

Vacancy for a full-time PhD Researcher in Law (UCLouvain) and Political Science (ULB) in Inter-Disciplinary Research on Migration

The research project “EU Migration Diplomacy as Law-Making”, funded by the FNRS, is seeking to fill **a fully funded full-time PhD doctoral position in Law and Political Science** in joint supervision (*cotutelle de thèse*) between UCLouvain (Law) and ULB (Political Science), in Belgium.

About the project

EU Migration Diplomacy as Law-Making is an interdisciplinary study focused on the European Union’s (EU) cooperation with non-EU countries on migration (see Annex 1 for a summary of the research project). It examines how and why the EU uses soft law instruments to promote international and EU legal norms for migration management in non-EU countries and regions and whether these instruments impact the domestic legal systems of partner countries. By exploring the concept of migration diplomacy within the 'Rabat process,' the project aims to understand soft law formation and its legal effects. It highlights that non-EU countries maintain autonomy while cooperating with the EU, benefiting from diverse forms of soft law. The project aims to uncover how migration norms are shaped by interactions within the Rabat process and how soft law can act as regulation, influencing non-EU countries’ legal orders. A robust research design, focusing on intermediary actors and employing qualitative methods, will seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of the EU’s Migration Diplomacy as a law-making practice.

About the doctoral position

The doctoral researcher will examine how non-binding international agreements exist, focusing on how different actors are involved in migration diplomacy and for what reasons. The aim is to understand how prescriptions about migration management are formed through the interactions between the actors of the Rabat process, which will be taken as a site of investigation into (soft) law formation, as well as the background knowledge that shapes their practices in that respect. The doctoral candidate will conduct empirical work, mainly through semi-structured elite interviews and document interpretation.

As a PhD researcher...

- You will develop your research proposal within the project's framework and conduct research (please refer to the summary in Annex 1), including fieldwork and study stays in Morocco and Tunisia.
- You will join the EDEM research team (UCLouvain) and the REPI center (ULB). You will benefit from a vibrant research environment and regularly engage with peers, senior researchers, and international guests.
- You will receive appropriate training (exposure to relevant academic materials, reading group sessions, etc.) in interpretive research methodologies and methods to foster your interdisciplinary skills.
- You will present your research at international conferences and engage in research networks and other ad hoc teaching activities.
- You can follow the Odysseus Network’s one-year Certificate in EU migration and asylum Law and/or the Odysseus Summer School that takes place every year in Brussels in July.

Your profile

- You hold a Master's degree in Political Science, Law and/or International Relations¹. A mixed training in Law and Political Science is an asset.
- You have a demonstrated excellent track record of academic achievement.
- You can demonstrate an interest in addressing migration research across law and international relations, combining subjects and disciplines from both areas. Prior experience in conducting research is an asset.
- You are interested in empirical research methods or motivated to receive training in this area.
- You are fluent in English, the project's primary working language. Proficiency in French and/or other languages is an asset.

What we offer

- A fully funded full-time Scholarship for 12 months starting on 01/10/2025 (with a foreseen extension of 36 months for a combined total of 48 months, conditioned upon the positive evaluation of your research work at the end of the initial 12-month period).²
- A unique interdisciplinary training in Law and Political Science. Supervision will be ensured by Professor Sylvie Sarolea (UCLouvain) and Professor Julien Jeandesboz (ULB). As a doctoral researcher, you will cooperate closely with the post-doctoral researcher working on the project.
- Access to diverse, dynamic, cross-border research networks (EDEM and REPI) and equal time spent at both universities. You will spend two years at UCLouvain and two years at ULB.
- A solid work environment, surrounded by experts in subjects closely related to the project and/or involved in interdisciplinary research.
- A path to obtain a double doctoral degree in Law and Political Science.

Application process

The deadline for the application is **15 July 2025** at the latest. Your application must be sent to sylvie.sarolea@uclouvain.be and include the following documents in PDF format:

- A one-page motivation letter.
- Your CV, together with an overview of your study results.
- A diploma transcript (if already in your possession), including your grades. If you hold a non-Belgian diploma in a language other than French, English, Dutch or German, please add a translation of your diploma in one of the mentioned languages.
- A 2,000-word (excluding references and footnotes) research proposal outlining your understanding and interpretation of the research to be conducted in the framework of the project. The proposal should include a short review of literature relevant to the project (800 words), a methodological section on implementing the project's research design (800 words) and a research plan over four years (400 words).

Short-listed candidates will be informed by early August 2025, and interviews with short-listed candidates are expected to take place in the first week of September.

The successful candidate will start as of 1 October 2025.

For more information about this vacancy, please contact Eleonora.frasca@uclouvain.be

¹ To be acquired before 15 September 2025 at the latest.

² The doctoral scholarship is subject to the condition of your enrolment as a doctoral student at UCLouvain and, upon admission to the doctoral programme at UCLouvain, to the condition of successful enrolment at ULB and the stipulation of a convention (*cotutelle de thèse*).

An Interdisciplinary Study on Soft Law Formation and its Legal Effects in EU Migration Cooperation with Third Countries

This research project examines how the European Union (EU) cooperates with non-EU countries on migration and how this cooperation contributes to norm formation in non-EU countries. The EU migration diplomacy increasingly relies on informal agreements – memoranda of understanding, mobility partnerships, and technical cooperation – rather than formal treaties—these instruments, while non-binding, shape migration management norms and practices across borders. The project combines legal and political science approaches to study how soft law instruments are formed and what legal effects they produce, especially in non-EU countries like Tunisia and Morocco.

Objectives and Approach

The project has two key goals:

1. **Understanding Law-Making through Migration Diplomacy:** The project will investigate how informal EU migration agreements – emerging from initiatives like the Rabat Process – function as mechanisms of law formation. We challenge the dominant "externalisation" narrative that sees the EU exporting its migration control policies one-directionally. Instead, we emphasize the agency of non-EU countries in co-shaping these instruments.
2. **Studying Legal Effects in Partner States:** The project analyses how these soft law instruments influence the domestic legal orders of partner countries, even without formal binding status. Do EU-promoted strategies and cooperation projects lead to legal reforms in Tunisia and Morocco? If yes, how? If not, why?

The Rabat Process as Empirical Focus. We focus on the Rabat Process, a long-standing regional forum for migration cooperation between the EU, the EU Member States and non-EU countries in Africa. It constitutes a central platform for the diffusion of norms, the convergence of governance practices, and the negotiation of policy orientations. The Process is brokered by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and supported by national focal points from 57 countries.

Structure and Roles. The research team includes a postdoctoral researcher (with a legal background) and a PhD candidate (with a law and/or political science background). The doctoral researcher will explore how norm diffusion emerges in the Rabat Process through elite interviews and document analysis (Work Package 1). The postdoctoral researcher will analyse the impact of EU migration instruments on domestic laws in Tunisia and Morocco (Work Package 2).

Why This Matters. This project contributes to rethinking EU migration cooperation as a form of transnational law-making rather than mere policy export. It addresses a significant research gap by looking beyond legal formalism and how diplomacy, institutional practices, and soft law instruments shape legal realities. It also highlights the role of non-EU countries and intermediaries in shaping the migration governance landscape.

Who Should Apply? This project offers the opportunity to engage in cutting-edge, impactful research on one of the most pressing challenges in EU external relations today, at the crossroads between law-making and policymaking.