 5.3, p. 55.

5. Sustaining the response: from emergency to institutional continuity

Once the emergency phase ends, public attention may fade, but the underlying operational and institutional challenges remain. The period that follows therefore provides an opportunity to assess the response, identify gaps and preserve the lessons learned during the crisis.

This approach helps build a functioning system capable of maintaining essential capacity over the long term.

5.1 Structured review: retaining institutional learning

After the response to an emergency has ended, a structured review should examine the actions taken to assess what worked, where decisions stalled and what gaps emerged. The review should include national, regional and local authorities, as well as the reception professionals directly involved in the response.

Crucially, the review must lead to concrete follow-up. The gaps identified need to be translated into specific actions, with clear responsibilities, resources and deadlines. Otherwise, the system may have the necessary information to address these gaps, while lacking the institutional capacity to do so before the next crisis.

Each review should document staffing levels, decision timelines, reception conditions and the time taken to open reception places, complete registration and arrange onward transfers. It should compare announced measures with delivery, identify which promised resources failed to arrive and assign corrective actions. Follow-up should be tracked through the next staffing and budget cycle.

5.2 The receiving city as part of the response

The situation of the receiving city should form part of the review of the response. Border crises place significant pressure on local organisations and residents, who often step in to provide improvised forms of support.

The review should therefore consider what these actors were expected to absorb and whether they received sufficient institutional support. Understanding these pressures is important for developing a system that provides local actors with greater predictability and clearer arrangements, especially during sudden increases in arrivals.

5.3 Maintaining workforce capacity and professional practice

The work of reception services continues even after border pressure has decreased. People who arrived during the emergency may still require an assessment of their circumstances before moving to the next stage. If services are scaled back too quickly, these people may remain in prolonged uncertainty.

A sustainable reception system therefore requires a stable and reliable core workforce in ordinary times as well, with the ability to expand services as situations evolve. Effective professional practice cannot rely solely on staff mobilised during a crisis.

Maintaining this capacity requires investing in training, supervision and staff. These factors help retain experienced staff and institutional knowledge beyond the end of the emergency.

6. Operational recommendations

The following recommendations set out practical measures to help Spain and the EU move from a predominantly reactive approach towards a more coherent and sustainable model of migration governance.

6.1 Spain

National level

1. Clarify institutional responsibilities for migration governance

- Define the respective responsibilities of national, regional and local authorities within existing coordination arrangements;
- Review the division of responsibilities across ministries and departments as part of the post-crisis assessment, to identify where arrangements created delays or uncertainty.
- Establish a permanent national migration authority with a dedicated budget, explicit alert and coordination powers, and an obligation to report on delivery of agreed measures.

2. Strengthen existing contingency plans

- Ensure that current protocols identify in advance who can activate them, on the basis of which warning indicators, which actors are required to intervene, what each is expected to deliver and within what timeframe;
- Link each responsibility to the staff, funding and information needed to fulfil it;
- Establish clear procedures for resolving disagreements among institutions when responsibilities are unclear or shared;
- Incorporate the transition from the emergency response to ordinary services into contingency planning.
- Agree territorial activation thresholds, deployment deadlines and emergency funding arrangements; maintain a roster of available teams and reception places and test the protocol through joint exercises. Record the results of these exercises and fund corrective measures, so that the existence of a plan can be distinguished from demonstrated readiness.

3. Turn early-warning signals into anticipatory action

- Strengthen communication between the authorities that monitor early-warning signals and those responsible for mobilising resources;
- Define clearer criteria, based on a combination of indicators, for activating contingency arrangements or deploying additional resources;
- Ensure continuous monitoring of border developments and local reception capacity, including during periods of lower arrivals.

4. Provide sufficient and predictable funding for service continuity

- Cover both service structures and staffing, including in ordinary times;
- Enable services to scale up as circumstances evolve, before they reach their capacity limits;
- Review funding needs as part of the post-crisis assessment to adjust future allocations.
- Fund permanent National Police and Guardia Civil posts and equipment alongside reception and processing teams; maintain a separate reserve for temporary deployments, transport and additional accommodation. Agree predictable arrangements for directing European and national support to the territories and services facing the greatest pressure.

Regional and local level

1. Monitor and report on local reception capacity

- Ensure information on local reception capacity and emerging pressures is systematically shared with national authorities;
- Identify where local staffing and service capacity are insufficient, so that additional funding and resources can be mobilised in time.

2. Integrate local experience into the post-crisis assessment

- Ensure the post-crisis assessment draws on input from local authorities, reception professionals, local organisations and residents;
- Reflect lessons identified at local level in updated contingency plans.

6.2 European Union

1. Ensure effective solidarity across Member States

- Match solidarity contributions to identified needs, combining timely relocations, financial support and operational assistance as appropriate, before reception capacity is overstretched;
- Facilitate access to additional operational staff and specialised personnel during periods of heightened pressure.

2. Build stronger and more balanced partnerships with third countries

- Invest in programmes addressing the structural drivers of migration;
- Improve communication and information-sharing with countries of origin and transit to better anticipate emerging pressures;
- Integrate African perspectives and priorities into EU migration policy, protecting legitimate regional labour mobility, trade and family connections when designing return and readmission cooperation;
- Diversify cooperation to reduce excessive dependence on individual partner countries and limit the leverage this can create; assess its effects across routes and over time, including safety, access to protection and possible displacement of journeys.

7. Conclusion

Reacting promptly to a crisis is essential. Nevertheless, a reactive approach cannot remain the default model for managing migration pressure.

The Ceuta events underline the need to assess emergency mobilisation alongside the capacity that existed before the crisis and the support maintained afterwards. A system centred on exceptional mobilisation cannot provide reliable preparedness over the long term. The priority is to turn the lessons of recurring pressure into funded, tested and durable institutional arrangements.

The focus, therefore, should be on building a governance model capable of anticipating rising pressure and managing it before a crisis emerges. This requires strengthening coordination and cooperation among the institutional actors involved throughout the process, within Spain, across the EU and with African partners, while ensuring that institutional knowledge and operational capacity are maintained over time.

A more comprehensive approach must look beyond individual episodes to consider what happens before and after them. This will not eliminate the risk of emergencies. It will, however, contribute to building a system better prepared to manage migration pressure in a coherent and sustainable way.

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