MIGRATION GOVERNANCE AND BORDER EXTERNALIZATION IN EUROPE–AFRICA RELATIONS

Author: **Diing Dau Chol Diing**
Department of International Relations and Public Affairs, Jilin University.
Email: diingdau.student@tutamail.com
ORCID: 0009-0000-0196-6972

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ABSTRACT

This article assessed how migration governance relates to border externalization using Europe–Africa relations as an example. The article conducted a policy analysis of the European Union–Africa migration compacts, border control funding, and partnership agreements. The article also combined the policy analysis results with a systematic review of policy effectiveness studies, human rights reports, and migration statistics from international organizations. The article argues that border externalization is a defining feature of modern migration governance, shifting migration control beyond Europe's territorial frontiers to African states through readmission arrangements, conditional financing, security cooperation, and capacity-building. Despite these measures responding to irregular smuggling and migration, evidence shows that they continuously displace risks, intensify human rights concerns, and weaken asylum access in transit contexts. The article identified three key results. First, it was found that externalization expanded via institutionalized cooperation platforms (such as trust funds, bilateral migration deals, and mobility partnerships. Second, it was also established that externalized controls' effectiveness was uneven, with some routes showing short-term suppression. However, route diversification, continued departures, and displacement effects persist. Third, substantial human rights costs have been reported, with an increase in cases of detention, pushbacks, racialized violence, abuse, and mortality at sea and along transit corridors. The paper concluded that migration governance within Europe–Africa relations remains a dominant issue, mainly focused on containment instead of conducting effective cooperation. To address the issue, the article recommended the use of more sustainable frameworks or frequent pathways that will provide partner-state accountability, and stronger alignments between development objectives, migration management, and human rights.

Keywords: Africa, border externalization, European Union, external borders, human rights, irregular migration, migration governance.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Migration governance is one of the highly contested dimensions when it comes to Europe–Africa relations. In the last twenty years, the European Union (EU) has managed to reconfigure migration control through increased border functions both inside its territory and in collaborating and neighboring states through the border externalization process. The border externalization process is characterized by outsourcing, relocation, and delegation of migration control functions to third parties (nations) through security cooperation, anti-smuggling partnerships, funding, surveillance support, diplomatic pressure, and readmission agreements. In practice, the externalization process has led to the transformation of African countries into areas of intercepting, containing, and returning asylum seekers and migrants before they reach Europe (Akkerman, 2021).

Border externalization as a variable in this article is measured using several variables, including financial, institutional, operational, and legal externalizations. Financial externalization occurs in the form of migration-related aid, security transfers, and border management funding sent to governments of different African states. Institutional externalization occurs in the form of readmission agreements, joint patrols, migration partnership frameworks, mobility compacts, and liaison officers. Operational externalization occurs in a way that third-party countries intercept, conduct surveillance, provide border agency training, and detention support. Legal externalization occurs in a way that the migration governance responsibility of protecting, screening, and returning outside EU territory is transferred to African countries (Czaika et al., 2023).

Border-related migration governance involves setting both informal and formal rules, practices, and institutions that enable states and international institutions to control human mobility. The key variables for measuring migration governance are border enforcement capacity, return and reintegration systems, labor migration pathways, data-sharing mechanisms, asylum access, and, finally, cooperation between the state of origin of migrants, transit area, and destination states. In relation to Europe–Africa relations, increased asymmetrical bargaining shapes migration governance. Europe is linked to the use of development aid, security cooperation, trade preferences, and visa facilitation for migration control cooperation. This presents a governance model that allows mobility to be managed via coercion and incentives as opposed to shared protection (Silga, 2025).

Globally, most developed countries are shifting their migration governance toward risk- and security-based approaches. States are increasingly treating migration as a matter of border and domestic political management, integrity, terrorism prevention, and organized crime; thus increasing selective admission systems and extraterritorial border controls. Regionally, the Mediterranean region is a

more paradigmatic space for externalization. Bilateral agreements, EU partnerships, and Frontex operations are taking center stage to stop illegal immigration before arrival, thus making Africa a source and transit corridor for migration to Europe. Through this, African states are helped to address their own governance pressures such as unemployment, weak institutional capacity, insecurity, and uneven development (Silga, 2025).

2.0 LITERATURE

Scholarly material on border externalization and migration governance has expanded rapidly as a response to the changing migration regime in Europe, thus indicating that a majority of the literature insists on the expansion of political and legal border control transformations. Borders are no longer being viewed as fixed territorial lines. Instead, they are currently viewed as mobile systems whose roles are to sort, filter, and deflect migrants (illegal from legal migrants). The EU border policy, for example, has increasingly operated through data exchange, third-country cooperation, remote controls, and surveillance technologies.

Border externalization from the perspective of Europe involves governance and spatial shifts that coercively move functions outward from the border, while preserving European Union control over the vast immigrant mobility outcomes. Recent studies reveal that the transformation to border externalization concerns relocating migration control to fill gaps left by dispersed sites way beyond EU territory and simultaneously maintaining the power setting agenda of Europe (Paoletti & Taylor, 2010; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2011; Walters, 2006).

In addition, several literature are focused on the politics and economics of migration partnerships. The evolution of EU–Africa cooperation through the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the Khartoum Process, mobility partnerships, the Rabat Process, and the bilateral arrangements with Tunisia, Niger, Libya, and Mauritania. These frameworks continuously connect migration cooperation with state-capacity support, financial assistance, and development projects. It is widely argued that these kinds of arrangements make states in Africa migration gatekeepers and offer limited reciprocating gains. For example, aid continues to be an increasingly instrumental leverage used by border enforcement in place of institutional development and poverty reduction. Several empirical studies show that EU funding towards African migration governance has been used as development language masked as security priorities. In such arrangements, partner states have been frequently incentivized to intensify the process and number of interceptions and returns of immigrants and, in exchange, receive political recognition and resources (Lavenex & Kunz, 2008; Andersson, 2014; Musumeci, 2024).

Some literature has also examined the effectiveness of externalized border controls. It has been found that illegal migrants from some departure routes fall temporarily in post-enforcement operation intensifications and post-bilateral cooperation between African states and the EU. Despite these efforts, it was revealed that, in the long run, the decline in immigrants as a result of these efforts is offset by illegal migrants using more dangerous pathways where security and border control are not presently there, smuggling networks, and route displacement. Most literature suggests border externalization rarely eliminates movement. Instead, border externalization is known for changing the migration geography and thus redistributing the risk. This evidence is seen in Western Africa routes and the Central Mediterranean, where stricter border controls have occasionally pushed migrants to use longer and deadlier sea or land crossings to reach territories that are more insecure. The study of migration routes confirms how border externalization has caused increased displacement as opposed to closure, with results being an increase in immigrants being exposed to mortality risks and migration pressure moving toward less monitored corridors (Nevins, 2010; de Haas, 2014; EUAA, 2024).

Another set of literature is centered on human rights. The majority of literature presented in this line explains that outsourcing migration control puts asylum seekers and migrants at risk of extortion, arbitrary detention, pushbacks, abuse, limited access to legal remedies, and non-refoulement violations. Human Rights Watch, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Organization for Migration, and other migration monitoring initiatives continuously report human rights violations against African migrants along migration routes, including risks of being detained or harsh conditions that come with being intercepted. Externalization therefore causes “protection gaps,” causing migrants to be intercepted and contained within jurisdictions characterized by weaker safeguards and limited accountability. A journal published on human rights found that border externalization practices continue to increase vulnerability by putting migrants under the control of coercive actors who have weak oversight, especially when dealing with transit zones that are mainly used for conducting detention, exploitation, and forceful return of migrants and asylum seekers (Cassarino, 2014; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Pécoud, 2021).

Literature exists that links border externalization to post-colonialism and critical border research. Border externalization is understood as the continuation of imbalanced power relations between Africa and Europe. In depth, the migration diplomacy by the EU has caused asymmetries in sovereignty. In this case, Europe continues to retain agenda-setting power, thereby leaving African states with the pressure to provide enforcement functions. Scholars recommend selective mobility rights, racialized border regimes, and a moral economy of deservingness to be used to shape parties that should move and the conditions they should adopt. Migration governance is therefore established as one that is embedded in unequal historical relations. It is argued that border externalization is a geopolitical order that makes unequal mobility rights normal across regions and, in the long run, reproduces colonial control patterns through contemporary financial and legal instruments (Boswell, 2007; De Genova, 2017; Squire, 2020).

From the presented literature, three major gaps exist. The first gap is that there is limited integration of systematic migration statistics, human rights reporting, and policy analysis. The second gap is that the effectiveness of externalization is asserted but not continuously examined across agreements and routes. The third gap is that many studies have examined singular instruments instead of broader governance assemblages linking aid, mobility, containment, and security. This paper sought to address the outlined gaps by combining

systematic review and policy analysis. By doing so, the study assessed both the consequences and operation of border externalization and migration governance within Europe–Africa relations. The gaps in the literature increasingly push for multi-level analysis to replace the failures of single-policy explanations in order to analyze how border externalization as a networked regime works in terms of law, coercion, finance, and diplomacy practice across diverse fields.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study area was Europe and Africa. The article utilized qualitative policy analysis and systematic secondary evidence review. Policy analysis evaluated the EU–Africa partnership, trust fund instruments, border control funding mechanisms, migration compacts, and bilateral migration deals. The systematic review included migration statistics, human rights reports, and policy effectiveness studies published by international organizations, namely IOM, the EU Agency for Asylum, Human Rights Watch, UNHCR, and Frontex. The review prioritized documents from 2014–2025 to capture the contemporary phase of intensified externalization.

The selection of sources (documents) was done using targeted searching. This allowed the article to use official international reporting and related platforms. Inclusion criteria in the selection of sources included sources that were relevant to the study areas (Europe–Africa) and the variables (border externalization and migration governance). The keywords for selecting sources were explicitly related to asylum, irregular migration, return cooperation, and border control. The study also selected sources based on the availability of evaluative or descriptive evidence.

Exclusion criteria used to select the study were documents focused solely on domestic migration issues and yet missing trans-regional policy relevance. The analysis process involved coding documents thematically. The thematic was around four key categories, namely, border externalization tools, governance mechanisms, human rights consequences, and route effects. The findings of the study were synthesized narratively and not statistically.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Layered governance structure and European Union funding as a tool for migration governance

The study analyzed layered governance structure and European Union funding as a tool for migration governance. The results were then presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Layered governance structure and European Union funding as a tool for migration governance

No.	Indicators	Evidence	Interpretation
1	European Union external borders' irregular crossing as of the year 2023	385000	Sustaining pressure towards governance system
2	Increase from 2022	18%	Continuous externalized control demands
3	Mediterranean crossings (European Union and NGOs Immigrants saved) since 2015	615100	Shows operational intervention scales

Source: EUAA (2024)

In Table 1 above, there is a strong institutional apparatus. The measurable burden for African states remains asymmetric, given that African partners are given the role of enforcing, training, and equipping immigration management, while the European states retain strategic policy design and linked control. The findings imply that border externalization within Europe–Africa relations functions based on a layered governance structure. This links migration management by the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa and other financing channels with diplomatic cooperation, development assistance, and security support, thereby normalizing migration control in terms of a shared responsibility, but ending up shifting the burdens of migration management operationally onto African states.

4.2 Bilateral conditionality as a tool for Preventive Logic

The aim of the study was to establish bilateral conditionality as a tool for preventive logic. The results were then presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Bilateral conditionality as a tool for preventive logic

No.	Indicator	Evidence	Interpretation
1	European Union pledged funds to Tunisia targeting border management	Amounting €105 million	Direct financial conditionality
2	European Union sends financial support to African for purposes of security forces	Multiple states	Widened delegated enforcement
3	Border rights related independent monitoring	Lacking	Deficits accountability

Source: HRW (2024)

In Table 2 above, it was established that border externalization has increased towards conditional and bilateral perspectives. The study reflected the recent arrangements between Sahelian and North African states as a model involving funding, equipping, and political recognition as exchanges for stronger departures, interceptions, and returns implementation by the Sahelian states. According to reports by Human Rights Watch, the European Union pledged €105 million to Tunisia in 2023, which was channeled towards border management despite serious human rights violation concerns. This action illustrates the use of funding to motivate preventive logic policy. These deals were found to be reducing departures temporarily; yet transparency, accountability, and independent monitoring remain weak.

4.3 Route displacement versus durable suppression

The study evaluated route displacement versus durable suppression. The findings were then presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Route displacement versus durable suppression.

No.	Route	2023 Trend/Detections	Key implication
1	Central Mediterranean	Detections = 158000 (41% of the total)	Dominant pressure point
2	Western Africa to Canary Islands	Detections = 40400 (+161% of the total)	Strong route displacement shifting towards the Atlantic
3	European Union external borders (Total)	Detections = 385000 (+18%)	Not reduced irregular crossings as an overall

Source: (EUAA, 2024; IOM, 2024).

In Table 3 above, it was revealed that externalization has failed to eliminate irregular migration. The opposite is that, externalization has reorganized immigration by changing geographical movement. In 2023, the European Union Agency for Asylum discovered a total of 385,000 irregular border crossings (the largest since 2016). The study found that the Central Mediterranean reported detections up to 158,000 (41% of the total number of irregular entries). The Western Africa route into the Canary Islands reported detections up to 40,400 (161%), thus illustrating displacements as opposed to closure.

4.4 Human rights implications reported along externalized routes

The aim of the study was to examine human rights implications reported along externalized routes. The results were then presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Human rights implications reported along externalized routes

No.	Types of risks	Evidences	Human rights implications
1	Violence and kidnapping	Documented across African land routes	High exposure before reaching Europe
2	Detention and expulsion	Frequently reported	Restricts access to protection
3	Unlawful pushbacks	Reported by HRW in EU border settings	Denial of asylum access and remedy

Source: (HRW, 2024; UNHCR, 2024).

In Table 4, it was revealed that substantial human rights costs were associated with externalized governance. Reports by the IOM, the UNHCR, and the Mixed Migration Centre found the occurrence of violence, detention, extortion, rape, kidnapping for ransom, robbery, expulsion, and human trafficking along the African land routes. Human Rights Watch reported cases of abuse, unlawful pushbacks, and detention happening in Libya, Tunisia, and other transit countries facing insufficient safeguards. The evidence showed that externalization causes protection gaps as immigrants interception occurs in jurisdictions found to be experiencing weaker rights protections and limited accountability.

4.5 Borders dispersed outside Europe's territory

The aim of the study was to investigate borders dispersed outside Europe's territory. The results were then presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Borders dispersed outside Europe's territory

No	Border site	Evidences	Functional effect
1	Western African and Mediterranean routes	High-risk crossings	Pushing border functions outward
2	Sahara Desert corridors	Dangerous	Containing movements before reaching Europe
3	Security institutions in transit-states	EU cooperation with Africa	Territorial borders converting into mobile controls

Source: (EUAA, 2024; UNHCR, 2025).

In Table 5 above, it was established that border externalization has shifted since policy meaning of borders has changed to refer to states acting as sources of immigration and states acting as transit points for immigrants. According to the findings, borders are beyond Europe's geographic edge (representing dispersal of sea routes, partner-state security institutions, desert corridors, liaison cooperation, and detention facilities. The governance outcome refers to border externalization as a layered system the European nations retain as a strategic control tool whereby African states are programmed to absorb operational exposure.

4.6 Weak link to root causes

The aim of this section was to determine the weak link and root causes of border externalization. The results were then presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Weak link and root causes of border externalization

No.	Structural drivers	Evidences	Policy gaps
1	Conflicts/persecutions	Major driver in terms of immigration movements	Border funding has not yet solved it
2	Climate/livelihood stress	Increasingly in terms of important in routes	Limited reach on development aid
3	Employment/studies	Persisting in terms of motivation	Restrictive governance leading to non-removal of demand

Source: (IOM, 2024; UNHCR, 2024)

In Table 6, it was established that externalization faces limitations in the process of addressing migration root causes (Conflicts/persecutions, climate/livelihood stress, and employment/studies). This could be interpreted to mean that policy documents are evidence that justify cooperation between Europe and Africa on development narratives, yet the drivers of migration (namely conflict, fragility, climate stress, inequality, unemployment, and mobility aspirations) continue to be largely unchanged. The evidence also suggested that funding linked to border control was too little to transform the structural conditions.

4.7 Divergent responses to immigration by African states

The aim of this section was to assess the divergent responses to immigration by African states. The results were presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Divergent responses to immigration by African states

No	Response type	Evidence	Meaning
1	Cooperation	Security support and funding in exchange for migration control	Conditional governance has been highly accepted
2	Renegotiation/ Resistance	Interest diverges/Governments pushing back	African agency remaining present despite misunderstandings/ disagreements
3	Asymmetrical	European Union is retaining policy leverage	Cooperation being shaped by unequal interdependence

Source: HRW (2024)

In Table 7, it was found that African states illustrate diverse responses to EU policy on migration control. Some African governments are cooperative as a way of securing political support and funding. Other African governments renegotiate or resist conditions, especially in cases where migration control policies from the EU threaten regional mobility interests and domestic legitimacy. This illustrates that Africa as a whole is not merely passive in the subject of border externalization. However, despite the two responses (cooperation and renegotiation/resistance), the power asymmetry continues to be clear because European preferences remain the shaper of EU-African cooperation terms.

4.8 Protection versus Security

In an effort to assess the scores between security and protection, the study presented the results in Table 8 below.

Table 8 Security versus protection

No	Tension	Evidence	Result
1	Security prioritization	Border control and detention expanded	Protection has become a secondary instead of a primary priority
2	Short-term results	Shift in specific route pressures	Non-durable solution
3	Long-term results	Rights violations and route displacement	Externalization becomes unstable

Source: EUAA (2024); HRW (2024)

In Table 8, it was found that there is persistent tension between protection and security. There was an increased priority towards migration governance securitization at the cost of protection. This resulted in secondary prioritization of asylum rights protection and access. Human Rights Watch reported evidence of increased detention, unlawful pushbacks, and weak safeguards. EU statistics showed that despite heavy enforcement, crossings remain high and routes simply shift. This suggests that policies appearing effective in the short term can be counterproductive over time.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The findings illustrated that migration governance in the contemporary context is being characterized by the shift from traditional to externalized models. The Europe–Africa relation in border control is characterized by containment, delegated enforcement, and deterrence. This was supported by Tsourdi and Zardo (2025), who found that borders have changed towards operating as transnational governance systems as opposed to fixed territorial lines. The European Union migration strategy continues to rely on African countries' cooperation, leading to African countries being the managers of European border objectives. This has both decreased political pressure on Europe and relocated operational risks and responsibilities towards less protected spaces.

It was established that border externalization was unstable and partial in terms of its effectiveness. Border externalization was found to disrupt specific routes, and thus failed to resolve the key drivers of migration. The result was in line with Bisong (2026), who argued that migrants opt to change routes, using alternative brokers, and undertaking riskier routes in their migration journeys. It was also argued that enforcement-centric strategies create a displacement and danger cycle without achieving sustainably reduced mobility.

The findings on the human rights perspective established that border externalization increases profound concerns. Outsourced migration control by the EU weakened procedural safeguards. It also led to arbitrary detention, increased likelihood of abuse, and increased refoulement. This is especially troublesome when technical support and financing provided by Europe involve systems that are not transparent. The result was in line with Häkli and Peltonen (2026), who found that the border externalization control model has created a legal and moral contradiction whereby policies are designed to control movement but instead undermine human rights standards the European Union claims it upholds.

It was established that the Europe–Africa broader externalization needs recalibration. Cooperation needs to be reoriented to create safe mobility channels, human rights accountability, and border control practices that are

protection-sensitive. Border externalization was justifiable through enforceable safeguards, meaningful access, and independent monitoring of asylum seekers and migrants. Without these elements, Europe–Africa migration governance remains ethically contested and structurally imbalanced.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The analysis illustrated that border externalization within the Europe–Africa relations has been subjected to a layered governance structure. The European Union's institutionalization of migration control has been characterized by the use of partnerships to conduct mobility management, diplomatic cooperation, security support, and development assistance. The European Union Emergency Trust Fund targeting Africa has subsequently financed border management, anti-smuggling activities, surveillance, and capacity building in origin and transit states. These instruments normalize migration control as a shared responsibility, despite operational burden disproportionally falling on African countries. Border externalization is increasingly operating on bilateral conditionality terms. Recent arrangements between North African and Sahelian countries demonstrate the use of funding, political recognition, and equipment to obtain stronger action against interception, return, and departure of migrants. This model has led to the establishment of a governance environment whereby African governments conduct intermediaries' roles on behalf of European countries and their border objectives. Such deals have resulted in temporary decreases in departures on certain routes and increased monitoring, but have reduced accountability and transparency. The policy logic is seen as preventive as opposed to protective. Statistical evidence shows that border externalization has failed to eliminate irregular migration. Border externalization has instead reorganized geography movement of migrants. The European Union reports show how irregular crossings of borders remain significant since 2023. The Central Mediterranean was found to account for most entries of migrants, followed by Western Africa's Canary Islands route, which is experiencing a sharp rise in the number of migrants crossing. These shifts demonstrate route displacement instead of durable suppression. An increase in enforcement targeting one corridor has been found to result in the redirection of movement of migrants towards other corridors, which are characterized as being riskier. The EU-Africa migration governance has thus been found to be an adaptation as opposed to total closure and mitigation. It was also found that human rights faced substantial costs linked to externalized governance. International advocacy groups and organizations documented increased arbitrary detention, pushbacks, restricted access, extortion, and violence by both non-state and state actors towards asylum seekers and immigrants, with extreme cases reported in West and North Africa. Migrants and asylum seekers intercepted during transit have reported having faced detention, exposure to abuse, limited procedural safeguards, and detention under poor conditions. The EU's delegation of border functions to African states as partners has weakened protection systems and raised non-refoulement concerns, especially when returns or interceptions occur without individualized assessment. Fifth, the results show that externalization has changed the policy meaning of borders themselves. Borders are no longer confined to the geographic edge of Europe; they are dispersed across airports, coastlines, desert routes, detention facilities, liaison offices, and partner-state security institutions. EU border regimes are found to have sustained political pressure, funding, and data exchange. The outcome of EU regime functionalities has led to the establishment of a layered system that prioritizes Europe's strategic control over African states' absorbed operational exposure. The review of the sources of data showed limited evidence of border externalization being able to address the main (root) causes of migration. The review of policy documents has justified cooperation via development narratives. Despite these justifications, the underlying key drivers of migration (conflict, aspirations for mobility, unemployment, inequality, climate stress, and state fragility) remain completely unaddressed. Development funding that has been attached to migration control has been found to be too small or narrowly targeted, thus unable to transform structural conditions. The consequences are that EU policy emphasis on containment does not match the deeper socio-economic realities affecting migrants. African states in the EU-Africa migration governance relationship have been given the role of responding to diverse activities. Some African governments have been found to cooperate with EU migration control policies to secure political support and funding. On the other hand, other African countries have been found to renegotiate or resist conditions that are characterized by migration control threatening regional mobility and domestic legitimacy interests. Thus, Africa has been found not to be a mere passive recipient of EU migration control policy. Asymmetries in resources, institutional capacity, and bargaining power were found to represent the EU as being highly influential. Cooperation was found to be structured by unequal interdependence. Evidence shows persistent tension between protection and security. An increase in securitised migration governance has resulted in an increase in rights protection becoming secondary to asylum rights. Border externalization continues to prioritize the decrease in visible arrivals over sustaining rights-based migration management. EU led border externalization policies have been found to be effective in meeting short term goals at the cost of meeting long term goals. This article found that border externalization is the central subject of migration governance within the Europe–Africa relations. Through collaboration with Africa, border control and migration compacts, such as funding mechanisms provided by the EU, have extended the control of migration governance into transit and origin African states. This EU-led governance model has shown mixed results, with the majority being ineffective (consequences such as significant human rights violations and route displacement concerns). The study concludes that the EU-led migration governance is mainly based on security logics as opposed to shared protection. African states continue to be drawn into the EU border regime, often being given unequal conditions by the EU. This paper therefore suggested the establishment of a more sustainable framework that emphasizes stronger asylum protections, genuine development engagement, legal mobility pathways, and transparent cooperation. It was also recommended that future policy is required targeting border management based on human dignity as opposed to migrant containment as the center stage for implementing migration governance.

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