25/11/2026

Presse release



Rwandan return hubs: migrants and Europeans deserve better

Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark and Greece have announced that they have reached an agreement with Rwanda allowing third-country nationals who have not been granted asylum or equivalent protection on their territory to be sent there. The announcement comes a few weeks after the European Parliament and the Council adopted a new regulation to replace the 'Return' Directive, which had been in force since 2008[1]. The European Parliament had approved this new regulation on 17 June 2026, in a vote that saw the EPP join forces with the two most right-wing groups in the European Parliament.

As the Jacques Delors Institute noted in its analysis of what was at stake at the last European Council[2], the new provisions adopted by the EU in early 2026 (the new Return Regulation and new definitions of safe third countries) allow individual Member States to conclude agreements with third countries, either to return people whose asylum claims have been rejected or to delegate to those countries the examination of any asylum claims. The agreement concluded with Rwanda falls into the first category.

[1] *Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a common system for the return of third-country nationals, 16 September 2026.*
[2] *Pariat, M. 'On the usefulness (or otherwise) of a strategic debate on migration', blog post, Jacques Delors Institute*

Neither the European Commission nor the other EU Member States took part in the negotiations leading up to this agreement, since the new regulation does not require them to. However, the five Member States behind the arrangement will have to provide the other Member States and the Commission with details of its provisions before they enter into force on a pilot basis. It will then be for the Commission, as guardian of the Treaties, to verify that the specific terms of the agreement do indeed comply with the fundamental rights set out in the Regulation. The European Commission is already in a position to check whether Rwanda meets the criteria laid down in Article 14 of the Regulation, which defines 'countries of return' as those 'which must respect international human rights standards and principles, including the principle of non-refoulement'. It would therefore be desirable for the Commission to carry out this check promptly and make its findings public, so as to maintain confidence in the safeguards provided by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights.

It should also be noted that the announced capacity of the Rwandan platform is minimal, if not purely symbolic: a few hundred people, compared with the 135,000 actual returns expected in 2025. This modest scale probably reflects the failure of earlier initiatives of this kind, notably the one between Italy and Albania – Italy not being a party to the new agreement. This confirms that such initiatives are aimed less at solving the problems arising from the presence of undocumented migrants in the European Union than at adding a potential deterrent effect to the existing restrictive measures, which have already helped to reduce the number of irregular entries recorded annually by Frontex since 2024. Such measures are therefore aimed more at public opinion than at providing a lasting solution to the real difficulties faced, and they risk undermining the very value on which the Union was founded: its commitment to the fundamental dignity of the human person.

The Member States concerned have been very vague about the cost of this agreement, which they say they will bear alone; greater transparency about its actual cost should nonetheless be demanded (including within the framework of the EU–Rwanda partnership).

Attention should also be drawn to the negative side effects of the agreement signed by five Member States with Rwanda: it undermines the coherence of the common European asylum area and heightens tensions between Member States, particularly over the mutual recognition of return decisions. It is also likely to weaken the European Union's position when negotiating readmission agreements with countries of origin, which may then raise their demands in return for taking back those of their nationals whose asylum claims have been rejected.

Public opinion is shocked by the number of return decisions that are not enforced, and this concern certainly needs to be addressed, first of all by explaining why they go unenforced – a situation that varies from one Member State to another[3].

[3] See the infographic and analysis by the Jacques Delors Institute, 'An overview of irregular migration in the European Union', February 2026.

There are indeed significant differences, particularly as regards voluntary returns, which could provide an opportunity to identify and promote best practices. One indirect consequence of this agreement may be to encourage more voluntary returns, but this remains to be seen. Any attempt to resolve this situation – which results in a high number of people residing irregularly in the EU – or at least to improve it in the long term, requires testing and developing, in cooperation with the countries of origin, ways of organising the legal labour migration that the European Union needs.

Institut Jacques Delors

Penser l'Europe • Thinking Europe • Europa Denken
17 rue d'Antin 75002 Paris, France
www.delorsinstitute.eu • info@delorsinstitute.eu