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The Ceuta Crisis: Geopolitical Leverage on Europe's Border

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Executive Summary

- ✦ Over 70,000 migrants crossed from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta within 48 hours in late July 2026, overwhelming local infrastructure and emergency services before most returned to Morocco days later.
- ✦ Misinformation on social media distorted a Spanish Supreme Court ruling regarding sea arrivals, which organised smuggling networks exploited to fuel the sudden influx.
- ✦ The border crisis aligns with an established pattern of Morocco relaxing border controls as geopolitical leverage.
- ✦ European leaders launched severe criticism against Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, linking the surge to his migrant regularisation plan and proposing temporary border restrictions or Spain's suspension from Schengen.
- ✦ Prime Minister Sánchez defended his border record, pointing out that his regularisation scheme excludes 2026 arrivals and warning that penalising frontline states undermines EU solidarity.
- ✦ The incident has severely destabilised the Spanish government by empowering domestic right-wing opposition and threatening the fragile parliamentary coalition supporting Prime Minister Sánchez.

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Key Picture: Geopolitical Leverage at Ceuta



Source: [BBC](#)

1. How Ceuta Became Morocco's Ultimate Leverage Point

The strategic vulnerability of the European Union's southern perimeter is arguably nowhere more pronounced than in the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla - the EU's only land borders on the African continent. Even though Ceuta sits on North Africa's coast bordered by Morocco, it is a Spanish territory and part of the EU. Alongside Melilla, these two enclaves create the European Union's sole land frontier with Africa, frequently sparking migratory pressures and diplomatic friction between Spain and Morocco.¹

In late July 2026, over 70,000 migrants crossed from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta in less than 48 hours, making it the largest single crossing in the territory's history², which created a sudden surge that pushed local emergency services and infrastructure beyond capacity. The sudden arrival strained local support services, forcing hundreds of migrants to sleep on the streets, creating a humanitarian and social emergency.³ Following their arrival in Ceuta, the vast majority of the migrants returned to Morocco within days of crossing the border.⁴

The sudden surge of migrants breaching the sea barriers has brought border security back to the top of Europe's foreign policy agenda.⁵ France heightened border controls with Spain, while Italy's far-right leadership called to suspend Spain from the Schengen free-movement area, even though Ceuta and Melilla operate under distinct Schengen rules.⁶ In addition to exposing critical fault lines in terms of border security, the incident overwhelmed local infrastructure⁷, and prompted emergency troop deployments.⁸

European, Spanish and Moroccan authorities attributed the surge to viral social media misinformation and organised smuggling networks following a Spanish Supreme Court ruling. Much of the misleading information stemmed from a recent Spanish Supreme Court decision. Issued several weeks prior, the ruling specified that migrants arriving by sea are exempt from the expedited deportation process used for individuals caught crossing physical border barriers, such as fences. Social media posts falsely suggested that the ruling barred Spanish authorities from deporting migrants arriving by sea, implying they would be granted permission to stay in the country.⁹ However, fully understanding this incident requires a deeper look at the historical background.

1.1. The History of the Crisis: Is Migration Becoming a Tool of Geopolitical Pressure?

Understanding the 2026 Ceuta border crisis requires looking beyond the immediate events to the diplomatic history between Spain, Morocco, and Algeria. A tense political dynamic shapes the relationship between Spain, Morocco, and Algeria, with Western Sahara at the center of their disputes. Western Sahara was under Spanish colonial rule until Morocco annexed the territory in 1975.

This annexation ignited long-standing tensions between Morocco and neighbouring Algeria over the region's political future, eventually triggering a military conflict. Algeria has historically supported the Polisario Front (a national liberation movement which opposes Moroccan rule¹⁰) in its push for Western Saharan independence - a territory that Morocco, Algeria's regional rival, claims as its own.¹¹ Because Spain relies on Morocco for border enforcement¹² and historically depended on Algeria for energy supplies¹³, Spain finds itself caught between these two regional rivals.

Spain maintains a direct physical border with Morocco through two small Spanish territories on the African coast, including the city of Ceuta.¹⁴ Reaching Ceuta grants entry onto European Union soil, so Spain relies on Moroccan security forces to prevent large groups of migrants from crossing the border. Morocco recognises the critical importance of this border security to Madrid and periodically leverages border control as a tool to apply political pressure.¹⁵

The 2021 Ceuta border crisis illustrates this strategy clearly. When Spain quietly permitted the leader of the Polisario Front to receive medical treatment in a Spanish hospital, Morocco responded by withdrawing its border guards at Ceuta. As a result, over 8000 migrants crossed into the enclave within a matter of days.¹⁶ Spain later

attempted to mend relations with Morocco by supporting Rabat's autonomy plan for Western Sahara, but that decision prompted Algeria to suspend key trade links with Madrid.¹⁷ This established a recurring pattern where a diplomatic rapprochement between Spain and Algeria prompts Morocco to loosen its border patrols, sending new waves of migrants toward Ceuta as leverage.

Consequently, this long-standing pattern culminated directly in the 2026 Ceuta border crisis. The surge unfolded shortly after Spanish leadership traveled to Algiers to reaffirm strategic ties with Algeria.¹⁸ Just as in 2021, there are speculations that Morocco responded to Spain's diplomatic engagement with its chief regional rival by stepping back from border enforcement, once again using border security at the Ceuta frontier as a powerful geopolitical lever. Meanwhile, Morocco rejects such claims.¹⁹

1.2. Arguments Over Schengen

Twenty-two European Union leaders signed a joint letter criticising Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez following the events in Ceuta. Initiated by Italy and Denmark, the coalition, which spans political backgrounds and includes figures like German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, argued that Spain's plan to grant legal status to up to 1.2 million undocumented migrants, announced earlier this year, served as an attractive incentive for illegal entries.

Although nearly all the migrants who entered Ceuta have already returned to Morocco and none reached continental Europe, the signatories called for stricter border management, a review of policy incentives, a special ministerial conference, and potential temporary border controls across the bloc. Some nations, including Italy and France, have already instituted heightened travel restrictions on Spain, with Meloni having proposed Spain's temporary removal from the Schengen area.²⁰

In response, Sánchez firmly defended his administration while launching counteraccusations, describing their actions as illegal, self-interested, and driven by misinformation or political motives. The Spanish Foreign Ministry pointed out that the regularisation initiative applied strictly to residents who arrived prior to January 1, 2026, meaning none of the recent arrivals in Ceuta would qualify.

In his own letter to EU leadership, Sánchez argued that excluding Spain from the Schengen zone violates European and humanitarian standards as well as the principle of member-state solidarity. He further contended that Spain has effectively managed its perimeter, highlighting that the country recorded only half the number of unauthorised entries as Italy between 2021 and 2026, and cautioned that internal division ultimately weakens the entire European Union.²¹

These internal divisions appear to reflect a broader structural weakness in European border governance. The absence of mandatory, automated solidarity mechanisms leaves frontline Mediterranean states to manage border issues independently, exposing the bloc to internal friction whenever external boundaries are breached.

1.3. Political Impact on Sánchez and Europe's Right

Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez faces intense political vulnerability as domestic and international right-wing figures exploit the Ceuta border collapse to challenge his leadership. Domestically, domestic opposition figures have aggressively targeted Sánchez. Alberto Núñez Feijóo of the center-right Partido Popular designated the events a national security emergency, while Santiago Abascal of the hard-right Vox party directly held Sánchez responsible by pointing to his recent scheme to legalise hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants.

Furthermore, Sánchez relies on crucial parliamentary support from the right-wing Catalan party Junts to survive potential votes of no confidence. With Junts under electoral pressure from Sílvia Orriols's surging hard-right party Aliança Catalana, there is growing risk that these anti-immigration forces could withdraw their backing and collapse Sánchez's precarious governing coalition.²²

On the international stage, right-wing leaders have organised to frame the situation as a systemic threat to European stability and push for punitive measures against Sánchez's government.²³ Prominent centre-right European politicians have used the escalation to criticise Madrid, arguing that Spain has lost control of its borders. Right-wing politicians across other EU countries contend that Spain is obligated to protect Europe's outer borders, warning that unmanaged arrivals will eventually spread into final destination nations.²⁴

Beyond Europe, American conservative figures also intervened, with the US Department of Homeland Security suggesting Spanish voters needed a Donald Trump-like figure, alongside provocative social media commentary from Elon Musk. To preserve his government and maintain European integration, Sánchez is now under pressure to convince both domestic voters and European allies that the Ceuta events are distinct from his broader migration agenda, resisting right-wing momentum that seeks to isolate Spain and fragment the Schengen agreement.²⁵

As such, the Ceuta incident illustrates that the management of the EU's southern perimeter remains tied to regional diplomatic balances, national policy decisions, and broader European solidarity mechanisms. The event highlights how external security incidents quickly trigger intra-EU disputes over Schengen governance and amplify domestic political risks for frontline governments.

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