



Blog



MEANINGFUL LINKS, LIMITED CHOICE: RELOCATION UNDER THE EU MIGRATION PACT

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About the Author

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EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



Introduction

Imagine a Syrian applicant whose application for international protection is registered in Italy. During the relocation process, the authorities learn that the applicant speaks Czech and has an adult cousin legally present in Prague. The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) identifies language skills as a possible cultural link and adult cousins as a possible family link. Both may therefore amount to 'meaningful links' with Czechia.¹

That information does not guarantee relocation to Czechia. Matching operates only between people in the relocation pool and Member States with an open relocation pledge. It also depends on the implementation of pledges, reasonable preferences expressed by Member States, individual reception needs and operational constraints.²

The applicant must be allowed to provide information and documentation about meaningful links, but the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR) expressly states that this opportunity does not create a right to choose a particular Member State of relocation.³

The AMMR has applied since 12 June 2026, and the first Annual Solidarity Pool has entered its implementation phase. For 2026, the Council set a reference level of 21,000 relocations and EUR 420 million in financial contributions. It is nevertheless too early

¹ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on asylum and migration management, OJ L 2024/1351 (May 22, 2024), art. 67(3), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1351/oj>; European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism: Operational Implementation of Relocation* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, March 2026), sec. 4.6.1, <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/publications/practical-guide-solidarity-mechanism-part-i>.

² EUAA, *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism*, secs. 4.6, 4.6.2, and 4.6.3.

³ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, art. 67(3) and (4).

to assess systematically whether meaningful links are shaping completed matches in practice.⁴

This blog argues that meaningful links are best understood as a partial safeguard. They can make relocation more responsive to applicants' family and social realities, but they cannot determine the outcome. Their practical value will depend on whether national authorities treat them as a genuine matching factor rather than a formal box-ticking exercise.

⁴ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, art. 85, as corrected by Corrigendum to Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, OJ L 2025/90929 (November 25, 2025), correction 10, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1351/corrigendum/2025-11-25/oj/eng>; Council of the European Union, "Migration and Asylum: Member States Agree on Solidarity Pool," press release, December 8, 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/12/08/migration-and-asylum-member-states-agree-on-solidarity-pool/>.

Responsibility Rules Meet Social Realities

The New Pact combines revised responsibility rules with a permanent solidarity mechanism. The AMMR determines which Member State is responsible for examining an application, while the recast Eurodac Regulation expands the database supporting asylum and migration management. Solidarity is mandatory at the collective level, but Member States retain flexibility over whether they contribute through relocation, financial contributions or alternative solidarity measures.⁵

Administrative allocation, however, does not operate in a social vacuum. Research on secondary movements identifies family and ethnic networks, language, employment prospects, living conditions and perceived opportunities as factors that can influence where applicants seek to settle. These factors do not determine behaviour in every case, but they help explain why a legally assigned destination may not always be experienced as workable.⁶

Most of this evidence concerns the pre-Pact system. It cannot prove that matching on the basis of meaningful links will reduce secondary movements under the AMMR. It does, however, identify a practical risk that the new mechanism should be designed to test rather than assume away.

From Legal Responsibility to Relocation Matching

The concept of 'meaningful links' is not a single, free-standing legal test. Links to a Member State matter at different stages and with different consequences. First, specific connections can determine legal responsibility. The AMMR's hierarchy includes

⁵ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, arts. 38-50 and 56-65; European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1358 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on the Establishment of Eurodac, OJ L 2024/1358 (May 22, 2024), recitals 2-9 and art. 1, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1358/oj>.

⁶ Anja Radjenovic, *Secondary Movements of Asylum-Seekers in the EU Asylum System* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, June 2024), 2-3, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762326/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)762326_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/762326/EPRS_BRI(2024)762326_EN.pdf).

criteria concerning unaccompanied minors, family members, residence documents and visas, diplomas or qualifications, entry and dependent persons. A diploma issued in a Member State, for example, can make that state responsible where the application is registered less than six years after the diploma or qualification was issued.⁷

The Regulation also retains a discretionary humanitarian clause. Before a first decision on the substance, a Member State may ask another Member State to take charge of an applicant in order to bring together family relations on humanitarian grounds, based particularly on meaningful family, social or cultural links. This can capture connections that do not satisfy the mandatory criteria, but its use remains discretionary.⁸

Second, meaningful links inform solidarity relocation. Article 67 requires the benefitting Member State - the state receiving solidarity support - to identify people who could be relocated and, where applicable, to consider meaningful family or cultural links. The relationship with responsibility determination is not a simple sequence: applicants covered by specified family and dependency criteria are generally excluded from relocation, while Article 68 allows a limited responsibility determination procedure to take place after relocation in other cases.⁹

The EUAA guide gives the concept operational content. For adults, family links may include legally present adult children, siblings, parents, cousins, nephews, nieces or grandparents. Cultural links may include language skills, previous residence, employment, study, support networks or close personal friends where those connections could facilitate integration.¹⁰

⁷ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, arts. 25-34, especially art. 30(1).

⁸ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, art. 35(2).

⁹ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, arts. 67(3), 67(5), and 68(2); EUAA, *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism*, secs. 4.3.1-4.3.2.

¹⁰ EUAA, *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism*, sec. 4.6.1.

Meaningful Links in Practice

The benefitting Member State establishes a pool of eligible people, but inclusion does not guarantee relocation. Matching then assigns a person to a Member State with an open pledge. Where possible, the person should be matched with a state to which they have a meaningful link, and authorities may need to assess several links or decide whether the evidence is sufficient.¹¹

The limits are explicit. If the linked Member State has already fulfilled its pledge, the benefitting state must consider a match elsewhere or remove the person from the pool. Vulnerability-related reception capacity and reasonable Member State preferences may also affect the outcome. Meaningful links therefore operate inside, rather than above, the solidarity architecture.¹²

Their inclusion still matters. Social connections can provide practical orientation, employment contacts, wider networks and community assistance. Relocation to a country where a person lacks language knowledge or support may make settlement harder. But the evidence does not justify claiming that every linked match will succeed or every mismatch will cause onward movement. Giving evidenced links greater operational weight may improve the prospects that relocation is workable and sustainable; whether it actually reduces secondary movements will require systematic evaluation.¹³

ECRE has welcomed the explicit recognition of meaningful links while arguing that applicants' preferences should receive practical weight. A possible objection is that more predictable matching could be presented politically as a 'pull factor'. That concern has long accompanied relocation debates, but it is not an empirically established effect

¹¹ EUAA, *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism*, secs. 4.1, 4.3.3, 4.4, 4.6, and 4.6.1.

¹² EUAA, *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism*, secs. 4.6, 4.6.2, and 4.6.3; European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, recital 34.

¹³ Radjenovic, *Secondary Movements of Asylum-Seekers*, 2-3; UNHCR, "Promoting Integration through Social Connections," *Integration Handbook*, last updated March 9, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/handbooks/ih/social-connections/promoting-integration-through-social-connections>.

of the AMMR's meaningful-links rule. The Regulation does not create free choice, and the links at issue normally reflect relationships that already exist.¹⁴

What Implementation Should Prioritise

Three implementation priorities follow. First, national authorities should identify links early, explain what evidence may be submitted and avoid inconsistent thresholds. The EUAA guide expressly recognises that claimed links may be substantiated through evidence, including circumstantial evidence, which is important when formal documents are unavailable.¹⁵

Second, the Commission should publish aggregated annual data on how the rule operates: how many people substantiated meaningful links, what proportion were matched with a linked Member State, and the main reasons why linked matches were not possible. These indicators could be incorporated into the European Annual Asylum and Migration Report, with the Technical-Level Solidarity Forum and the EU Solidarity Coordinator supporting consistent data collection. Without such reporting, it will be difficult to know whether Article 67 functions as a meaningful safeguard.¹⁶

Third, for Czechia, the issue will become operationally relevant if it participates in relocation. Where Czech authorities participate in matching, Czech-language knowledge, previous residence or study, employment links and legally present relatives

¹⁴ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), *Comments on the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management* (Brussels: ECRE, May 2024), 78-80, https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ECRE_Comments_Asylum-and-Migration-Management-Regulation.pdf; ECRE, *Comments on the Commission Proposal for a Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management* (Brussels: ECRE, January 2021), 70, <https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECRE-Comments-RAMM.pdf>.

¹⁵ EUAA, *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism*, sec. 4.6.1.

¹⁶ European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1351, art. 9; EUAA, *Practical Guide on the Solidarity Mechanism*, secs. 4.6-4.6.3.

should be assessed consistently. Where people without such links are received, targeted language, reception and integration support will be especially important.

The objective should not be perfect matching, which the AMMR cannot promise. It should be to reduce avoidable mismatches, explain decisions clearly and provide additional support when a linked match is impossible.

Conclusion

The New Pact does not ignore applicants' connections to Member States. It incorporates defined links into responsibility determination, permits wider family, social and cultural links to support a discretionary request, and requires meaningful links to be considered, where applicable, in solidarity relocation.

Yet recognition does not determine the result. Applicants may present evidence, but they cannot choose the Member State of relocation. A match remains dependent on open pledges, reception considerations, Member State preferences and procedural feasibility.

Taking meaningful links seriously is therefore not equivalent to granting free choice. It is a way to make relocation better informed and potentially more workable. The first implementation cycle should now be used to test that proposition transparently, rather than treating the collection of links as an end in itself.

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