PRAGUE PROCESS
ПРАЖСКИЙ ПРОЦЕСС

Prague Process Migration Observatory: Research & Analysis 2024-26

MIGRATION OBSERVATORY

Funded by
the European Union

Disclaimer

This publication was produced in the framework of the Prague Process Migration Observatory. The Prague Process is funded by the European Union through the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF), which is implemented by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).

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International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2026

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Required citation: Scissa C., Fallone A., Sahadeo J., Morrison N., Düvell F., Kulesa A., Jurić T., Hohwieler L., Katsiaficas C., Hendow M., Hodgson G. (2026). Prague Process Migration Observatory: Research and Analysis 2024-26. Prague Process, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Vienna.

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Prague Process Migration Observatory

The Prague Process is an intergovernmental migration dialogue involving nearly 50 countries from Europe and Central Asia. During the third Ministerial Conference in 2016, the participating states agreed to establish the Prague Process Migration Observatory to enhance information sharing among the parties and better inform policy makers and experts from migration authorities in their decisions.

Since 2018, the Migration Observatory has engaged academic researchers and state experts from the region to conduct systematic and ad hoc analyses of significant migration trends and policy developments at both regional and national levels, addressing contemporary migration challenges. The publications produced by the Observatory identify concrete lessons learned, map potential future trends, and offer relevant policy recommendations. These findings also inform senior-level discussions within the Prague Process.

The Migration Observatory provides impartial, evidence-based analysis aligned with the six thematic areas outlined in the Prague Process Action Plan:

- **Preventing illegal migration;**
- **Return, readmission and reintegration;**
- **Legal and labour migration;**
- **Integration;**
- **Migration and development;**
- **Asylum and international protection.**

All publications are available in both English and Russian at **www.pragueprocess.eu**

Acknowledgements

Dear Reader,

I am pleased to present the fifth collection of publications produced by the Prague Process Migration Observatory, bringing together research and analyses from 2024 to 2026. Building on its established role as a platform for evidence-based research and policy dialogue, the Observatory continues to bring together academic researchers, experts, and policymakers to examine evolving migration dynamics and support informed policymaking across the Prague Process region.

This edition reflects the increasingly complex and interconnected nature of migration challenges, shaped by geopolitical developments, demographic change, technological advances, and environmental pressures. The selected publications provide timely insights and forward-looking perspectives across several thematic priorities of the Prague Process Action Plan 2023-2027. Key areas explored in this collection include:

- **Climate change and demographic resilience**, examining the implications of environmental change for migration, protection and adaptation strategies, alongside long-term demographic scenarios and strategic migration planning in the Western Balkans.
- **Geopolitics and forced migration**, analysing developments in Russian migration policy, migration trends involving Belarus and the EU, and the consequences of Russia's continued war against Ukraine, including attacks on critical energy infrastructure.
- **Migration governance and international cooperation**, exploring the implications of EU accession processes for migration, asylum and border management in Ukraine and Moldova, as well as opportunities for skills mobility partnerships across the Prague Process region.
- **Digitalisation and emerging technologies**, assessing the implications of digital migration management systems and artificial intelligence for administrative processes, migrants' experiences and the future of legal labour migration pathways.

Together, these contributions underline the importance of anticipating emerging challenges, strengthening institutional preparedness, and developing migration policies grounded in sound evidence and regional cooperation. The Migration Observatory remains committed to providing independent, high-quality research that bridges academic knowledge and practical policy needs.

The publication of this volume would not have been possible without the dedication and expertise of many individuals. I extend my sincere gratitude to all contributing authors and researchers for their valuable insights and rigorous work. My appreciation also goes to the Prague Process Secretariat and the editorial team for their continued commitment, coordination and careful preparation of this collection. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the European Union to the Prague Process and its Migration Observatory.

Finally, I wish to thank our readers and partners for their continued interest and engagement. I hope that this collection will serve as a useful reference for policymakers, researchers and practitioners, stimulate further dialogue, and contribute to more informed, resilient and cooperative approaches to migration governance across the Prague Process region.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Phil. Radim Zak
Head of Prague Process Secretariat
ICMPD Head of Region Eastern Europe and Central Asia

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PREPAREDNESS & RESILIENCE

Migration in the context of climate and environmental changes in non-EU Prague Process States: Exploring Vulnerabilities, Policy Gaps and Available Protection Frameworks

Analytical Report

Dr. Chiara Scissa

October 2024

Executive summary

This analytical report examines the political challenges and responses to migration driven by climate and environmental changes (MECC) across the non-EU Prague Process states (non-EU PPS). It offers evidence of cases substantiating the climate change-migration nexus and elaborates on the impact that climate change can have on migration movements. It investigates the role of the EU in supporting climate adaptation in non-EU PPS, while reflecting on the impact that latent and ongoing conflicts, often interrelated with water scarcity and mismanagement of (already scant) natural resources, may have in exacerbating climate vulnerability and migration movements. The report illustrates relevant national protection practices covering a wide range of people, both nationals and non-nationals, affected by climate and environmental factors. It also analyses the protection frameworks available to MECC at the national and international level.

Non-EU PPS are recommended to engage more at the supranational level to develop comprehensive and uniform policy responses addressing specific climate and environmental challenges forcing people out of their homes, as well as related protection needs. States should improve climate adaptation and mitigation actions in their internal and external policy dimensions and enhance regional cooperation on climate and environmental matters. Finally, they should consider developing or reinforcing concerted actions, regional cooperation, and transboundary water agreements to properly and fairly manage shared water resources, their use and distribution. This in turn would deepen regional integration, while avoiding the escalation of tensions or conflicts over natural resources.

Introduction

Climate change and environmental degradation are emerging as critical drivers of human mobility. Global warming is exacerbating the impact, frequency, and intensity of disasters and extreme weather events. As a result, individuals and communities around the world are increasingly forced to move in search of safety, stability, and better livelihoods. This phenomenon – often referred to as migration in the context of climate and environmental changes (MECC) – presents profound challenges for policymakers, particularly in regions where environmental vulnerabilities intersect with political instability, economic fragility, armed conflicts, and limited governance capacity.

Non-EU Prague Process States (non-EU PPS) – a diverse group of countries spanning Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus[I] – are also affected by these dynamics.[1] Climate change in their cases acts as a threat-multiplier by interacting with other political and socio-economic factors, exacerbating vulnerability, reducing resilience and triggering migratory movements within and from these countries.

The nexus between climate change and migration as well as the impact of conflicts and resource scarcity on climate vulnerability and migration movements represent important features of this region and are at the core of this report, which provides a patchwork analysis of the complex interplay between these features along with the ongoing efforts in addressing them.

Chapter 1 begins by offering a regional profile of non-EU PPS, focusing on the climate vulnerabilities and resulting migration dynamics. It also examines the interplay between conflict and natural resources, which intensifies migration pressures, and explores how EU policies on climate adaptation contribute to reducing these pressures by strengthening resilience to environmental changes in non-EU PPS.

Chapter 2 delves into the protection frameworks and assistance provided to people fleeing climate and environmental changes, comparing national practices across the region, and identifying relevant shortcomings.

The report concludes by offering policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the protection of individuals displaced by climate and environmental factors and improving related (sub)regional cooperation. It represents a step towards understanding the scope of the challenges confronted, allowing policymakers across the Prague Process region to navigate this landscape.

1. Regional Profile of Non-EU Prague Process States

1.1. Climate vulnerabilities and resulting migration dynamics

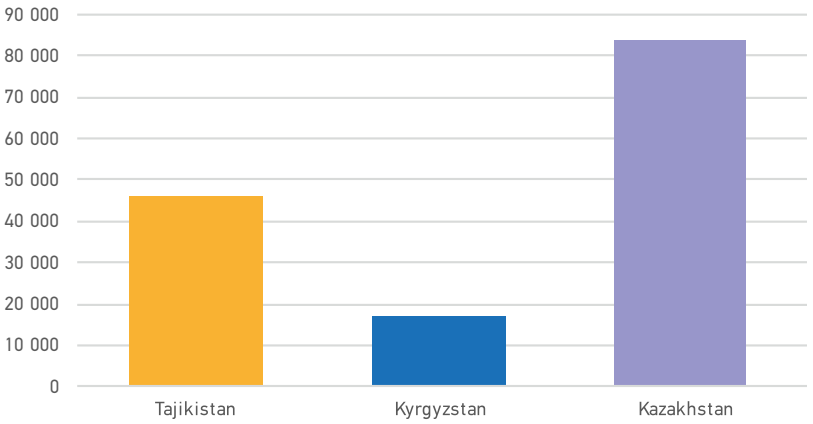
Within the Prague Process region, **Central Asia** emerges as one of the most climate-vulnerable areas, facing significant risks from aridity and extreme weather events. The projected rise in intensity and frequency of sudden-onset disasters, such as floods, and droughts, is poised to exacerbate land degradation and desertification,

I Non-EU Prague Process States covered by this report are: Western Balkans countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia); Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine); Schengen countries (Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland), and Türkiye. *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

undermining economies dependent on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture, energy, and cotton production. The region's increasing water scarcity and soaring temperatures are projected to inflict substantial economic damage, potentially leading to employment losses.[2] By 2030, Central Asia could lose around 32,300 full-time jobs due to heat stress, with Tajikistan expected to suffer the most, losing approximately 4,900 full-time jobs.[3]

Central Asia's reliance on fossil fuels, such as oil and gas in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and hydro-power plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, alters their resilience to climate change.[4] Evidence suggests that climate and environmental factors are increasingly shaping human mobility patterns in Central Asia, including internal displacement, rural-to-urban migration, cross-border labour migration, and planned relocation.[5] In Kyrgyzstan, climate change has already induced many individuals working in climate-sensitive sectors to migrate abroad in search of better economic opportunities. The country recently recognised that the lack of clean water and land, crop failures and disasters are among the most common factors triggering forced migration, displacement and relocation.[6] Similarly, in Tajikistan, entire communities have been relocated from disaster-prone areas, while thousands of people in Kazakhstan have been displaced due to floods and wildfires.[7]

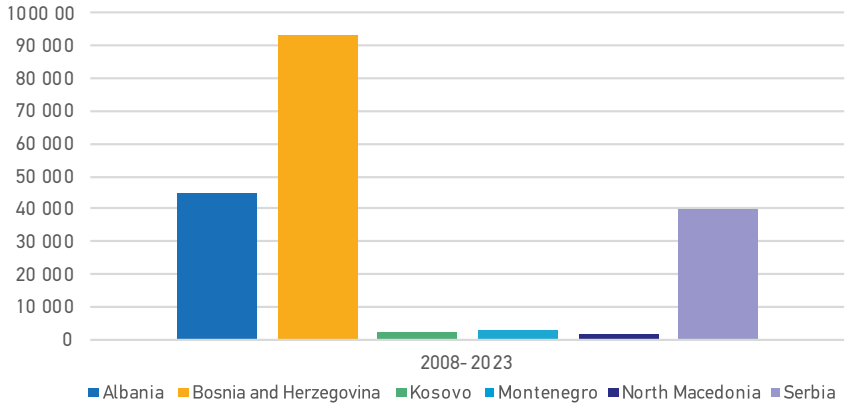
Chart 1. Internal disaster displacement in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (2008–2023)



Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

The **Western Balkans** mirror Central Asia's vulnerabilities, with climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation significantly impacting the region. Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the Western Balkans, with over 80% of its municipalities at risk from floods and landslides.[8] Not only is there evidence that environmental degradation has already contributed to emigration, but the nexus between migration, climate and environmental factors is emerging as a driver of immigration and transit flows. IOM study found that 5% of surveyed migrants and asylum seekers traveling through the Western Balkans cite environmental and climate changes as the main reason for leaving their countries of origin.[9]

Chart 2. Internal disaster displacement in the Western Balkans (2008–2023)



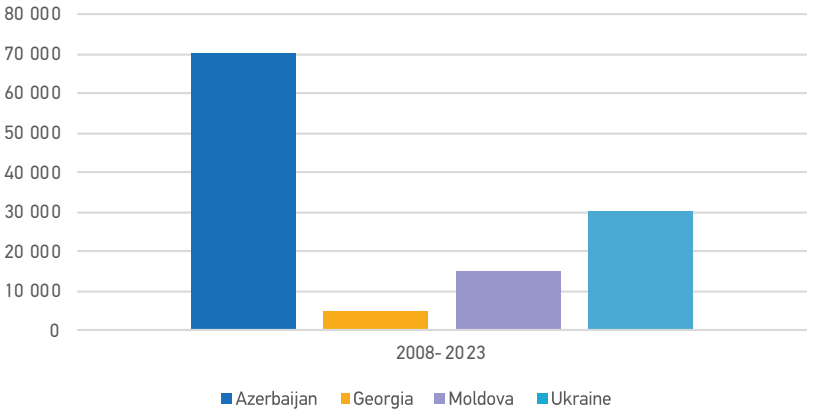
Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

Türkiye is similarly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, having experienced 4.5 million internal disaster displacements between 2008 and 2023, primarily due to earthquakes. Without urgent action, increasing droughts and heatwaves along with rising sea level, coastal erosion, and sudden-onset events could cost Türkiye up to 2.26% of its GDP by 2050.[10] Global warming is also reducing the availability of water for food production and agriculture, worsening social and regional disparities and rural-urban migration. The construction of major dams since the 1970s, aimed at mitigating water scarcity, has instead degraded the environment and harmed agricultural activities of Turkish farmers, while also resulting in forced relocation and internal migration of farmers and seasonal workers from rural to urban areas.[11] Dam projects, such as the Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi[12] and the Atatürk Dam[13], have displaced hundreds of thousands, often forcing families to relocate under adverse conditions. The relocation process failed to adequately compensate people for the land they had lost, nor did it consider their needs and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The 2000 national census revealed a significant growth in urban populations due to the intensive use of arable land, which led to migration from rural to urban areas, particularly from the country's east to west.[14] Years later, the government recognised that the loss or improper use of natural resources resulted in poverty, which in turn caused "mass migration from rural to urban areas" in search of better employment opportunities.[15]

The 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye further highlight the intricate links between disasters and migration. In February 2023, 11 Turkish provinces were hit by devastating earthquakes, significantly affecting migrant communities, particularly Syrians. This led to temporary and internal movements from urban to safer rural areas, compelled relocations to undamaged neighbouring provinces, and voluntary returns to safer areas in their countries of origin, including Syria.[16] The Turkish government temporarily suspended the travel permit requirement in affected provinces and provided support to relocated migrants, including food aid, rent and bill assistance, but many migrants faced untreated psychological issues and struggled to meet basic needs, particularly housing.[17]

Within the **Eastern Partnership**, the South Caucasus countries are progressively becoming drier and warmer, facing landslides and floods. Food insecurity, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity are severe concerns for these countries. In this context, **Georgia** expects a rise in "ecological migrants" and is developing protection programmes for children and their families forced to relocate due to "natural disasters or crisis induced by climate change.[18] **Azerbaijan** has recognised that most of its current environmental problems stem from unsustainable industrial and agricultural policies, aggravated by mass displacements due to pressure on arable land, water, and waste management systems.[19] Similar problems exist outside the Caucasus. **Moldova**, with its reliance on agriculture and energy imports, is particularly vulnerable to rising temperature, aridity, and disasters like floods, storms, and droughts.[20] **Moldova** has acknowledged that climate crisis can lead to forced migration movements and that climate factors have contributed to accelerating emigration from the country, which has resulted in land abandonment and lack of workforce in agriculture.[21] **Ukraine**, too, faces heightened risks from climate change, with increasing likelihood of droughts and floods threatening agricultural production.[22] Disasters caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine further compound these challenges, likely influencing future migration patterns.

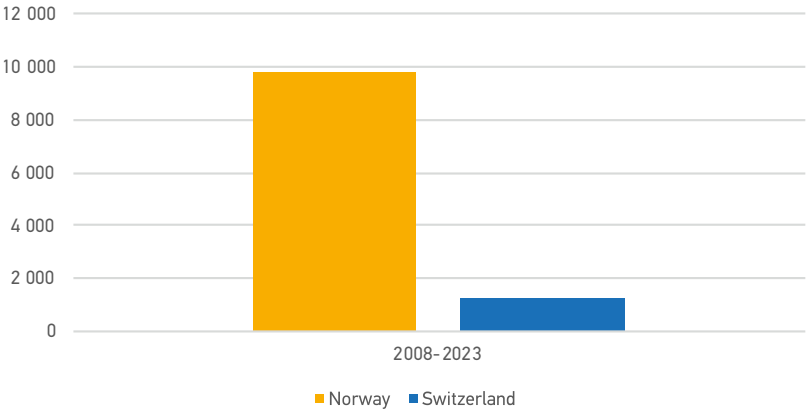
Chart 3. Internal disaster displacement in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (2008-2023)



Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

Within the **Schengen Area**, countries are not immune to the effects of climate change either. **Liechtenstein**, for instance, anticipates prolonged heat waves and reduced precipitation, which could heighten water stress in agriculture and reduce crop yields. An increased frequency of extreme events, such as forest fires, storms, and avalanches, may also affect forests. In **Norway**, rising temperatures are expected to accelerate snowmelt and reduce the volume of glaciers, leading to higher sea levels and more frequent extreme weather events. Norwegian coastal areas, already vulnerable to storm surges, are expected to face more frequent inundations. In 2023 alone, storms led to 5,800 internal displacements, highlighting the ongoing impact of these extreme weather events.[23] In **Switzerland**, a potential 1.5°C global warming could translate to a 3°C increase locally, accelerating the retreat and the melting of Alpine glaciers and impacting the availability of water for agriculture and energy. In 2023, dry and wet mass movements together with wildfires displaced hundreds of people in Switzerland.[24]

Chart 4. Internal disaster displacement in Norway and Switzerland (2008-2023)



Source: IDMC Data collection of internal disaster displacement movements in the selected countries

Research on the impact of climate change on irregular migration toward the EU and Schengen countries[25] suggests that weather events, such as higher rainfall in countries of origin, may influence migration toward Europe. As these patterns emerge across different regions, the interconnectedness of climate change, environmental degradation, and migration becomes increasingly clear, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive, adaptive responses.

1.2. Conflict, natural resources and climate change

Karabakh

Conflicts over natural resources, particularly water, further complicate the climate change-migration nexus in the region. In Southern Caucasus, the Kura and Araks river serve as vital water sources, flowing through several countries before emptying

into the Caspian Sea. Water distribution in the region is uneven, with Georgia being the most water-rich and Azerbaijan the most water-scarce. Water resources have been a significant factor in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, particularly regarding the Sarsang dam and hydro-electric plant in Karabakh, which generates most of the region's electricity. In 2015, Azerbaijan raised concerns with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe about the dam's misfunctioning, citing the lack of regular maintenance and related risks to the whole region and deliberate water deprivation for Azerbaijani inhabitants in bordering areas.[26] The Assembly's 2016 resolution considered this as "environmental aggression".[27]

Armenia's and Azerbaijan's mutual accusations of ecocide and environmental damage have hindered efforts to reach a peaceful and successful agreement on water management. In January 2023, Azerbaijan suited Armenia under the 1979 Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats, binding for both countries, for allegedly destroying its environment by causing deforestation, pollution and biodiversity loss during the Karabakh conflict. Concurrently, Karabakh populations accused Azerbaijan of obstructing power line repairs, leading to electricity shortages. The same year, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called on states to refrain from exploiting the environment as a warfare tactic and urged the prosecution of ecocide while establishing protections for "environmental refugees" fleeing an armed conflict.[28]

The conflict over water resources in Karabakh persisted until September 2023, when Azerbaijan regained control over the region, effectively ending the self-proclaimed "Republic of Artsakh". The EU intervened to support normalisation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and aid Armenia in accommodating over 100,000 persons who left Karabakh for Armenia. In April 2024, Armenia and Azerbaijan had reached a preliminary agreement on border delimitation and territorial integrity, while the EU announced a €270 million Resilience and Growth Plan to support Armenia over the next four years.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia

The frozen conflicts in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have isolated these territories from international environmental protection and cooperation, limiting their ability to effectively mitigate the adverse effects of climate change and cope with disasters, especially earthquakes and landslides. Despite the Liakhvi and Enguri rivers crossing the territories of Georgia proper, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia and its two breakaway regions do not share water distribution and management systems. The lack of communication and cooperation among these territories has contributed to a reduction of the river flow and has undermined the rivers' ability to sustain the natural ecosystem.[29] Moreover, the Enguri dam and hydropower plants, located on the Georgia proper and Abkhazian territory, remain critical for energy security, serving as the main source of electricity for both Georgia and the breakaway Abkhazia. The conflicting parties have agreed to maintain its constant operation, but disagreements over energy distribution persist.

Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has inflicted severe environmental damage alongside its humanitarian and economic toll. Attacks on chemical plants, oil depots and water facilities have triggered air, water, and soil pollution in Ukraine, damaging ecosystems and biodiversity. According to Ukraine's Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, by July 2023, there were 2,450 reports of Russian military actions with direct environmental impact and 257 instances of environmental crimes. The destruction of Ukraine's largest dam, Kakhovka, in June 2023, led to disastrous flooding, mass displacement, and human casualties, with long-term environmental and health consequences. The EU condemned the attack, qualifying it as ecocide and the worst environmental disaster in Europe since Chernobyl.[30]

The conflict has heightened Ukraine's vulnerability to climate change, forcing the country to divert funds away from climate initiatives to address war-related consequences. Moreover, national efforts to achieve climate neutrality have been obstructed by Russia's weaponization of energy supplies, and widespread damage to Ukraine's renewable energy systems. The war will likely worsen the climate crisis and delay the global transition to renewable energy.[31] Moreover, it is conceivable that war-related contamination and pollution will likely become an additional factor of migration from Ukraine.[II] For instance, the destruction of oil industries can lead to an ecological disaster, including oil spills and discharge of toxic materials, prompting people to flee from irreparable harm. Additionally, Ukraine is currently one of the most landmine-contaminated areas in the world. It faces dire environmental and humanitarian challenges, with mines and unexploded devices restricting freedom of movement, access to basic services, and livelihoods. These issues are increasingly considered in protection assessment.

Central Asia

In Central Asia, tensions frequently arise over border disputes and control of shared natural resources, particularly water, triggering displacement, insecurity, and political instability.[32] The Syr Darya and the Amu Darya basins – the main rivers in Central Asia, which cross Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and terminate in the Aral Sea – are central to these conflicts. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries signed the 1992 Almaty Agreement, declaring equal rights to water use and responsibility to ensure rational use and protection of shared water. However, cooperation has faltered due to unequal water distribution and competing economic and political interests.[33] Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, rich in water but poor in energy, need water for energy production, while downstream countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, rich in energy but poor in water, require water for agriculture. This disparity has made water scarcity

II The correlation between migration and pollution, although not caused by conflicts, was already observed in 2006-2011 by comparing the rate of waste, hazardous substances and polluted water in the Western regions of Ukraine with the rate of migration from these regions during this period. Andel, I. (2013). 'Ecological migration of population in the regions of Ukraine' in Socio-economic Problems of the Modern Period of Ukraine 3(101):451–457.

and poor management significant threats to regional stability and security, and, in the absence of successful cooperation, a source of conflict. The fact that countries in Central Asia are projected to soon become water-stressed countries further deepen security concerns.[34] Clashes also concern water distribution in undetermined lands, especially in and around the Fergana valley between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Here, disputes over water resources by neighbouring villages often escalate into international armed conflicts and provoke loss of life and displacement.

Map 1. Main Rivers in Central Asia



Source: Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia, http://www.icwc-aral.uz/activity.htm

Disputes over dam construction along the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers further exacerbate tensions, as upstream countries would benefit from hydropower at the expense of downstream countries, providing the dam-builder countries greater power over water resources. The shrinking of the Aral Sea, driven by dam construction and climate change, stands as a "prominent example of environmental change and human mobility in Central Asia".[35] Local communities in regions of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan surrounding the lake have been forced to leave due to loss of livelihood and means of subsistence. Around 80% of migration movements from Qozoqdaryo in Uzbekistan and from Kzyl-Orda in Kazakhstan were found to be directly or indirectly caused by ecological degradation and related socio-economic collapse.[36]

Central Asian countries have stressed the dire consequences of uneven water distribution in different fora. Uzbekistan, responding to a 2022 call by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change, declared that a third of its population lives in areas prone to disasters and environmental degradation, facing escalating risks from climate change. These problems result in serious socio-economic impact, internal migration, and reduced water availability for agriculture, leading to 90% of Uzbekistan's farmland requiring artificial irrigation.[37] Tajikistan's 2022 National Communication argued that poor water management and the lack of water rights, rather than water scarcity, drives poverty and water-related tensions. A 2023 report by the Eurasian Development Bank on water conservation in Central Asia emphasized the need for new cooperation mechanisms in transboundary river basins, rooted in deeper economic integration among Central Asian countries.[38]

Tension over water resources may also arise between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, where water management suffers from poor governance and inefficient management. The Taliban's return to power in 2022 halted 32 environmental protection projects worth USD 805 million of international funding.[39] Afghanistan's large-scale irrigation programmes, including the construction of the Qosh-Tepa Canal, launched in 2022, threaten to significantly reduce water availability for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, risking up to 15% loss of Amu Darya's upstream water and threatening their agricultural sectors.[40] The construction of the Qosh-Tepa Canal may therefore lead to further political instability and diplomatic tensions in and around Central Asia. Despite some bilateral arrangements, such as the bilateral colloquium between Afghanistan and Turkmenistan and the two Memorandum of Understanding between Tajikistan and Afghanistan on hydrological and environmental data sharing, there are no binding arrangements between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan on sharing water resources in the Amu Darya basin. At the same time, Afghanistan has so far refrained from established cooperation mechanisms, such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea or the Interstate Commission for Water Cooperation.[41]

1.3. The influence of EU policies on climate adaptation

The cooperation between the EU and non-EU PPS is crucial for promoting climate resilience, especially in light of the EU Green Deal's ambitious targets for climate adaptation and climate neutrality in line with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. The EU has been a leader in the green transition, leveraging its experience to support neighbouring countries in adopting green commitments and climate mitigation measures through dialogue, cooperation, and alignment with EU climate norms.

Through the European Economic Area Agreement, the EU has extended large parts of its climate legislation, including the EU Emission Trading System and the EU rules on land use and forestry, to **Norway** and Liechtenstein. In April 2023, the EU formed a Green Alliance with Norway to enhance cooperation on climate action, clean energy, industrial transformation and environmental protection.

In line with the European Climate Law, the EU's commitment to climate neutrality is reflected in its bilateral ties and accession negotiations with EU candidate countries, requiring alignment with EU climate and environmental policies. The **Western Balkan countries**, five of which are EU candidates, must adhere to the Paris Agreement and

meet the EU's targets for energy efficiency, GHG emissions, and renewable energy.[42] Similar to EU Member States, they are expected to deliver their National Energy and Climate Plans, which will set the region on track towards energy transition and climate neutrality. The 2020 Green Agenda for the Western Balkans aims to assist these countries in transitioning towards climate neutrality through decarbonisation, circular economy, biodiversity, depollution, and sustainability. Moreover, via climate proofing of investments, the EU aims to assist the Western Balkans in the preparation and implementation of long-term climate adaptation strategies to increase resilience. Most Western Balkan countries are developing climate frameworks in line with the EU Climate Law, although progress is uneven.[III]

Building on the "20 deliverables for 2020" reform agenda, the European Commission and **Eastern Partnership countries** have established five long-term objectives, known as the "post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities". These priorities include environmental and climate resilience, which will be pursued through governance and investment plans aimed at reducing air pollution, ensuring universal access to clean water and sanitation, and enhancing public awareness and engagement on climate change across all levels of governance.[43] The ambitious targets of the EU Green Deal are echoed in the countries of Eastern Partnership, which are required to, inter alia, strengthen their climate policies and green investment in line with the Green Deal. This includes transitioning towards sustainable food systems in line with the EU's Farm to Fork strategy. Moreover, the EU will help partner countries to implement their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to achieve climate neutrality and scale up adaptation to climate change. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, as EU candidates, are also supported through the Energy Community Treaty, with key objectives focused on monitoring and reducing GHG emissions and decreasing reliance on fossil fuels.[IV]

The alignment with the EU Green Deal has also been manifested by **Türkiye**, which published its Green Deal Action Plan in 2021, setting targets and actions across nine clusters, including carbon border adjustments, green and circular economy, green finance, and awareness-raising related to the EU Green Deal.

In **Central Asia**, the EU is supporting climate resilience and adaptation through projects like the Team Europe initiative on water, energy and climate change, launched in November 2022. This project aims to enhance water and energy resources management, while tackling climate change.[44] Under the Global Gateway, the EU is financing technical assistance to support Central Asian countries tackle water scarcity and improve adaptation policies. The EU has also acknowledged climate change and environmental degradation as potential threat multipliers in Central Asia. The EU's 2019 Strategy on Central Asia, for example, aims to integrate "the link between the environment, climate and security in its policy dialogue, conflict prevention, development and humanitarian actions and disaster risk reduction strategies across Central Asia", thus indirectly addressing the climate change-migration nexus.[45] A significant step forward was the endorsement of a Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia during the 19th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting in October 2023. The roadmap outlines cooperation in energy, climate-neutral economy and adaptation, reflecting the growing priority of climate adaptation across the region.

The emphasis on adaptation is evident in the evolving legal frameworks of Central Asian countries. While **Kazakhstan** established adaptation priorities towards climate change in its new Environmental Code,[46] **Kyrgyzstan** recognised the need for climate change adaptation strategies to improve resilience in its National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2018 – 2040.[47] **Tajikistan's** 2021 updated NDC emphasises the strategic importance of adaptation measures in energy, industry, and agriculture, while noting the relevance of social and gender issues of water access.[V] This also reflects the EU-Tajikistan bilateral programmes on Water and Energy, launched in 2021 and 2022, which aim to foster transboundary water governance. **Uzbekistan** has adopted a low-carbon energy strategy and is developing an adaptation plan centred on irrigation, agricultural chains and green energy.[48] Meanwhile, **Turkmenistan's** 2019 National Strategy on Climate Change, outlines key sectors for adaptation to climate change and promotes research to assess the health impact of high temperatures to develop solutions for adapting the human body to adverse climatic conditions. The Strategy also highlights the importance of raising awareness of climate change issues among the youth and enhancing resilience for children.[49]

Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain. **Central Asian countries** vary in their ability to meet climate commitments, necessitating structural reforms and enhanced regional integration to tackle economic threats posed by climate.[50] The EU is working to support these efforts through the 2019 EU Strategy for Central Asia

III Fragmentation refers to, among others, climate adaptation strategies that have been adopted by all Western Balkans except North Macedonia and Serbia, and the Law on Climate Change, which has been already adopted in Albania and Serbia, while Kosovo*, Montenegro and North Macedonia are in a drafting phase and Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet started working on it. See, Regional Cooperation Council (2023). Green Agenda for the Western Balkans Action Plan - Implementation Report 2022. RCC: Bosnia and Herzegovina.

IV The Treaty establishing the Energy Community was originally signed in October 2005 between the EU and nine non-EU States. These are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia (which joined in 2017), Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Moldova (which joined in 2010), Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine (which joined in 2011). Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia were also contracting parties until becoming full members of the EU.

V The issue of gender and the specific involvement of women workers in climate-sensitive economic sector, especially agriculture, was particularly addressed in Tajikistan's National Strategy for Enhancing the Role of Women in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2011-2020, where the strategy proposed to improve women's access to land resources, simplify women's access to loans, and improve their education by improving, among others, their skills in agricultural production. Tajikistan's Medium-Term Development Program for 2021-2025 not only deals with environmental protection, climate change and disasters, but also acknowledges the relevance of the development of gender-sensitive indicators for climate change as adaptive measures. In its updated NDC of 2021, Tajikistan re-affirms its commitment to investigate the relationship between gender and climate change. Tajikistan recognizes that gender inequality is present in the country and is the product of traditions and gender stereotypes on the role of women in family and society, on the one hand, and of a large number of female-headed households due to large-scale male labour migration, on the other hand. To counteract gender inequality in the context of climate change, the government commits to a number of actions, including raising awareness, improving understanding of the connection between gender and climate change in the development context, and strengthening the capacity of and providing opportunities for women's active participation in sustainable development.

and bilateral Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, aiming to foster a closely interconnected economic and political space.[51] **Türkiye's** progress on climate change adaptation policies and regulations has been slower, as reflected in the findings of the European Commission's 2023 report, with Türkiye still facing significant mitigation and adaptation challenges. There are also discrepancies between Türkiye's targets and objectives and those set by the EU. Türkiye plans to attain net-zero emissions by 2053, three years later than the Green Deal's 2050 target, and its first updated NDC calls for a 41% reduction in GHG emissions by 2030, falling short of the Green Deal's 55% reduction goal. Additionally, Türkiye requires a long-term decarbonisation strategy to support its net-zero-emission goal and has yet to address several key aspects of the Green Deal.[52]

Successful implementation of adaptation policies in **Eastern Partnership and Central Asian countries** also hinges on adequate funding. These countries have highlighted the need for a balanced allocation of international finance, with equal emphasis on both adaptation and mitigation projects, as mitigation – particularly in the energy sector – currently receives more funding.[53] To address these financial needs, the Climate Finance Access and Mobilization Strategy for Central Asia and the South Caucasus 2023–2030 focuses on building institutional capacity at the national and regional levels, improving access to existing climate finance resources, and mobilising climate finance.[54]

2. Protection frameworks and assistance to people fleeing climate and environmental changes

Across non-EU PPS, national practices concerning protection in case of MECC vary widely. Some countries have started to incorporate climate considerations into their migration and asylum policies, while others lag behind, offering fragmented and inconsistent protection.

Over the years, **Türkiye** has introduced migration considerations into its comprehensive disaster management strategy to address security, protection and assistance for citizens and migrants. Among others, the National Disaster and Emergency Management Authority's Strategic Plan 2013-2017 mentioned internal migration or displacement due to climate change or nuclear accidents. The Strategic Planning Guide of the Disaster Risk Reduction Plan 2019-2023 highlighted the risk of significant migration movements from neighbouring countries due to disasters.[55] The Disaster Risk Reduction Plan 2022-2030 recognises disasters as causes of physical and socio-economic losses, including unemployment, production declines, and migration movements. The 2024-2030 Climate Change Mitigation Strategy and Action Plan and the 2024-2030 Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan aim to counteract the adverse effects of climate change, with initiatives to enhance circular economy and support economic income-increasing activities to prevent rural migration. Türkiye's Law on Foreigners and International Protection allows to issue a residence permit on humanitarian grounds for up to one year in specific cases, such as when removal is not feasible due to emergencies or extraordinary circumstances.[56] However, it is unclear whether this provision accounts for climate and environmental factors.

Within Central Asia, **Tajikistan** offers the highest level of protection to migrants and migrant workers affected by climate and environmental factors, recognising a strong connection between climate change and migration at the political level. The National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change until 2030, adopted in 2019, identifies migration as one of seven key cross-cutting areas. It stresses that "climate change is likely to be an important driver of future migration", whilst environmental degradation has an increasing impact on migration patterns, including temporary international or internal labour migration, rural-to-urban migration, or permanent migration abroad. The Strategy defines *environmental migrants* as "people who are living in environmentally dangerous areas that are subject to planned relocation to prevent loss of life from natural disasters", whereas the reasons for relocation include living in areas susceptible to landslides, avalanches, mudslides and other natural disasters that pose a threat to lives.[57]

Akin to the Strategy, Tajikistan's Decree on Ecological Migration and its 1999 Law on Migration, updated in 2018, view environmental migration as the planned *relocation* of citizens forcibly displaced by "natural disasters" to safer areas,[58] excluding cross-border migration and internal voluntary movements as an adaptation response to climate and environmental factors. At the same time, Tajikistan issues or extends visas to migrant workers in case of disasters, as set in the Law on Migration,[59] and can issue visas in force majeure situations, defined as "unforeseen and unpreventable events occurring as a result of emergency situations (natural disasters, military operations and other similar cases)", in line with the 2017 Order on Rules for the Issuance of Visas and Electronic Visas to Foreigners and Stateless Persons.[60]

In the Western Balkans, **Albania** has implemented several solutions to address cross-border migration in the context of disasters. Its Law on Aliens allows issuing a visa at the border in exceptional cases for up to 15 days because of, *inter alia*, emergency cases resulting from natural disasters, floods or accidents.[61] The revised 2021 Law on Aliens introduced additional protection provisions for migrants affected by disasters, including temporary residence permit on humanitarian grounds for aliens "fleeing from natural disasters/events striking their country",[62] and exemptions from employment authorisation for migrant workers engaged in disaster recovery efforts and staying up to one month within a year.[63]

In the Eastern Partnership, **Georgia**, **Ukraine**, and **Azerbaijan** provide distinct approaches to MECC. **Georgia** takes a proactive stance in addressing the impact of climate and environmental factors on migration both within its borders and beyond. It defines *ecological migrants* as its citizens evacuated, relocated or displaced by natural hazards and man-made disasters.[VI] In its 2021 Nationally Determined Contribution, Georgia highlighted the urgent need for adaptation measures, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities, those with chronic diseases, and eco-migrants displaced or at risk of displacement due to disasters caused by climate change.[64] Recognising that disasters can also drive cross-border migration, Georgia extends humanitarian protection to non-citizens and persons without permanent residency , if they "entered Georgia from a neighbouring country of origin as a result of a natural disaster".[65]

Azerbaijan shares a narrower view of the climate change-migration nexus, placing a greater focus on internal movements. It defines *ecological migrants* as those forced to move internally due to specific natural disasters such as the change of level of the Caspian Sea, earth landslides, mudflows, and salinization of soils to find employment in other parts of the country, including large cities like Baku.[VII] Azerbaijan's Law on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugee Status also allow applying the IDP status to persons forced to leave their permanent residence within the national territory due to natural or manmade disasters.[66] Beyond internal migration and displacement, climate and environmental factors are also recognised as a valid cause for extending the visa of foreigners and stateless persons who, during their transit in the territory of the Republic of Azerbaijan, are affected by a natural disaster that obstructs traffic, resulting in their stay exceeding the period specified in their visas.[67]

Ukraine's approach to MECC has been significantly influenced by past nuclear and military crises. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster spurred a rich legislation in Ukraine concerning the evacuation, resettlement, and the "independent migration of citizens" to safer areas.[VIII] In October 2014, Ukraine adopted a new law on IDPs, who are defined as citizens and legally residing foreigners and stateless persons "forced to leave their domicile as a result of, or with the aim of avoiding, the negative consequences of [...] environmental or industrial emergencies", thereby extending protection also to migrants residing in Ukraine and affected by disasters.[68] Additionally, Ukraine has broadened its definition of temporary protection to cover influxes of migrants seeking protection due to natural or industrial disasters.[IX]

Although **Switzerland and Norway** lack specific legal provisions for protecting migrants fleeing due to climate and environmental factors, both countries have contributed to the global understanding of this phenomenon. In 2012, the governments of Switzerland and Norway led and funded the Nansen Initiative – a state-led, bottom-up consultative process supported by 109 States globally (currently substituted by the Platform on Disaster Displacement), which sought to build consensus on protecting people displaced across borders by natural disasters and the effects of climate change.[69] The two countries have since engaged in dialogue to explore the unique dynamics of MECC and related protection needs. Swiss law provides temporary protection on a case-by-case basis to people already in Switzerland if their return would threaten their life or physical integrity, for instance, due to war, civil conflicts, generalized violence or in case of need for medical assistance.[70] In light of this provision, Switzerland has argued that its domestic law is able to protect people who would be seriously and concretely threatened due to climate change in case of return in their country of origin, in particular when linked to matters of physical integrity and health.

Recent years have seen growing interest in extending the application of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the cornerstone of international refugee law, and its 1967 New York Protocol to address MECC. On a case-by-case basis, refugee status may apply in situations where disasters, climate change, or environmental degradation contribute to a well-founded fear of persecution, demonstrating the State's lack of protection.[71] Non-EU PPS have welcomed the opportunity to explore the complex interplay between the 1951 Refugee Convention and MECC. Notably, **Uzbekistan**, the only Prague Process state that has refrained from adhering to the Convention, has engaged in the discussion and supports using the term "climate refugees" to define those forced to flee "due to the well-established risks of becoming victims of natural disasters that pose a real threat to human life" and extending the scope of the Convention to such individuals.[72]

Despite some progressive interpretations of refugee norms, the broader application of refugee status to climate and environmental factors is hindered by inconsistent state practices that fall short of international standards. Asylum systems face

VI For instance, in Georgia's Third NC to the UNFCCC, the term has been used to describe the rooted characteristic of the Ajara region, permanently affected by landslide and mudflow processes. See, Republic of Georgia (2015). Third National Communication to the UNFCCC, 145, 167.

VII Republic of Azerbaijan, Resolution of July 13, 2004 No. 94. The concept of the Azerbaijan Republic on policy of management of migration. The complete definition of "ecological migrants" is "people forced to replace the places of residence in view of change of level of the Caspian Sea, earth landslides, mudflows and other natural disasters, and also salinization of soils due to the lack of necessary means and the equipment for implementation of meliorative works and also the social and economic migrants connected with the flow of able-bodied population which went from rural districts to the large cities, in particular to Baku and to Absheron on which it is located in job searches".

VIII These include the Law of the Ukrainian SSR On the Status and Social Protection of the Victims of the Chernobyl disaster adopted on 28 February 1991; the Strategy for Living on the Territories of the Ukrainian SSR with an Elevated Level of Radioactive Contamination due to the Chernobyl Disaster adopted on 27 February 1991; the Law of Ukraine On the Status and Social Protection of the Victims of the Chernobyl Disaster and the related Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine On the Procedure for the Resettlement and Self-Resettlement of Citizens from the Territories that Received Radioactive Contamination as a Result of the Chernobyl Disaster adopted in 1992.

IX Article 1 of Ukraine's Law On Refugees and Persons in Need of Subsidiary Protection or Asylum adopted in 2011 includes the concepts of "persons in need of temporary protection" and defines them as "foreigners or Stateless persons who are forced in large numbers to seek protection in Ukraine due to external aggression, foreign occupation, civil war, ethnic confrontations, natural or industrial disasters, and other incidents disturbing civil order in some parts or on the whole territory of the country of origin".

ongoing challenges, including difficulties in fully aligning with international refugee and human rights obligations. There have been concerns regarding the treatment of asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants, including instances of restrictive practices such as expulsions, pushbacks, and detentions. In several cases, states have imposed restrictions on the movement of their nationals, limiting their right to leave the country. In certain contexts, political and security considerations may take precedence over refugee protection and human rights law obligations, leading to exclusions or restrictions in asylum processes and occasionally resulting in limited access to protection for specific nationality groups. There are also widespread concerns about the denial of essential rights to asylum-seekers and the lack of thorough assessment of their claims, particularly when national security considerations are cited. Even in places with robust legal frameworks, violations of core refugee law tenets, such as the principle of *non-refoulement*, have been documented, highlighting the global challenges in aligning domestic practices with international refugee and human rights standards.[73]

Conclusions and policy recommendations

All non-EU Prague Process states are vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and exhibit unique migration patterns. Despite shared climate risks and clear evidence that climate and environmental changes influence migration movements at the national and regional levels, the respective impact in the region remains underresearched. Moreover, the lack of sufficiently strong supranational coordination undermines truly common and comprehensive responses to migration driven by climate and environmental changes. In such context, the role of the EU in harmonising responses towards climate resilience and adaptation in the Prague Process region is of particular relevance, especially for non-EU Schengen countries and EU candidate countries, whose alignment with EU climate and environmental policies is required.

Non-EU PPS are encouraged to foster cooperation and partnership with the EU to achieve the climate goals agreed upon under the Paris Agreement and to enhance regional cooperation on climate and environmental matters.

Similar to other parts of the globe, the countries covered by this report represent an example of the compounded effect that worsening climate conditions and political instability can have on migration movements. The political and security situation in the region remains volatile. Water scarcity will be likely exacerbated by climate change and, without coordinated efforts, clashes over shared water resources may become more intense. At the same time, war-related environmental damage undermines climate resilience and may have an impact on migration flows.

- Concerted actions, regional cooperation, and transboundary water agreements are urgently needed to properly and fairly manage shared water resources, their use and distribution in these states. This in turn would deepen regional integration, while avoiding the escalation of tensions or conflicts over natural resources between states.
- Non-EU PPS are urged to develop or consolidate a regional cooperation framework to enhance environmental protection in the context of armed conflicts. In doing so, States should take into account key principles stemming from environmental and human rights law in order to preserve the environment, while ensuring the respect for the human rights of affected communities.

Strong refugee and human rights frameworks would support non-EU PPS in managing MECC, while ensuring the full respect for the fundamental rights of migrants and refugees. The inconsistent application and interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention coupled with the absence of regional refugee and human rights treaties in most of the Prague Process' sub-regions represent key political challenges to the recognition and protection of people compelled to flee their countries due to climate and environmental factors. Considering the EU's influence on harmonising migration and asylum policies in the region, the Union can play an important role in fostering refugee and human rights. In this regard, any future reforms to the CEAS to include climate-related consideration might lead to corresponding efforts in non-EU states.

- Non-EU PPS are encouraged to strengthen regional cooperation on asylum and human rights matters as to provide common responses to migrants seeking protection in their territories.
- Pursuant to their international obligations under international refugee law, the states are required to implement and interpret the 1951 Refugee Convention in a principled way and to fully respect the human rights of migrants and asylum-seekers, including the principle of non-refoulement. This implies taking climate and environmental conditions in the country of origin into consideration when evaluating their protection claims.

Despite the lack of consolidated refugee and human rights frameworks suitable to provide protection to migrants fleeing climate and environmental threats, non-EU PPS have engaged with MECC from multiple perspectives, including through prevention measures in countries vulnerable to climate change, climate change adaptation and disaster risk management.[74] Most importantly, national provisions in several of them cover different categories of people affected by climate and environmental changes, these including citizens forced to relocate to environmentally safer areas, people

internally displaced, migrants seeking protection abroad due to climate change, and migrant workers affected by disasters. Although relevant, efforts to recognize, assist, and protect people fleeing climate and environmental factors remain volatile and not harmonized across the Prague Process region. They differ in scope, aim, and beneficiaries as well as in the terminology used to define similar targets. This means that protection remains highly fragmented, and uncertain.

A comprehensive policy response is needed at the supranational level so to 1) efficaciously and uniformly respond to the specific climate and environmental challenges that are driving people out of their homes in each sub-region; and to 2) provide adequate measures to protect and assist people affected by climate and environmental factors by leveraging migration and asylum law as well as the rights of national citizens. States providing direct or indirect protection instruments in such fields - such as Tajikistan, Georgia, and Albania among others - can offer useful models to inform policy developments at the regional and sub-regional levels.

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Western Balkans 2035: Demographic Resilience and Strategic Migration Planning under EU Integration and Isolation Scenarios

Analytical Report

Tado Juric

March 2026

Executive summary

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo* are entering a critical demographic decade. Persistent emigration of young and skilled workers, combined with low fertility and rapid population ageing, is driving structural population decline that immigration alone cannot offset. This report examines how migration will shape the region's demographic and socio-economic future by 2035 under two trajectories: *EU Integration*, marked by institutional strengthening and circular mobility, and Strategic Isolation, characterised by governance stagnation and one-way outflows.

The analysis shows that governance-driven migration management – not fertility – is the decisive factor. In the EU Integration scenario, improved institutions, return migration and regulated labour inflows slow population loss. In the Isolation scenario, demographic decline accelerates, labour shortages intensify and dependence on poorly integrated foreign workers grows, alongside rising exposure to non-EU geopolitical actors. The region's demographic resilience will depend on its capacity to retain and attract talent, manage immigration effectively and embed migration within a broader development and EU-alignment strategy.

Introduction

Albania (AL), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo*[1] (KS), Montenegro (MN), North Macedonia (NM), and Serbia (RS) – hereinafter referred to as the 'Western Balkans' (WB) – constitute one of the world's most demographically fragile regions. Persistently low fertility rates, coupled with sustained emigration – particularly of young, educated, and highly skilled individuals – are accelerating population decline and steadily eroding the region's human capital base. Meanwhile, parts of the region are increasingly emerging as destination countries, as immigration – albeit still limited in scale – becomes a more visible response to labour shortages. The region is entering a pivotal decade during which migration will decisively shape its demographic and socioeconomic trajectories.

The report frames migration as a principal driver of demographic decline and a potential lever for strategic intervention. The report presents two plausible scenarios for 2035, arguing that the WB face a bifurcated future: either consolidating demographic resilience through coordinated regional and European action, or confronting deepening depopulation, institutional fragility, and socio-economic divergence. These scenarios underscore the urgency of aligning migration governance with demographic sustainability, inclusive development, and EU integration objectives. As a result, the report proposes integrated policy responses that can equip the Western Balkans for the challenges and opportunities of the coming decade.

The report adopts 2035 as its analytical horizon: distant enough to capture the cumulative impact of fertility, ageing, and migration trends, yet proximate enough to inform current policy cycles, EU accession debates, and fiscal planning. Politically, 2035 falls within the EU's indicative timeline for enlargement – a period when population decline and migration patterns will increasingly shape institutional reform, economic resilience, and progress towards European integration.

The main part of the report focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia because they record the largest absolute and relative population losses, have a strong diaspora and pronounced youth migration flows, and provide the most detailed and comparable statistical data. Other Western Balkan countries (Albania, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia) will be treated only in the outline because they have a smaller impact on the overall WB projections, the availability and quality of data is more limited, and migration patterns are similar to those already analysed in detail in BiH and Serbia.

This report draws on both official statistics and innovative Big Data approaches[2], connecting demographic evidence with plausible future scenarios and the corresponding policy options available to WB governments and EU institutions.

The report follows a policy-oriented structure. Chapter 1 presents the demographic and migration context of the region. Chapter 2 develops two plausible scenarios – one of deeper EU integration and one of strategic isolation – and analyses their likely demographic and migration consequences. Chapter 3 translates these findings into practical policy options and key recommendations for national and regional actors, outlining strategic choices for the Western Balkans by 2035. The analysis is guided by a single overarching question: **How will migration shape the demographic and socio-economic future of the WB by 2035 under alternative EU integration scenarios, and what policies can mitigate negative outcomes?**

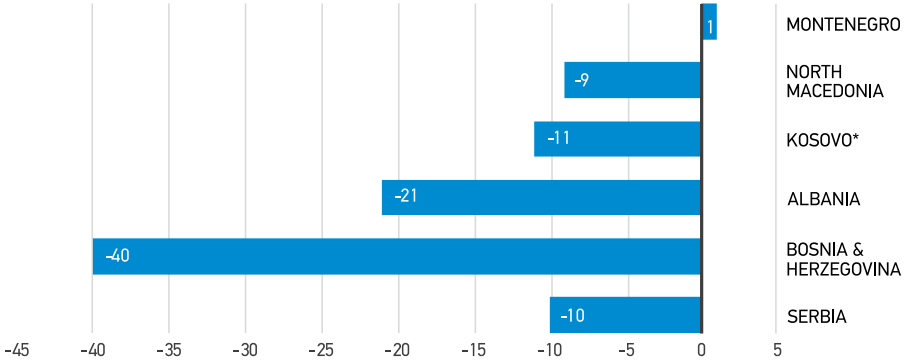
1 *This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

2 This report combines official demographic statistics, the European Commission's EUROPOP2023, the United Nations World Population Prospects 2024 Revision, The Lancet study, and author's Big Data-based model to provide a more accurate picture of migration trends in the WB. Core data come from Eurostat, UN WPP 2022, and national statistical offices, complemented by Meta Audience Insights, Google Trends, and YouTube Analytics to capture underreported emigration and migration intentions. Big Data-based digital demography tools are used to complement and cross-validate official statistics. The approach does not seek to replace official data but to reveal its blind spots, especially the temporal gap between intention and registration, and the spatial gap between declared and actual residence. This combined methodology allows for a more realistic estimation of migration flows and thus a more accurate assessment of demographic contraction in the WB. (See Jurić, T. (2022). Forecasting Migration and Integration Trends Using Digital Demography. Comparative Southeast European Studies, vol. 70, no. 1, 2022.

Demographic and Migration Realities in the Western Balkans

Over the past 25 years, the six WB countries have experienced a continuous population decline, losing nearly 2.5 million people and bringing the total population to just over 16 million.[I]

Figure 1. Population changes in the Western Balkans, 2000-2024 (%)



Source: Author's elaboration[3].

This demographic downturn is largely attributed to the economic and political upheavals of the post-socialist transition, compounded by the conflicts of the 1990s, but also to the policies of developed EU core economies, such as Germany, to attract young labour.[II] Today, roughly one in five citizens of the Western Balkans resides outside the region.

Sustained emigration is the single most powerful force reshaping the region's demographic and socio-economic landscape. Migration-adjusted projections point to population losses exceeding 15% by 2035 – a demographic shift with implications for social cohesion, labour markets, and governance. If current emigration patterns persist, migration will remain the primary driver of demographic decline, accounting for two thirds of total loss, compared with one third from natural decrease.[III] Between 2013 and 2023, official Eurostat and national data indicate that the WB lost over 1.8 million people to emigration, while the natural decrease (births minus deaths) accounted for about 900,000 fewer inhabitants in the same period. **In Serbia, emigration explains nearly 70% of net population decline, confirming that out-migration – rather than fertility – has become the dominant demographic mechanism.** By 2035, without targeted interventions, the region risks a critical erosion of its human capital base.

The main reasons for outward migration extend beyond short term economic motives to deeper structural challenges such as governance deficits, regional disparities, corruption and a persistent sense of stagnation.[IV] Empirical research[V] confirms that weak governance and ineffective public services are decisive push factors, particularly for skilled migrants. In turn, emigration undermines reform capacity, as many of the most motivated and reform minded citizens leave.

The demographic impact of emigration is visible in the rapid decline in school enrolment. Between 2008 and 2020, the number of pupils fell by over 90,000 in BiH, and 100,000 in Serbia, while high-school enrolments declined by 13-23% across the region.[VI] Student outflows are equally stark: more than 15,000 Serbian students are enrolled at universities in Germany, Austria, and Slovenia, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has lost nearly a quarter of its tertiary students abroad since 2015. [VII] This asymmetry underscores the region's persistent status as an exporter of young human capital within the European Higher Education Area. Generational frustration with limited progress and underinvestment in infrastructure accelerates both cultural and economic peripheralization,[VIII] reinforcing the cycle of emigration and demographic decline.

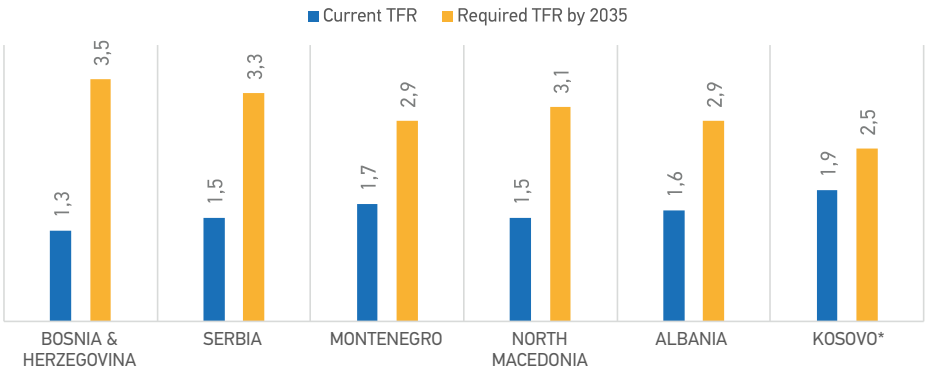
At the same time, immigration is no longer a marginal phenomenon in the WB. It is becoming structurally embedded in the region's labour markets. Serbia is moving in a similar direction: in 2025, it announced plans to issue 100,000 work permits, prompting Ghana to seek opportunities for its young citizens within this quota.[IX] The two countries have opened negotiations on a labour mobility agreement, targeting sectors such as construction, healthcare, ICT, agriculture, and services. Bosnia and Herzegovina has also began attracting workers from Asia, issuing nearly 6,100 work permits in 2024, mainly to workers from Nepal, India and Bangladesh.[X] These trends signal a gradual transition of the Western Balkans from pure emigration zones to mixed migration systems. [XI] While foreign workers partially help alleviate labour shortages in certain sectors, the absence of comprehensive integration policies risks creating parallel societies and potential social tension.

Despite emerging immigration inflows, the overall demographic balance remains deeply negative. None of the Western Balkan countries maintains a fertility rate above the replacement threshold of 2.1 children per woman.[XII] The regional average of around 1.5 is comparable to the EU average of 1.46 recorded in 2022. Meanwhile, to stabilise national populations by 2035, each woman would need to have on average 3.3-3.5 children in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, and above

3 Sources used: Popis stanovništva, domaćinstava i stanova [Census of population and households in Serbia]; Wankiewic, P., 2025; Albanian Population and Housing Census; UN, Counting 1,602,515 people: The 2024 Census and Its Impact on Kosovo's Development; DZS, 2021.

2.5 children in Kosovo*[4]. Such thresholds are virtually unattainable under present conditions, and no European country since 1950 has achieved a fertility rate above 3.0.

Figure 2. Current vs Required Total Fertility Rate (TFR) to Maintain Stable Population by 2035 in the Western Balkans



Source: UN DESA – World Population Prospects 2024; Eurostat (2024) Population and Fertility Database; author's Big Data migration correction.

The persistent sub-replacement fertility, combined with the large-scale emigration of young people has led to accelerated population ageing throughout the WB. In BiH, Serbia, and North Macedonia, the median age now approaches or surpasses the EU average of 44.5 years. The share of the population aged 65 and above is also rising sharply – reaching about 20% in Serbia and BiH – while Kosovo* remains a demographic outlier, with only 10% of its population in that age group.[XIII] Yet even these indicators likely understate the true scale of demographic contraction, as national statistical offices often fail to accurately capture the emigration of young adults and their children, resulting in distorted demographic estimates, particularly the average age of the population.

4 These estimates illustrate the magnitude of demographic imbalance in the region. "Required Total Fertility Rate" quantifies the fertility rate that would be needed to maintain a stable population size by 2035, given current levels of mortality and migration. The higher the gap between actual and required TFR, the greater the structural deficit of reproductive-age women and the stronger the dependency on immigration or return migration to offset population loss. Such quantification therefore serves as a proxy for demographic sustainability rather than a realistic fertility target.

Table 1. Western Balkans Population Estimates and Projections (millions)

Country	United Nations Medium Variant					Big Data	Difference UN vs Big Data
	2020	2030	2040	2050	Change 2020-50	2050	
Albania	2.79	2.63	2.45	2.26	–19.0 %	1.89	–17 % lower
Bosnia & Herzegovina	3.30	2.99	2.79	2.61	–21.0 %	1.80	–31 % lower
Kosovo*	1.82	1.75	1.69	1.63	–10.4 %	1.43	–12 % lower
Montenegro	0.62	0.58	0.55	0.53	–14.5 %	0.33	–38 % lower
North Macedonia	2.08	1.97	1.87	1.77	–14.9 %	1.27	–28 % lower
Serbia	6.72	6.31	5.93	5.60	–16.7 %	4.90	–13 % lower
WB Total	17.33	16.23	15.28	14.40	–16.9 %	11.62	–19 % lower

Sources: UN World Population Prospects 2022 (medium variant); author's correction based on Big Data migration analysis, 2024.

The demographic imbalances outlined above are already generating significant economic and fiscal consequences. The shrinking workforce constrains labour supply and overall economic productivity, while the growing number of retirees increases pressure on already fragile pension systems. These strains threaten the long-term sustainability of social protection, putting pressure on the WB governments.[XIV]

Across the region, demographic decline has prompted a visible but fragmented policy response. Governments increasingly promote pronatalist rhetoric and introduce small-scale incentives such as child allowances, housing subsidies, and tax deductions – seen in Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia – or free preschool and housing support in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, and Montenegro. While these measures offer short-term relief, they remain largely ad hoc, politically symbolic, and disconnected from broader demographic and migration strategies. The absence of central coordination, transparent budgeting, and long-term planning limits their structural impact, leaving the region without a coherent framework to address population loss and human capital flight. Demographic sustainability in the Western Balkans cannot be restored through fertility increases alone. Structural constraints – including delayed family formation, and the shrinking base of women of reproductive age – make a rapid recovery inconceivable.[5]

Without coordinated policy action, these dynamics risk reinforcing economic stagnation and further incentivising outward migration. Understanding how alternative political and economic trajectories could influence these trends is therefore central to anticipating the region's demographic and developmental future. The following section explores two plausible scenarios for 2035 that illustrate these diverging pathways.

5 See the Theory of Demographic Transition.

2. Two Plausible Scenarios

All Western Balkan countries except Kosovo* hold EU candidate status, yet their future demographic and socio-economic trajectories will depend heavily on the pace and direction of the EU integration process. This section examines how different levels of alignment with the EU shape migration dynamics – and through them, the broader demographic outlook – by 2035.

The analysis builds on the demographic evidence and migration patterns outlined in the previous chapter, which showed that the region faces three structural pressures: sustained emigration, persistently low fertility, and rapid population ageing. Because fertility and mortality are slow-moving variables, migration remains the decisive factor determining whether population decline stabilises or accelerates over the next decade.

To explore these possible futures, the analysis applies a comparative foresight approach, following OECD/ESPAS scenario-building methods. Two contrasting but plausible trajectories are developed: one in which the Western Balkans deepen their integration with the EU and another in which the region drifts away from the EU framework. Scenario building starts from a question: What happens to migration and population trends if governance improves, and what happens if it does not? The method identifies a small number of factors that strongly influence behaviour – quality of institutions, access to the EU, and available mobility channels. It then examines how changes in these factors lead to changes in migration decisions (whether people stay, leave, or return), and how these migration patterns translate into demographic outcomes by 2035. In this way, each scenario follows a clear and linear causal chain: governance conditions shape migration behaviour, and migration behaviour shapes demographic trends.

Scenario 1: EU Integration – Migration as a stabilising force

In the **EU Integration scenario**, the region remains anchored to the EU through continued accession, gradual access to funds, and improved governance under EU conditionality. As institutions become more transparent and predictable, public trust grows, investment conditions stabilise, and mobility is better managed. Migration patterns gradually shift from predominantly permanent outflows towards a more circular forms: many young people continue to leave for education or work abroad, but an increasing share return or invest at home, encouraged by political stability, clearer rules and economic incentives.

These governance and economic improvements translate into measurable demographic effects. Better public administration reduces uncertainty, improves the business environment, and lowers the incentives for permanent emigration among young and skilled workers. At the same time, more transparent and predictable administrative systems make return migration more attractive by reducing risks associated with returning. Faster recognition of qualifications, clearer investment rules, and more reliable public services encourage returnees and diaspora members to engage more actively in local labour markets and entrepreneurship. As a result, net migration balances gradually improve, as return migration and diaspora engagement compensate for part of the ongoing outflow. Improved governance also enables more effective family-support policies, including better childcare provision, housing support, and greater employment security for young families. Together, these factors contribute to a modest recovery in fertility to around 1.7-1.8. When improved migration balances and modest fertility gains occur simultaneously, overall population decline slows. By 2035, population loss could be limited to approximately 5-7%, compared to the double-digit declines projected under weak governance.

Immigration from third countries – particularly from Asia and Africa and non-EU Eastern Europe - remains regulated and helps ease labour shortages. At the same time, irregular migration declines as alignment with EU rules reduces both incentives and opportunities for irregular entry and onward movement. When visa policies, border procedures and identity-screening standards become harmonised with those of the EU, the Western Balkans no longer function as an easier "entry point" for individuals who would not qualify under EU procedures. In addition, improved border management, better information-sharing with EU agencies, and more predictable legal mobility channels reduce reliance on smugglers and lower the probability that irregular transit through the region will succeed.

Depopulation slows in most areas and halts in urban centres. Major cities stabilise first, as they attract return migrants, investors, and internal migrants seeking better services and job opportunities. These inflows offset natural decline, allowing urban centres to halt population loss while depopulation in other areas merely slows. In this environment, migration becomes a mechanism of renewal rather than a source of demographic loss. The region is more closely connected to European labour markets, innovation networks, and opportunities for social mobility. Better governance and EU incentives give countries greater policy space and more predictable resources to mitigate demographic decline, strengthen institutions, and support economic development.

Overall, the Integration scenario offers more favourable conditions for demographic stabilisation and political resilience. It aligns with the EU's strategic objectives of fostering a secure and prosperous neighbourhood, while enabling the Western Balkans to retain and attract talent, advance convergence, and avoid the deeper population losses projected under the Isolation scenario. Final outcomes, however, will depend on sustained domestic reforms and their effective implementation. Even under strong EU conditionality, demographic gains will materialise only if governments consistently enforce transparency rules, strengthen public administration, and deliver predictable

public services. Without such follow-through, the incentives that encourage people to stay, return, or invest weaken, and migration behaviour reverts to permanent outflows.

Although several WB countries have held EU candidate status for many years, this scenario assumes a different dynamic. The decisive factor is not formal EU candidate status, but the depth and credibility of EU conditionality and the extent to which domestic political elites respond to it. Experience from recent accession processes shows that governance reforms accelerate only when the EU offers clear timelines, strong monitoring, and predictable financial incentives. In this scenario, such a framework raises the political and economic costs of stagnation, prompting governments to pursue reforms more consistently. Comparative evidence indicates that countries, such as Slovenia and the Baltic states, which improved governance under credible EU conditionality, eventually experienced higher return migration, greater circular mobility, and stabilisation of population decline. [XV] The scenario therefore does not assume that EU candidacy alone produces demographic change, but that strengthened conditionality combined with domestic political alignment generates the governance improvements needed to influence migration and demographic outcomes by 2035.

Scenario 2: Strategic Isolation – Migration as a driver of decline

The **Isolation scenario** assumes a gradual distancing from the EU and a shift toward alternative political and economic partners such as Russia, China, Gulf countries and Türkiye. While such partnerships may offer short-term financial or geopolitical advantages, they carry long-term risks for the region's governance, stability, and demographic future. External actors such as Russia and China typically prioritise regime stability and elite loyalty over transparency and civic accountability. This approach tends to reinforce clientelism and weaken horizontal accountability, eroding public trust and deepening political fragmentation.[XVI] Infrastructure investments linked to opaque financing arrangements increase debt exposure and bypass EU procurement standards[XVII], while some forms of external influence channel identity-based narratives that complicate secular governance and interethnic cohesion. [XVIII] Together, these pressures consolidate illiberal elites and reduce incentives for structural reform.

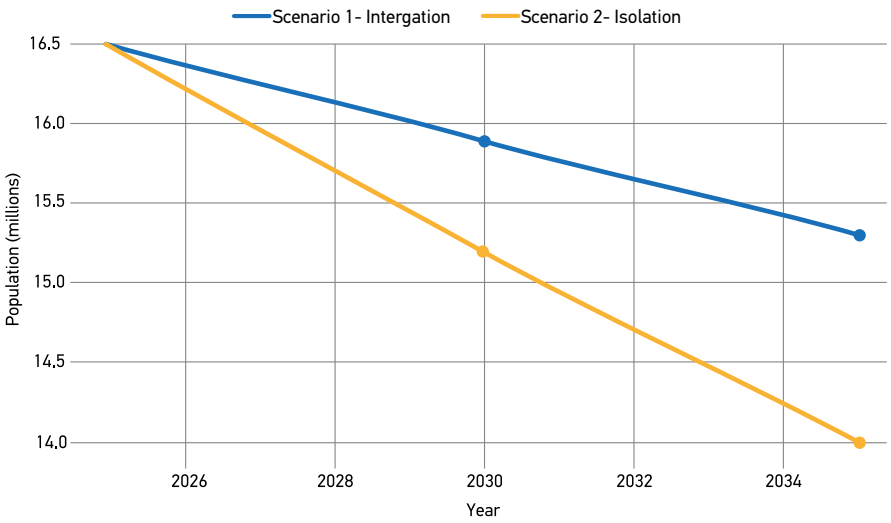
For the Western Balkans, turning away from the EU would mean losing access to the most powerful driver of governance reforms: the conditionality framework that links financial support and mobility incentives to improvements in the rule of law, public administration, and accountability. [XIX] As this leverage disappears, reform momentum slows, institutions become less predictable, and corruption pressures deepen.[XX] These institutional changes directly shape migration behaviour. When people judge that prospects for improvement at home are diminishing, migration shifts from temporary mobility to permanent exit – especially among the young and skilled. As a result, outflows accelerate while almost no one returns. Survey evidence[XXI] confirms that, in the absence of a credible EU integration perspective, permanent emigration becomes significantly more likely. Since 2013, more than 1.8 million people have left the region, and under isolation conditions this outflow could double by 2035, leading to shrinking labour markets, higher dependency ratios, and growing pressure on welfare systems.

Furthermore, weakened alignment with EU visa rules and border procedures creates gaps that can be exploited for onward movement. Reduced cooperation with EU border agencies lowers screening capacity and enforcement effectiveness, making irregular routes both more feasible and more attractive to migrants and smugglers. At the same time, labour immigration from third countries can expand in an uncoordinated and weakly regulated manner, as governments seek to offset labour shortages. Experiences from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina already points to rapid, only partially regulated recruitment of workers from Asia and the Middle East,[XXII] as labour inspectorates and migration administrations often lack sufficient staff, technical capacity, and monitoring tools needed to regulate recruitment effectively. Unlike EU member states, they do not have access to EU interoperability systems or joint risk-assessment mechanisms, making it difficult to detect fraudulent recruitment and labour exploitation. Moreover, regulatory frameworks remain fragmented, while coordination between institutions and oversight of recruitment agencies remain limited. Without integration frameworks or labour protection comparable to EU standards, these inflows risk creating segmented labour markets and new social tensions, further feeding the cycle of institutional fragility and political polarisation.

Governments in the Isolation scenario also deprioritise integration policies because political incentives work against them. As studies[XXIII] show, countries in South-Eastern Europe rarely initiate integration programmes for third-country nationals due to fears of losing political support in contexts where ethnic identity remains a central marker of legitimacy. Any move toward incorporating new ethnic groups is often framed as a form of disloyalty, making political elites reluctant to support integration measures that could be portrayed as weakening the dominant national identity.

Demographic consequences follow directly from this institutional and geopolitical environment. Rural areas empty, fertility remains at 1.3-1.5, and ageing intensifies as working-age cohorts shrink. These trends reinforce a self-perpetuating cycle in which weak institutions drive emigration, emigration erodes the workforce and tax base, and institutional capacity weakens further. By 2035, sustained outflows and limited return migration could result in population losses of 12-15%, leaving the region more economically vulnerable, politically fragmented, and demographically fragile.

Figure 3. Population Projection for the Western Balkans (2025-2035)



Source: Author's own elaboration.

In the EU Integration scenario, emigration patterns gradually shift from permanent outflow toward circular mobility. Young people still leave for education or temporary work, but improved governance, clearer rules and more predictable economic conditions encourage a growing share to return or reinvest at home. Over time, these returnees and diaspora investors strengthen local labour markets, stabilise human capital, and reduce the long-term demographic impact of outmigration. By the early 2030s, the migration balance improves as return migration increasingly offsets annual outflows.

In the Isolation scenario, this dynamic reverses. Weak governance and uncertainty increase the likelihood that those who leave do so permanently. Legal mobility channels to the EU narrow, but the underlying drivers of emigration intensify, leading to more irregular attempts and a rise in departures to non-EU destinations such as Canada, Australia and the United States. Highly educated individuals are disproportionately represented among those who do not return, accelerating the erosion of the region's human capital base and deepening demographic decline.

Policy Options for Diverging Futures

Building on the findings from the ***EU Integration and Strategic Isolation*** scenarios, the policy options presented below show how targeted interventions can alter the trajectory of both scenarios. Under the Integration pathway, these measures strengthen resilience, converting migration from a symptom of demographic decline into a lever of renewal, supporting closer alignment with EU standards. Under Isolation, they represent the minimum set of actions to preserve institutional capacity, preventing demographic collapse, and maintaining basic social stability in the context of weak governance and limited EU leverage.

These measures reflect areas where evidence shows both urgency and feasibility within a ten-year horizon. Comparative research demonstrates that targeted improvements in governance, childcare availability, circular migration schemes, and regulated labour recruitment produce measurable demographic and labour-market effects even in lower-capacity environments. Evidence from OECD [XXIV], UNDP[XXV] and IOM[XXVI] shows that countries which expand childcare access, professionalise public administration, and introduce basic return-migration incentives achieve higher retention of young workers, modest fertility increases, and improved labour-market stability within a decade. While they would not reverse the effects of strategic isolation, they can slow its most damaging consequences, helping the region retain essential human capital, and basic demographic viability until renewed prospects for integration emerge.

1. Institutional Integrity and Service Quality

Institutional integrity and service quality remain the foundation for all demographic and migration reforms. Evidence[XXVII] confirms that countries with more transparent governance retain more citizens and attract higher levels of return migration and investment, while maintaining stronger social cohesion. Enhanced institutional credibility – through stronger anti-corruption bodies, digitalised public procurement, and professionalising local administrations – directly improves service delivery and public trust.

Under EU Integration: EU conditionality provides a strong enforcement mechanism for governance reforms. It enables the full digitalisation of procurement, professionalisation of local administrations, and empowerment of independent anti-corruption bodies with enforcement powers. By 2035, measurable progress should be visible through improved governance indices and a higher quality of public service delivery, even if domestic resistance remains a challenge.

Under Strategic Isolation: without EU conditionality, institutional progress slows, and corruption pressures increase. In this context, institutional integrity becomes the first line of defence against further decline. Government should rely on low-cost transparency tools – such as open-budget portals, e-procurement audits, citizen reporting mechanisms – which are already yielding positive results in Serbia and North Macedonia[XXVIII]. Strengthening independent media and local watchdog networks helps sustain accountability and public trust and prevent further administrative decay.

2. Childcare and housing packages

Childcare and housing packages are crucial for fertility recovery and the reintegration of returnee families. Access to affordable childcare correlates strongly with higher

fertility and higher female labour participation across EU member states[XXIX]. Municipal childcare networks, targeted housing subsidies, and tax deductions for young families are among the most direct incentives for settling and raising children.

Under EU Integration: With targeted EU support, governments can scale affordable childcare provision to near-universal access in urban centres and institutionalise housing support tied to employment. These measures would improve the predictability of family planning and make return migration more viable for young households. By 2035, such interventions could raise fertility rates by 0.2-0.3 points.

Under Strategic Isolation: Fiscal constraints limit large-scale expansion, but well-targeted childcare and housing measures can still help stabilise fertility and social cohesion and slow down the outflow of young families. UNICEF[XXX] evidence from Albania and Serbia shows that expanding access to affordable childcare and housing subsidies increases the likelihood that families remain in urban areas where jobs are concentrated. Redirecting existing social transfers toward childcare places and rental support in core cities offers a cost-effective way to retain working-age households.

3. Circular and return migration regimes

Circular and return migration regimes are among the most effective tools to counter brain drain without restricting mobility. Experience from Poland, Portugal, and the Baltic states demonstrates that simplified recognition of qualifications, tax incentives for returnees, and diaspora investment funds significantly increase circular migration. [XXXI] Regardless of the scenarios, mobility should be treated as a two-way circuit, not a one-way exit.

Under EU Integration: EU alignment provides the institutional framework and incentives needed to expand circular migration. Western Balkan governments could institutionalise bilateral circular/return corridors with EU partners, fast-track the recognition of qualifications, and offer predictable tax relief for returnees and diaspora investors, while establishing dedicated diaspora innovation funds. By 2035, at least one quarter of emigrants in circular/return schemes could be engaged in temporary or return mobility, contributing skills and capital to domestic economies.

Under Strategic Isolation: With fewer legal mobility channels and weaker institutional credibility, large-scale circular migration becomes difficult to sustain. Retaining human capital therefore requires creative national measures. World Bank[XXXII] findings indicate that small-scale return grants, start-up incentives, and remote-work programmes can slow the outflow of young professionals even in low-trust environments. Supporting diaspora entrepreneurship and co-financing professional reintegration schemes could maintain a limited but vital flow of skills back into domestic economies despite broader structural challenges. One-stop "re-entry" services may also provide low-cost assistance to returning professionals navigating fragmented administrative systems.

4. Targeted labour immigration with integration standards

Targeted labour immigration with integration standards addresses growing labour shortages, particularly in construction, healthcare, and IT. IOM[XXXIII] and World Bank[XXXIV] note that unmanaged inflows from third countries can generate parallel labour markets, fuel exploitation, and heighten social tension unless accompanied by clear integration measures and oversight frameworks.

Under EU Integration: Western Balkan governments can establish transparent recruitment channels and mandatory integration programmes, including language/civic courses, skills certification, and strict equal-pay enforcement. These measures would enable the region to fill gaps by attracting immigrant workforce while maintaining cohesion. By 2035, immigrants could represent 8-10% of the workforce under regulated conditions, particularly in critical sectors such as health, construction, transport and IT, contributing to tax revenues and demographic resilience.

Under Strategic Isolation: Labour immigration management remains equally essential but measures comparable to those under the EU Integration Scenario are difficult to sustain, as they require regulatory capacity, oversight mechanisms, and EU technical and financial support that would no longer be available. In the absence of EU conditionality and cooperation frameworks, governments would lack both the incentives and the resources to develop structured recruitment and integration programmes, increasing the likelihood that labour migration occurs through ad hoc and weakly regulated channels. At a minimum, governments would need to establish the most basic integration and oversight mechanisms – language courses, regulated recruitment channels, equal-pay rules, inspection standards – to prevent the emergence of parallel labour markets and to avoid exploitation and social backlash. While more limited in scope, these measures would still help maintain social stability and protect migrant workers.

5. Data, foresight and regional cooperation

Big Data-based early warning systems would enhance foresight and policy responsiveness. Current migration statistics understate real outflows by 20-30%[XXXV] making it difficult for governments to anticipate labour shortages, pressure on social services, or emerging demographic risks. Integrating digital trace data – from Meta, Google, and administrative platforms – into national monitoring systems could provide near-real-time signals of emigration or labour shortages. Establishing a Western Balkans Migration Monitoring Platform would institutionalise this capacity, providing predictive analytics to support strategic planning in education, employment, and health sectors. Moreover, no matter the trajectory, demographic risks are regional and therefore require regional coordination.

Under EU Integration: EU Integration could provide the resources, technical standards, and interoperability needed to build a full-scale permanent Migration Monitoring Platform. Governments can link official statistics with digital trace data, harmonise

methodologies with Eurostat, and embed predictive analytics into policy planning. A fully operational Migration Monitoring Platform would support forward-looking labour market monitoring and education planning, along with early detection of demographic pressures. Regional coordination can be strengthened through alignment with EU Single Market rules and the Western Balkan Common Regional Market, facilitating data sharing and skills circulation.

Under Strategic Isolation: Fiscal constraints and weaker institutions capacity limit the scope for large-scale data reforms, but a lean, low-cost Migration Monitoring Platform function remains essential. Maintaining a streamlined platform that integrates basic administrative data with simple digital indicators can provide early warning on emigration spikes and sectoral shortages. In this context, regional coordination becomes even more important: pooling capacities through a Western Balkan data platform and shared monitoring can reduce costs and improve response time, while joint demographic data systems and cooperative early-warning tools can enhance foresight and policy learning at minimal cost.[XXXVI] A joint Migration Monitoring Platform could track regional flows, issue alerts, publish briefs, and strengthen institutional resilience even without deep EU support, ensuring policy is reactive at worst and anticipatory at best.

EU Actions under the Integration Scenario

Within the Integration scenario, closer EU alignment creates the policy space for more coherent migration governance and a stronger European approach to demographic challenges. Since mobility and population decline are structurally linked across the Union, the Western Balkans would benefit from EU-wide standards that address demographic imbalances and make mobility more mutually beneficials.

A **Common European Demographic Policy** would help reduce disparities that currently encourage labour-driven outmigration from the Western Balkans. **Harmonising minimum standards for family benefits, childcare access, and parental leave across the EU** would lessen the incentive for young families to migrate to higher-income Member States. A complementary **demographic cohesion mechanism**, similar to structural funds, could channel resources to regions facing depopulation or brain drain, supporting investments in childcare, housing, and service accessibility.

Embedding demographic sustainability into the European Semester would further align EU Member States' and candidate countries' national policies with long-term population goals, while strengthening institutional planning capacity in the Western Balkan countries as they move towards accession. Equally important **is linking demographic and migration policy at the EU level**, through return incentives, circular mobility programmes, and diaspora engagement. This approach transforms mobility from a zero-sum competition for human capital into a shared European resource.

Recommendations for the European Union under the Integration Scenario

- **Demography-migration coherence:** Anchor WB measures in a single EU framework that treats depopulation, skills mobility, and integration as one policy file. Tie pre-accession funding to measurable improvements in governance, childcare coverage, skills recognition, and integration standards.
- **Talent Partnerships and circularity:** Expand EU Talent Partnerships to the WB to include return clauses, skill certification, and tax incentives for re-entry. Support bilateral corridors in health, STEM, and vocational trades, with co-financed re-integration packages.
- **Targeted cohesion for demographic peripheries:** Designate WB demographic hotspots[6] (areas facing the steepest population loss and youth outmigration) and finance urban retention (childcare, housing near jobs) and service consolidation in viable rural nodes. Link payments to outcome indicators: retention of 20-39 cohort, rise in female employment, share of circular returnees.
- **Data interoperability:** Establish real-time data links between EU MS and WB institutions for residence, employment, and qualifications. Co-fund a Western Balkan Migration Monitoring Platform with annual, comparable migration balance sheets.
- **Border-demography nexus:** Recognise that empty peripheries weaken border resilience. Finance joint projects that couple legal labour channels and integration measures with border management, reducing incentives for irregular flows and enhancing incentives in depopulated border regions.

Under **EU Integration**, the EU provides the policy space, standards, and resources to scale reforms systemically. They enable the Western Balkans to contribute to - and benefit from – a broader European response to demographic decline.

Under **Strategic Isolation**, EU instruments focus on containment: safeguarding integrity, protecting skills pipelines, and maintaining minimum data and integration standards until political conditions improve. In practice, this means prioritising border security, preserving limited but controlled mobility channels, and supporting basic statistical and integration safeguards to prevent governance setbacks in the region from creating wider EU instability.

6 These zones would receive priority funding for urban-retention measures such as affordable childcare, housing close to jobs, and basic service accessibility. Concentrating support in these critical areas helps slow further decline and stabilise local labour markets.

The impact of the proposed measures is highly scenario dependent. Under EU Integration, conditionality and funding enable reforms at scale: governance improves, childcare and housing support expand, circular migration increases, labour shortages are met through regulated inflows, and a Migration Monitoring Platform strengthens strategic planning. Under Isolation, these levers operate with minimal effect. Without EU incentives, reforms stall, family policies remain small pilots, return migration is rare, and labour inflows are poorly regulated. Big Data tools survive only as reactive instruments, while population loss, fertility stagnation, and governance fragility intensify. EU integration therefore remains the only framework capable of delivering systematic demographic stabilisation; isolation amplifies decline.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that the demographic future of the WB will be shaped less by fertility trends and more by how migration is governed. By 2035, the region's resilience will depend on whether mobility becomes a mechanism of renewal or a driver of irreversible decline. The scenarios show that governance quality and EU alignment, rather than demographic incentives alone, determine which of these two paths unfolds.

Under EU Integration, the Western Balkans gain the policy space, institutional incentives and financial instruments needed to stabilise population loss, expand childcare and housing access, support circular migration and encourage the return of skilled citizens. In contrast, under Isolation, the same measures remain fragmented and symbolic, while the region becomes increasingly dependent on poorly integrated labour inflows from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The decisive difference is not the volume of migration, but whether states have the capacity and frameworks to shape it.

Although the Isolation scenario cannot generate demographic stabilisation, it still allows for measures that can limit the pace of decline and reduce systemic risks. Targeted retention efforts in urban centres, selective upskilling programmes, and minimum standards for labour recruitment and data monitoring can slow labour-market erosion and prevent governance deterioration from becoming irreversible. These measures do not change the strategic trajectory but can preserve essential human capital and institutional capacity until political conditions allow for renewed alignment with the EU.

Ultimately, the region's demographic trajectory will depend on its political choices. The Integration scenario offers a path in which institutions improve, circular mobility expands, the diaspora re-engages and immigration is managed according to EU standards. The EU Integration is not a silver bullet, but it creates the policy space, financial resources and incentives needed to address demographic pressures more effectively. Experience from previous enlargements shows that these tools matter yet are not sufficient on their own: Poland was able to stabilise fertility and retain talent, while Bulgaria continued to depopulate despite access to the same EU instruments. This underlines that integration enables progress, but domestic reforms — especially in governance and anti-corruption —determine whether the opportunity is used or lost.

The choice is therefore strategic rather than demographic. If the Western Balkans strengthen institutions, deepen cooperation with the EU and adopt a long-term approach to migration governance, population decline can be managed and partially reversed. Without such alignment, the region risks entering a downward cycle of political fragility, demographic loss and diminishing development prospects. In this sense, Europe's demographic future and that of the Western Balkans are inseparable — and only coordinated, shared policies can ensure long-term stability on both sides.

Taken together, these findings underscore that the region's long-term stability requires a comprehensive strategy linking migration governance, family policy, and structural socio-economic reforms, grounded in coordinated regional action and sustained EU engagement.

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GEOPOLITICS & FORCED MIGRATION

Russian Migration Policy at the Crossroads: Trends and Regional Repercussions

Policy Brief

Jeff Sahadeo and Nicholas Morrison

January 2025

Executive summary

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has strained its migration policies, amplifying longstanding demographic decline and labour shortages. The country faces acute needs for human capital, short- and long-term, with birth rates at historic lows and emigration compounding the crisis. Efforts to mitigate these challenges – such as the Compatriots Program, aimed at attracting newcomers through fast-tracked citizenship offers, as well as seeking to settle over one million Ukrainians who have found themselves in Russia after the 2014 and 2022 invasions – have failed to deliver the numbers required to sustain the economy or meet military recruitment needs. Labour migrants, primarily from Central Asia but increasingly from elsewhere in the Global South, remain essential to the Russian workforce but face growing systemic discrimination, exploitation, and forced conscription into the Russian Armed Forces. The Crocus City Hall attack in early 2024 fuelled xenophobia, deterring migrants from the ex-Soviet south, depressing numbers of newcomers and destabilizing migration flows. Russia has used migration as a tool of geopolitical influence to expose ambiguities in Western policies but has no solutions for its own problems.

This policy brief highlights main directions in Russia's migration policy since the 2022 invasion and underscores the implications of these developments for the Prague Process region. It calls for strategic action to strengthen cooperation with Central Asian states to create alternative labour migration pathways and reduce reliance on Russia, counter the use of migrants as a hybrid tool to challenge European members and work to return displaced Ukrainians, particularly children, home from Russia.

Introduction

Russia's migration policies are at a critical juncture. The country has historically been a major destination for migrants within the post-Soviet space, who have been admitted, if not always welcomed, to offset demographic decline and maintain its economic stability. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has disrupted these dynamics. A sharpened demographic decline has collided with wartime demands for human capital. As battlefield losses mount and Russia's economy continues on a wartime footing, the country needs new bodies. Vladimir Putin and government leaders remain aware, however, of the suspicion and xenophobia towards outsiders in Russian society, which they themselves have stoked and which intensified since the Crocus City Hall attack in March 2024, blamed on Tajik labour migrants to Russia.

The Russian government has tried largely in vain to adapt existing migration policies and actions to its wartime environment. The country remains an important destination for migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and, perhaps counterintuitively after the 2022 invasion, Ukraine. But the war has brought new actors and trends to Russia's migration picture. Wealthier European and Asian countries now compete more actively for Central Asian migrants as Russia looks increasingly to Global South countries outside Eurasia for labour. Even as Russia's demographic picture darkens, its ability – and willingness – to attract newcomers shrinks.

The Backdrop: An Intensified Demographic Decline

Russia's Statistical Agency, ***Rosstat***, has laid bare the demographic picture facing the state after prolonged war. Russia's birth rate is at its lowest since 1999, while its death rate continues to rise. In July 2023, the 110,500 recorded births were the lowest registered since 1945.[1] The relative population decline of 18% led Nina Ostanina, the head of the State Duma Committee for Family Protection, to call for a "special demographic operation."[2] Rosstat predicts, under its most likely scenario released in October 2023, the country's population will decline from 146.1 million to 138.1 million by 2046; its worst case envisions a population of 130 million.[3] Even this latter scenario appears optimistic. Its baseline immigration figure of 154,000 is far higher than the number of migrants – at least officially – who have entered Russia since February 2022. It does not account for hundreds of thousands of Russian "relokanty" who left in opposition to the war or for fear of conscription. Small numbers have returned since 2022 but the significant majority, mainly younger Russians, remain abroad.[4] Even before the war, Russia was bleeding crucial sectors of its population. Nikolai Dolgushkin, Chief Scientific Secretary of the Academy of Sciences, reported that emigration by scientists rose from 14,000 in 2012 to 70,000 in 2021.[5] In the first half of 2023, a record high number of Russians applied for passports. Vladimir Postavnin, a Russian migration expert, noted that: "Previously, foreign passports were issued for almost one reason – for travel on vacation or for work. I think that today, to a greater extent, Russians get it "just in case."[6]

Rosstat predicts, under its most likely scenario released in October 2023, the country's population will decline from 146.1 million to 138.1 million by 2046; its worst case envisions a population of 130 million.

Falling birth and rising death rates undermine President Putin's 2020 claim that "Russia's destiny and its historical prospects depend on one thing: how many of us there are and how many of us there will be."[7] The invasion of Ukraine may have been partly viewed by the Kremlin as a means to increase the population by integrating those considered co-ethnics. The Russian government has sought to raise the birthrate with carrots – payments to young families, increased child-care spaces – and sticks, including outlawing advocacy of a "child-free lifestyle."[8] The results, however, have been underwhelming. Russia is not just fighting challenges of wartime but also broader trends across Europe, where the birth rate is insufficient to maintain a

stable population.[9] Migration is a critical tool for the development – and maybe even the survival – of the Russian state in the next years and decades, especially if Putin holds to his plan to expand the armed forces from 150,000 to 1.8 million and keep the economy on a war footing.[10]

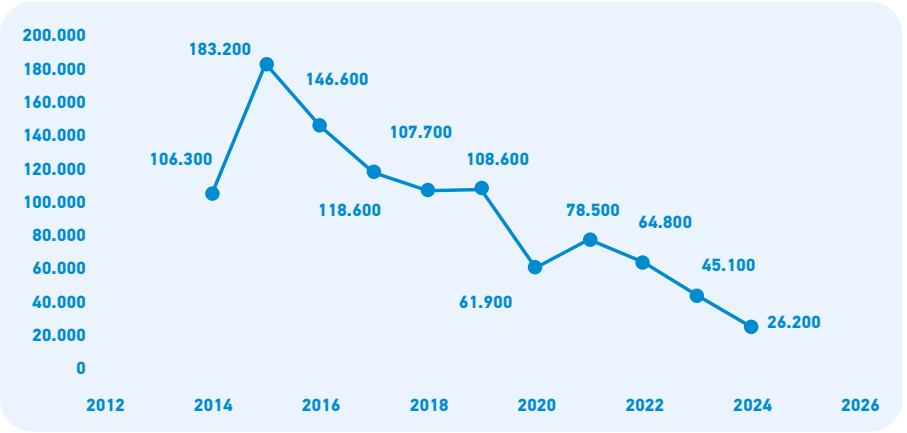
The State Program for Resettlement of Compatriots

Russia has utilised its Compatriots Policy as an important pathway for migrants to gain citizenship since the war in Ukraine. The "State Policy of the Russian Federation Concerning Compatriots (*sootechestveniki*) Abroad," adopted by the Russian Duma in 1999, sought to attract the twenty to forty million Russians who live outside of the Russian Federation. Immigrants from the former Soviet space, where most of these Russians live, account for 95% of total Compatriot arrivals, though many are not ethnic Russians.[11]

The Compatriots Program has fallen far short of President Putin's 2012 goal of attracting 300,000 migrants annually, the number needed to stem Russia's demographic decline.

Participants in the Compatriots Program are initially offered a temporary residence permit, with pathways to permanent residence and citizenship.[12] Ekaterina Donets and Olga S. Chudinovskikh note that "it is assumed that a compatriot must meet at least one of three criteria: citizenship ([former] USSR, Russian Federation); ethnicity (indigenous peoples of Russia); territory (descendants of inhabitants of the territory of the Russian Federation)."[13] Russian language proficiency is a key requirement for gaining citizenship through the Compatriots Program, which remains deliberately vague on the question of ethnic belonging. The Compatriots Program has fallen far short of President Putin's 2012 goal of attracting 300,000 migrants annually, the number needed to stem Russia's demographic decline.[14] Over 2012-2023, arrivals have averaged less than 100,000 per year. Despite government campaigns, a vibrant online presence promising a "Russian Passport in 3 Months" and policy adjustments like waiving requirements that Compatriots can only apply from abroad or need a pre-arranged place of employment, the program has failed to spark sufficient interest.[15] War against Ukraine further reduced application numbers. Data from Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs shows only 45,100 people registered for the program in 2023, a steep decline from 153,200 in 2019. Citizens of Tajikistan – overwhelmingly ethnic Tajiks – provided the largest contingent registered under the Compatriots Program in 2023 at 14,100, or more than 30%.[16]

Chart 1. The number of participants in the Compatriots program registered with the Ministry of Internal Affairs



Source: Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia; incomplete data for 2024 (January-September)

A major drawback of the Compatriots Program is its regional character. Seventy-six of 83 constituent units (Russia's regions) accept Compatriot applications but not those that would be most desirable: Moscow, Moscow Region, and St. Petersburg.[17] Each region determines which admission criteria to apply as well as what kind of social supports to offer. The program has effectively become a labour recruitment and regional development strategy.[18] Compatriots and other in-migrants, even in Russia's north, come predominantly from the ex-Soviet south. Arkhangelsk contains large Armenian and Azerbaijani populations, Krasnoyarsk has mainly Tajik migrants, while the Komi Republic hosts many Kyrgyz.[19]

Migrating to Russia through the Compatriots Program provides no assurances of social or cultural integration, especially as it places successful applicants outside the more cosmopolitan St. Petersburg and Moscow. Program beneficiaries who are not of "Slavic appearance" face particular challenges. Lauren Woodard notes that "[a]lthough nearly any immigrant from a former Soviet country can claim Russian compatriotism..., passing as a Russian citizen requires a particular performance that remains tied to phenotypical and linguistic features associated with ethnic Russians."[20]

Since the war, the Russian government has intensified efforts to boost migrant and Compatriots Program numbers beyond Eurasia. One involves the issue of a new, electronic "Rodina [homeland] card" to ethnic Russians (and others who might fall under the auspices of Compatriots) abroad.[21] The card allows access to a "work in Russia" database listing job opportunities.[22] Another initiative involves "value migration," targeted at "Christian families with many children from the USA, Canada, Europe, Australia."[23] The Russian government claims, without evidence, that they are "flocking to the expanses of Russia...to flee the new liberal normality for an oasis of

traditional spiritual and moral values."[24] Such initiatives are unlikely to significantly increase participation in the Compatriots Program or address Russia's demographic problem. Nikolai Zatulin, the First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots, stated frankly: "Not everyone is ready to go to a country at war. People are also waiting to see how this [the conflict between Russia and Ukraine] might end."[25]

Ukrainian Movement to Russia

Ukrainians have occupied a specific place in the Compatriots Program, with over one million likely fleeing the war in Donbass for Russia since 2014. The Russian government granted Ukrainians a form of temporary protection, with a simplified process towards a temporary resident permit.[26] The latter allowed them immediate eligibility to seek citizenship through regional migration offices.

Russia's 2022 invasion precipitated another Ukrainian migratory wave to Russia. UNHCR placed the figure at over 1.23 million at the end of 2023, higher than numbers in Germany and Poland.[27] At present, Ukrainian citizens can stay and work in Russia indefinitely subject to fingerprinting and medical examination.[28] Ukrainian arrivals provide a potential counterweight to the falling numbers in the Compatriots Program. Even before the February 2022 invasion, Putin promised 10,000-rouble (€ 95) payments to "refugees from Donbass and Ukraine," though how many have received this stipend is unclear.[29]

Authorities pressure Ukrainians to become Russian citizens, but many fear that acquiring citizenship may increase the likelihood of military conscription, and therefore prefer a status of temporary displaced.

In August 2022, Putin signed a decree offering one-off and monthly payments through the year to certain categories of citizens of Donetsk, Luhansk, other parts of Ukraine and stateless persons who left these territories after 18 February 2022. This included a 10,000-rouble payment for pregnant mothers and a 20,000-rouble payment for a mother giving birth in Russia.[30]

Authorities pressure Ukrainians to become Russian citizens; as of July 2023, this can be accomplished by an application and simple "swap" of passports at government offices.[31] Many Ukrainians, however, fear that acquiring citizenship may increase the likelihood of military conscription, and therefore prefer a status of temporary displaced.[32] Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs proposed in November 2024 to limit the period of temporary stay of Ukrainian citizens in Russia and their right to work without a special permit that would create a "stable legal connection" to the country.[33]

Ukrainians' motives for entering or remaining in Russia range from fear of dying in a war-torn state to joining relatives or comfort in a Russian-speaking environment. Russian propaganda portrays the country as a haven with a prosperous economy and strong labour market, especially in remote regions where compatriots can settle.[34] The war has left Russians suspicious of Ukrainians. Where Ukrainians settle is unclear, but they have been recruited by authorities as far east as Sakhalin.[35] Some seek to "pass" by changing their accent – for example, emphasizing a "g" instead of a "kh" sound in many common words.[36]

Abductions of Ukrainian children is another element of Russia's efforts to boost population. Ukraine has identified about 20,000 children forcibly taken to Russia, but experts believe the number is significantly higher.[37] The Russian government boasts that 744,000 Ukrainian children have, in their words, been evacuated from conflict zones. The Yale School of Public Health has located over 40 camps hosting these children – some are orphans, but many were forcibly separated from their parents.[38] In March 2023 the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants to President Putin and Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova and "for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation."[39]

Ukrainian children deported to Russia undergo an intense Russification program.[40] They are forbidden to speak Ukrainian and required to sing the Russian national anthem in camps and schools. Lessons focus on Russian history and culture.[41] An International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children, co-chaired by the Ukrainian and Canadian governments, involves the participation of 40 states as well as NGOs and human rights organizations. As of the end of 2024, only a few hundred have left Russia for Ukraine.

Instrumentalization of Migration

Russia's wartime efforts to instrumentalise migration have both drawn people from Ukraine and sent people to states it sees as adversaries in Europe. In 2022, President Putin focused not only on Ukraine's Slavic population but also the 75,000-plus foreign students from India, Central Asia, Africa and China.[42] Offers of visa-free status to them had two main purposes: to expose the racialized treatment of students who were fleeing westwards; and to portray Putin as a protector of citizens from states of the Global South, whose support he sought in various UN resolutions.[43]

In November-December 2023, over 1,000 migrants claimed asylum at land border crossings with Russia.

In 2023, Putin continued to expose perceived double standards in Western migration policies to foster discord. Russian embassies in the Horn of Africa and select Middle Eastern states reportedly eased entry requirements to Russia. The Federal Security Services (FSB) met newcomers in Moscow and facilitated their path to the Finnish

border.[44] In November-December 2023, over 1,000 migrants claimed asylum at land border crossings with Russia.[45] The Finns closed several checkpoints, requested the assistance of the EU border agency Frontex and erected wire and concrete barriers.[46] Poland, Estonia and Latvia also noted rising numbers of asylum-seekers from Russia and Belarus. These tactics echoed Belarusian President Lukashenko's sending of hundreds of Afghans to Western borders at the same time as pro-democracy demonstrations in Minsk in 2020.[47]

Finland's Minister of European Affairs Anders Adlercreutz labelled this migration as one of Russia's "deliberate, cynical, hybrid actions" to destabilize western solidarity and migration policies.[48] In July 2024, the Finnish parliament approved a law, valid for one year, to permit border guards to reject asylum applications on the Russian border unless migrants are children, disabled or deemed especially vulnerable.[49] Amnesty International joined academics and human rights groups in criticising the legislation. Its deputy director stated: "This law gravely undermines access to asylum and the protection from refoulement in Finland. It not only endangers the rights of people seeking safety, but it will also lead to arbitrariness and violence at the border (...). It calls into question Finland's commitment to the rule of law."[50]

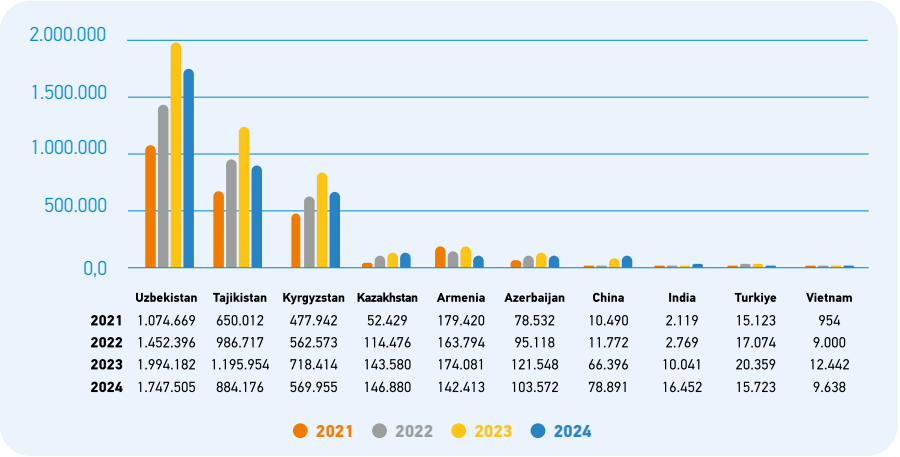
Wartime Labour Migration

While Russia exploits divisions in Western migration policy, it faces even greater wartime challenges. The Compatriots program's relative failure has forced the country to remain reliant on substantial labour migration, primarily from Central Asia. Migrants form the backbone of Russia's low-income labour sector and have become increasingly important in other economic sectors and military roles since the war's start. The country's partial mobilization in September 2022 left job positions in IT, medical and manual labour sectors vacant as Russian citizens fled the country or were recruited into the Russian Armed Forces. By mid-2023, job vacancies in Russia rose to 6.8 percent.[51]

Wartime labour shortages have pushed Russia to seek migrants workers from Southeast Asia and Africa. In addition to filling the gaps on the labour market, migrants from the Global South and Central Asia have increasingly been drawn into Russia's war effort.

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provide the bulk of labour migrants to Russia, driven by the shortage of available work in their home states and the importance of remittances to support their families. In March 2024, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated migrant numbers from these three countries at 10.5 million.[52] Irregular migrants from neighbouring countries add millions more.[53] Their path to Russia is full of complexities and informalities. To legally work and reside in the country, migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan must obtain a labour license (*trudovoi patent).* Although officially priced at 4,000 roubles, licenses generally cost migrants 20,000-25,000 roubles due to informal payments to Russian officials.[54] After acquiring a license, Tajik and Uzbek migrants must make monthly payments to migration authorities. Moscow's rate is set at about 6,000 roubles.[55] As do Compatriots from the former Soviet south, they face racism and harassment from law enforcement officers, employers and the general public.[56] Many reside in cramped, communal flats to save their earnings.[57]

Chart 2. Top 10 countries by number of entries to Russia for work reasons, 2021-2024



	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Kazakhstan	Armenia	Azerbaijan	China	India	Turkiye	Vietnam
2021	1.074.669	650.012	477.942	52.429	179.420	78.532	10.490	2.119	15.123	954
2022	1.452.396	986.717	562.573	114.476	163.794	95.118	11.772	2.769	17.074	9.000
2023	1.994.182	1.195.954	718.414	143.580	174.081	121.548	66.396	10.041	20.359	12.442
2024	1.747.505	884.176	569.955	146.880	142.413	103.572	78.891	16.452	15.723	9.638

Source: Federal State Statistics Service of Russia

Wartime labour shortages have pushed Russia to seek migrant workers from Southeast Asia and Africa. In early 2024, Russian officials began negotiations with the government of Kenya to employ 10,000 Kenyans in a variety of industries, with promises of language training. Mikhail Lyapin, a Russian entrepreneur involved in the negotiations, noted that positions would be temporary and filled on a rotating basis.[58] Russian companies are also advertising job vacancies in countries such as Sierra Leone, Malawi, and Nepal. These postings range from specialist positions in IT companies to manual labour.[59]

Migrants from the Global South and Central Asia have increasingly been drawn into Russia's war effort. Russia continues to face staggering battlefield losses. US officials estimate that Russia has suffered 115,000 dead and 500,000 wounded as of October 2024.[60] The Putin government is determined to retain a strategy aimed at minimizing the number of citizens recruited from major urban centres and among ethnic Russians overall.[61] Russia's 2022 mobilization targeted regions with high ethnic minority populations, sparking protests in Dagestan and Sakha Oblasts.[62]

The recruitment of migrants into the Russian war effort blends incentivization, subterfuge and force. Recruiters for the Russian Armed Forces advertise military service as a lucrative opportunity. Migrants are promised high salaries, with a sign-up payment of 220,000 roubles (€2,040) on top of a 398,000-rouble salary (€3,691),[63] far exceeding the average migrant worker wage of 20,000-50,000 roubles (€185-463).[64] In January 2024, President Putin decreed that immigrants who sign contracts with the Russian Armed Forces will receive citizenship after one year of service.[65]

Migrants may be coerced into military service through deception and force, even without directly signing contracts. Migrant rights activists in Russia report that customs officers conceal military contracts amongst bundles of documents, up to 40 pages in length, which migrants must sign upon entry to Russia. With long queues at their backs and pressure from customs officers, migrants cannot fully read the material.[66] Misleading job postings also serve as a recruitment method. One Tajik migrant recounted that he and his peers were offered a high-paying contract for construction work in Russian-occupied Ukraine. Indian and Nepalese migrants are lured to Russia with the promise of housekeeping work.[67] Upon arrival, however, migrants are transported to recruitment centres and, in extreme cases, directly to the frontline.[68] Central Asians and other non-Russians who hold Russian citizenship face intense pressure from recruiters and law enforcement.[69] Police raid mosques and workplaces frequented by Central Asian migrants; those with Russian passports are transported directly to enlistment centres.[70]

Recruiters also target female Central Asian migrants to serve as cooks and nurses in the Russian army.[71] Women from African and Southeast Asian countries, attracted to high-salary positions for factory work in Russia on the website "Alabuga Start" find themselves working in factories assembling drones.[72]

The recruitment of migrants into the Russian war effort remains largely unchecked by home country governments. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan threaten citizens with legal repercussions if they join "foreign militaries."[73] In 2023, Kyrgyz authorities sentenced Askar Kubanychbek-uulu to ten years in prison for his service with the Russian Army in Ukraine, but this remains an isolated case.[74] Southeast Asian governments have yet to protest recruitment of their citizens into the Russian Armed Forces, despite complaints from migrant families.[75]

Migration After the Crocus City Hall Attacks

On 22 March 2024, the Islamist organization ISIS-K claimed responsibility for a mass shooting at Crocus City Hall, a concert venue located just outside of Moscow.[76] The attack killed 145 people and injured hundreds.[77] The next day, Russian authorities arrested four Tajik migrants as the ostensible perpetrators.[78] Subsequently, Russian authorities arrested 11 more Tajiks and one ethnic Kyrgyz for facilitating the attack.[79]

In December 2024, four more men were arrested in southern Russian republic of Ingushetia in connection to the attack.[80]

The Crocus City Hall attack changed the migration landscape in Russia and reignited debates about securitizing Russia's migration policies.

The Crocus City Hall attack changed the migration landscape in Russia. Attacks against Central Asian migrants have mounted. In one instance, a Central Asian man sitting in his car at a stop light was pepper sprayed and beaten.[81] A video posted on Telegram showed two Russians attacking a man they believed to be Tajik, beating him with blunt objects.[82] Arsonists destroyed a migrant-owned business in the Far Eastern city of Blagoveshchensk.[83] The governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan issued warnings advising citizens to avoid travel to Russia in the wake of these attacks.[84] These advisories were reissued in September 2024.[85]

The attack reignited debates about securitizing Russia's migration policies. At an April meeting with officials from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Putin called for the implementation of biometric databases – which remains unrealized after 11 years of discussion.[86] The Russian government has allocated the equivalent of $129.6 million for the development of a biometric surveillance system focused on facial recognition.[87] The State Duma has submitted 28 bills related to the securitization of migrant communities in 2024, a handful of which have been passed. One prevents migrants from taking part in "mass gatherings" while another shortened deportation timelines for detained migrants.[88] These bills still must undergo vetting by the Federation Council, the Russian upper house, and be signed by the President to become law.

Russia is now testing courses aimed at migrant integration. In September 2023, Russia's Federal Agency of Ethnic Affairs (FADN) announced that it had developed a program to teach migrants about Russian language, culture, norms and values.[89] Aimed at Central Asians, the course instructs participants, among other strictures, not to speak their native language in public. In July 2024, FADN launched the course in several regions across Russia. As of Fall 2024, however, no legislation forces migrants to enrol.[90]

Federal and regional governments have enacted measures to lower Central Asian migrant intakes. On 16 October 2024, the Russian government announced that it was reducing the residence permit quota from 10,600 in 2024 to 5,500 in 2025[91] Regions across Russia have barred foreigners from working jobs commonly staffed by Central Asian migrants. Officials in Samara Oblast have prohibited migrants from renting residences and working in hospitality services.[92] A bill submitted to the State Duma in July 2024 proposes to rewrite the Compatriots Law to exclude most Tajiks and others from the ex-Soviet south.[93]

Central Asian labour migrants now seek alternative destinations for employment. A Kyrgyz worker remarked that "nowadays, Asians are leaving to Europe and the US for work, and Russian employers are trying to hire from other countries and continents like Africa, Vietnam and the Philippines."[94] Since Crocus City Hall, the number of job seekers from Tajikistan to Moscow and St. Petersburg has decreased by 60 percent.[95]

Similarly, the inflow of Uzbek labourers decreased by 40 percent.[96] South Korea, Türkiye, Eastern Europe and countries in Southeast Asia have emerged as competitors for migrants seeking work.[97] Central Asian governments have also attempted to redirect their workers. In September 2024, Uzbekistan signed a deal to facilitate the movement of its citizens to Germany.[98] Uzbek representatives are also engaged in talks with migration authorities in the Netherlands.[99] German officials met with Kyrgyz representatives to discuss a migrant labour agreement.[100] The United Kingdom has also raised caps on visas for Tajik, Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationals.[101] Opportunities to work in Asian and European countries lessens the popularity of Russia as a destination for Central Asian migrant labourers, especially as anti-migrant legislation and sentiment there has increased over 2024.

Conclusion, Scenarios, and Recommendations

Low intake through the Compatriots Program and declining labour migration flows have worsened an acute worker shortage in Russia.[102] Even so, the Russian government in 2024 has exerted greater effort to instrumentalise and securitise migration rather than attract newcomers. European countries bordering Russia experienced unexpected surges of migrants from the Global South directed by the Kremlin. Some of those coming to Russia for work from the ex-Soviet and Global South have been deceived and coerced into joining the army and face both popular and official antagonism. The danger of dying in a conflict that is not their own is acute. Even as President Putin disregards issues of demographic decline to win what he considers an existential conflict, the immediate consequences of shortcomings in migration policies are clear. Russia's neighbours now must consider their own place in a renewed migratory landscape.

- Facing low domestic recruitment numbers, Russia is turning to countries near and far to bolster manpower, even at the risk of alienating allies. The Putin government has already struck a deal to deploy North Korean soldiers in Ukraine, ignoring any potential Chinese discomfort.[103] Thus far, around 11,000 North Korean troops have travelled to Russia, where they have trained and received equipment.[104] On the frontlines, North Korean soldiers wear Russian uniforms and are interspersed in Russian units. In a clumsy attempt to mask their involvement, Moscow has claimed that North Korean soldiers are from the Russian Republics of Buryatia and Tuva.[105] The US Government estimates that around 10,000 North Koreans are deployed in the Kursk Oblast.[106] Western states should identify and address other potential countries that might be incentivised to send soldiers to Ukraine.

- Governments of European countries bordering Russia and Belarus should work proactively with human rights organisations and academics to design humane, legal and effective policies and practices should Russia attempt to send another wave of migrants to disrupt border areas. An efficient and coordinated response can at once improve humanitarian conditions for migrants whom the Kremlin might try to instrumentalise, display a positive face to Global South countries and exhibit to the Putin government the ineffectiveness of this strategy.

- European governments should continue to work with Central Asian states to direct and regularise migration flows through labour partnerships and agreements. As Russia becomes a less attractive destination, Central Asian migrants look to Europe. Germany has already undertaken investment in Uzbek educational institutions, including advanced training courses and vocational training.[107] Such investment can encourage flows of skilled, talented migrants. Migrant labourers from Central Asia have the potential to counter job shortages in manufacturing and construction sectors in European states.[108] Targeted migration with intergovernmental cooperation can serve to address security concerns and decrease potential backlash from EU member publics. Cooperation and investment will assist regional stability in Eurasia, strengthen ties between Europe and Central Asian states and offer a diverse migrant pool for work across the continent.

- Russia will continue to work to increase its population through forced migration of Ukrainian citizens, especially children. Western governments should consider this scenario in any negotiations to end the war. European states should play prominent roles in the International Coalition for the Return of Ukrainian Children. This return will, at some point, require discussions with Moscow.

- Western governments and Ukraine should, with NGOs or through online channels, inform citizens from the Middle East, Africa and South/East Asia that offers to work in Russia, however attractive, will likely end up with them in the military sector and quite possibly on the front lines. Central Asian governments should also alert their citizens to practices used by the Russian Armed Forces to recruit migrants.

- In the medium- to long-term, Russia will confront a severe demographic crisis. Its actions in response are impossible to predict as the war continues but this will become the next existential issue for its leadership – both the overall population numbers and their composition, as the percentage of ethnic Russians continues to shrink. Western countries need to start planning for Russia's actions as its population, and most likely its economy, contracts. A weakened Russia will pose important security risks across the continent, regardless of any settlement that might be reached in Ukraine.

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Do Russia's attacks on power infrastructure drive forced migration from Ukraine?

Situational Brief

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February 2025

"Energy services are essential for basic human protection and dignity. Lighting, heating, cooking and powering a radio or cell phone all use forms of energy. Energy is essential for health care services, and water and sanitation provisions, and extremely useful for education and community facilities"

(Grafham 2020: 2).

Key takeaways

- Surveys show that lack of electricity, heating and water can drive forced migration
- By January 2025, 80% of Ukraine's energy infrastructure has been damaged or de-stroyed. However, the heating system remains largely intact.
- Pre-war overcapacities, a drop in demand, rationing, quick repairs, energy and fuel im-ports, generator imports, and Western aid prevented the collapse of Ukraine's energy system.
- 26.8% of all households, notably in rural areas, have alternative heating sources such as wood or coal burners.
- As a result, there has been little to no net forced migration due to Russia's attacks of Ukraine's energy system.

By late December 2024, Russia had launched 13 major attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure, notably power plants, heating plants and boiler stations, but also hospitals and schools (OHCHR 2024). This continued into January 2025. As a consequence of such attacks, the Helmholtz Centre Berlin (31/10/2024), among others, concludes that "many of the combined heat and power plants and cogeneration plants are damaged, and there isn't enough electricity to go around, which means that control systems and pumps can temporarily shut down. As a result, poorly insulated homes, particularly in urban areas, have less heating. This leads to unacceptable conditions for residents – especially children, the elderly and the sick – and will drive more people to flee, even from areas not directly affected by the fighting". The energy situation in Ukraine may seem dire at first glance, but a closer look reveals it is less severe than anticipated.

This brief assesses the state of Ukraine's energy system, and its impact on the population, and discusses the potential for further forced migration to the EU.

Ukraine's energy situation

Ukraine's energy industry consists of two main sectors: electricity and heating, complemented by regional extraction of fossil fuels. The electricity-producing sector is highly centralised, relying on large nuclear, gas, coal-fired, and hydroelectric power stations. The heat-producing sector is more decentralised and primarily dependent on gas. Before the war, Ukraine had 33 power stations (4 nuclear, 11 hydroelectric, 18 thermal), along with 11 solar and 9 wind parks, many of which also generate heat, and around 100,000 dedicated boiler stations (2007) (CASE 2007). However, the heating infrastructure, notably pumps, depends on electricity.

Before the war, Ukraine generated 56 Gigawatt (GW) of energy, consuming 32 GW and exporting a surplus of 24 GW (ACAPS, 13/9/2024). "Over the course of 2022 and 2023, about half of Ukraine's power generation capacity was either occupied by Russian forces, destroyed or damaged, and approximately half of large network substations were damaged by missiles and drones" (IEA, September 2024)[1]. Up to that point, the overcapacities largely cushioned the destruction. However, by July 2024, further attacks had left only "around a third of its pre-war electricity generation capacity" operational (ibid). In winter 2022, this resulted in 35 days of power cuts over six months (UNDP 2023). By December 2024, following attacks in August and November, energy generating capacity has dropped to possibly 20%, or around 11 GW. Simultaneously, by early 2024, energy consumption fell by a third due to the emigration of 16,2% of the population and a 20% decline in economic activity, with peak demand in 2024/2025 assumed to be 12 GW in summer and 18.5 GW in winter (IEA, September 2024). Regarding heating, only around 800 of the 100,000 boiler stations were damaged, leaving the heating system largely intact (IEA 2024).

Before a major attack on 28 November 2024, the 'most realistic scenario' for the winter was that the country could face electricity supply limitations for 8-14 hours a day for both industry and households (News Ukraine 2024). In Kyiv, for example, "daily blackouts of eight hours are common, and people plan their days around when power is scheduled to be available" (Reuters 2024). A similar situation occurs in other parts of the country. After the latest wave of Russia's attacks in December 2024 and January 2025, power cuts are likely to last even longer. If energy production capacity were further reduced to 20%, the country could face up to 70 full days or 140 half-days without power during the 180-day heating season, meaning almost every day would be affected[2]. But there are also exceptions, notably in the frontline city of Kharkiv, where despite daily rocket attacks, local informants indicated few power cuts and nearly continuous 24/7 electricity supply in November/ December 2024.

1 All data in this paper come with a caveat. Many figures are imprecise or conflicting, certain information is classified. The sums presented here are approximate and rather indicators or trends than hard figures.

2 This calculation is based on UNDP 2023 and extrapolated to 2024

An important element in Ukraine's energy production is the supply of coal and gas. So far, the sup-ply of fossil energy sources has remained stable. Ukraine's resources are considerable and most of them remain under government control in Lviv, Volyn, Zakarpattya and Dnipropetrovsk provinces. Notably, natural gas production increased during the war, reaching 18,7 billion cubic metres in 2023 (Reuters 2023), covering almost 92% of domestic demand (IEA 2022). However, reports from early 2025 suggest that Russia also intensified targeting Ukraine's gas production and storage capaci-ties, even in the west. Therefore, the remaining demand is increasingly met through imports of gas and liquified natural gas (LNG) from Europe and, since December 2024, the US. Before the war, Ukraine met 100% of its crude oil demand from domestic sources, was a net exporter (IEA 2022), and recently even drilled new oil wells (Euromaidan Press 2024). At the same time, due to limited and outdated facilities, up to 97% of refined oil products were imported. Following the destruction of the key Kremenchuk oil refinery by Russian shelling (Kyiv Post 2022), "Ukraine's entire oil sector has been forced to halt refining operations", making imports of refined oil products, such as petrol, diesel and kerosene necessary. As of January 2024, coal demand was also met by domestic resources (IEA 2022)[3], with 53% of coal used for energy production and the rest for industrial purposes. In January 2025, the country's largest coal mine, west of Pokrovsk – primarily producing coal for steel production – halted production due to Russian advances and the evacuation of the city[4]. This development will affect steel-making and exports but is unlikely to affect domestic electricity and heating production. Ukraine still has significant coal resources, notably in the Dnepropetrovsk oblast (Petlovanyi et al. 2018), where most of thermal coal including all brown coal is mined. Moreover, the country had already begun reducing reliance on coal, from 164 million tonnes in 1990 to around 38 million tonnes in 2019.

The impact of winter weather on energy demand is another important factor, but no reliable forecast for winter 2025 temperatures is available. By mid-January, temperatures across Ukraine – west, east and south – have oscillated around zero. This is around the historical average, neither particularly cold nor mild. However, the coldest months are typically from January to March. "Every oblast in Ukraine is prone to experiencing days with temperatures below -10 °C, resulting in a nationwide exposure to severe cold temperatures" (REACH 2024). As a consequence, "exposure to severe cold weather increases the risk of mortality by exacerbating chronic conditions like heart disease, strokes and respiratory illnesses. It may also result in cold-related injuries, hypothermia, and frostbite"(ibid.).

3 In 2023, coal production was 23.341 million tonnes, of which 1.8 million tonnes were exported in 2024; hence, despite the war and Russian occupation of many mines in Donbas, there was still some over-production. However, certain types of coal are still also imported.

4 Before the invasion 88 of 121 coal mines in Donbas were in the occupied territory, of which at least a third was flooded or destroyed.

Any shortfall in energy supply due to Russian attacks potentially affects businesses, transportation, and private households. Factories, including those producing much-needed arms and ammunition, (hot) water supply, public and finance services, supermarkets (notably refrigerators), lifts in apartment blocks (impacting the elderly), internet and telephone services, as well as trams and trolley-buses may be left without power and cease functioning. Long-term damage is also a risk, notably due to frozen water pipes and pumps, leading to lasting disruptions in water and heating services, as well as flooding once temperatures rise again. To assess the actual shortfall, the impact of mitigating measures shall be analysed.

Table: Summary of key data

Pre-war energy industry **33** power stations, **20** wind/solar parks **100,000** boiler stations	**Destruction of energy generating capacity** **80%** (max., before restauration)	**Damaged boiler stations** **800** (0,8%)
Pre-war energy production **56** GW	**Pre-war energy consumption** **32** GW	**War 2022/2023 production** **28** GW
War 12/2024 production **11,2** GW	**War 12/2024 consumption** **11** GW	**2024/25 winter peak demand** **18,5** GW



Coping strategies

The gap of 7.3 GW between energy supply and peak (winter) energy demand has been addressed through five strategies: rationed power supply via scheduled power cuts, repairs to the damaged grid, energy and generator imports, the use of coal and wood, and the installation of solar panels.

1. Rationed power supply

During the first war winter in 2022/2023, when energy production capacity stood at around 40%, "the average Ukrainian household endured five cumulative weeks without power [...] That is 35 days", spread over around six months (UNDP 2023). This equals 70 half-days of power outages, with energy supply usually rationed to a few hours per day, out of 180 days.

2. Continuous repairs

Efforts are made to repair damaged infrastructure. The Ukraine Energy Support Fund, worth over 640 million Euro, was set up by Western allies to facilitate energy infrastructure repairs (BMWK 2024), partly through a dedicated Ukraine Support Task Force. "Ukraine has repeatedly managed to repair damaged infrastructure and mitigate the consequences of power outages, avoiding a collapse of the power system" (Swedish Defence Research Agency 2024). "With ongoing repairs ... Ukraine aims to restore about 4-5 GW of power generation by winter" (EEAS 2024), equivalent to 27% of overall demand. Observers have noted the "high pace of repairs by Ukrainian actors", with anecdotal evidence suggesting large numbers of affected households could be reconnected within hours rather than days (Swedish Defence Research Agency 2024).

3. Energy and generator imports

In 2024, the Ukrainian energy grid, integrated into the Western European grid as of March 2022, facilitated the flow of electricity from west to east (EUNeighboursEast 2024). Electricity imports rose by +333% ($669 million) amounting to 4.4 GW in 2024, equivalent to around 22,5% of peak winter demand, and almost double previous estimates. These energy imports are complemented by liquified gas from the US via Greek ports (DTEK 2024). In addition, in 2022, the first year of the war, 640,000 power generators were imported (OSW 2023), this number increased by around 20% (Berlin Economics 2024) to an estimated 777,000 units[5] in 2023, although it declined in 2024. Energy storage equipment (batteries) was imported at a cost of 2 billion Euro (ibid), with imports increasing from the summer of 2024. By 2024, about half of all energy equipment imports were power generators (Vox Ukraine 2024), without considering in-kind imports. Additionally, in 2024, imports of batteries and transformers increased by 103% ($950 million) and 108% ($596 million), respectively. Through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, over 6,500 power generators were sent

5 "The highest imports were the smaller size engines with an output smaller than 75 kVA", Berlin Economics 2024, p. 8

to Ukraine by June 2024 (DG NEAR 2023, ECPHAO 2024), with plans to increase to 10,000 transformers and generators (DG NEAR). German aid, including generators and boilers, is meant to secure energy and heat supply for 2.6 million people (BMZ 2024). This is complemented by generator deliveries from the UK, further aid from the UK[6] while US aid through the Energy Support Programme (ESP) totals $749million. By the end of 2024, Ukraine could have had over 2 million small power generators and about 10,000 large generators. Whereas small generators have "been crucial in meeting the electricity needs of critical facilities and public 'points of resilience,' enabling people to access essential services such as phone charging, internet connectivity, heating, and lighting" (Berlin Economics 2024), the EU's large energy items alone "will generate power to meet the needs of 6.5 million people" (EEAS 2024). Meanwhile, China has persistently been the main supplier of energy equipment. To facilitate these imports, energy-generating devices are exempted from taxation.

4. Solar panels

In Kyiv, "official data showed that about 1.5 GW of new solar generation has been installed", with the government subsidising 70% of the costs of solar panels (Reuters 2024). In Odesa, new solar power plants deliver energy to several institutions, including hospitals, a school and social services centres (Lithuania 2024). More solar panels are planned for other parts of the country. Also, humanitarian organisations (e.g. Hope for Ukraine 2024) provide portable solar panels to frontline communities disconnect from electricity supply. These systems are "designed to meet essential daily needs, such as cooking, lighting, and communication". But because not all private initiatives are recorded, the number of solar power installations is likely higher.

5. Wood and coal burners

Nationwide, 28.6% of all households have wood or coal burners (ACAPS 2024) for heating, with up to 57.3% in rural areas but only up to 12.9% in urban areas. Households in villages, (semi)detached houses, and some pre-WWII buildings are more likely to have coal and wood heating facilities, which do not exist in post-WWII apartment blocks. Accordingly, possibly 3,43 million households, with 8,58 million household members, may rely on such alternative means of heating, whereas 8,5 million households, with 21.5 million household members, do not have access to these alternatives.

In total, Ukraine's remaining energy production capacity, including repairs and imports, totals ap-proximately 19.9 GW, which should largely cover a winter peak demand estimated at 18.5 GW. Another indicator of the energy situation's stability is that it "even allows for commercial exports of electricity during certain hours, which helps to balance the system and generates additional revenue for energy companies" (CES 2025). A key challenge, given the damaged grid, is to transport energy to consumers.

6 The UK announced 42 million Euro (35 million GBP) in emergency support to repair the energy grid.

However, small-scale generators are proving effective in bridging some supply gaps, notably during scheduled power cuts. While this suggests that the energy situation is broadly under control and its impact on most people in Ukraine is not devastating, "local authorities report that nearly 900,000 people in ... [communities near the frontline] will require urgent winter support to survive the freezing months ahead" (World Vision Ukraine 2024).

Consequences for forced migration

Some migration literature identifies inadequate infrastructure, such as electricity and water, as drivers of migration or at least as exacerbating factors (e.g. Munoz et al. 2017). The results of a small-scale survey conducted in larger Ukrainian cities in May 2024 (Gradus 2024) suggest that for 49% of respondents, the lack of water, heating and light would be a driver of migration. These shortages ranked seventh, after security concerns or worries about children's development, but ahead of issues like lack of employment. Accordingly, only 15% of respondents considered this the main driver for leaving their domicile. Another survey by UNHCR in Switzerland in 2023 found that for 75% of respondents, access to electricity and water services was important or very important for return migration aspirations. This suggests that the destruction of critical infrastructure and interruption to the energy supply could act as a driver of forced migration.

There are still 31 million people in government-controlled parts of Ukraine who could be affected by an energy crisis, whereas around 6,6 million, or 16.9% of the pre-war population (2021), have fled the country. Before the war, there were around 16.5 million households in Ukraine (2020), with an average household size of 2,58 members (2020). By October 2024, 18% of the country was occupied by Russia (CFR 2024), meaning approximately 13,53 million households remain in government-controlled territory. The number of households in which all members have fled is unknown, as male adult household members are restricted from leaving the country and tend to stay. By late 2024, the number of households remaining in the country may have declined to below 12 million, with the number of household members likely reduced due to forced migration, possibly to around 2.07 million or fewer[7].

During the winter of 2023/2024, the already decimated energy and heating supply had no mea-surable impact on forced migration. Instead, the number of Ukrainian forced migrants in the EU increased by only around 10 % during the summer and winter months. Over the past 12 months, the total number of Ukrainians under temporary protection in the EU remained stable at 4.2 million (Eurostat) to 4.4 million (EUAA)[8]. The absolute numbers, however, shroud certain dynamics, nota-bly the balance between

7 Pre-war average number of household members of 2,58 minus 16.9% of people who fled the country.

8 From October to November 2024, according to Eurostat data, there was a marginal increase of around 36,000, less than 1 %.

returnees and new applications for temporary protection. For example, according to ICMPD (2025), there were 660,000 new applications for temporary protection in 2024. There is little evidence of a correlation between these dynamics and the energy crisis in Ukraine, as the number of returnees seems to match the number of those leaving. Among the various drivers of forced migration – such as security, economic hardship, separation from family, and evading con-scription – there is no clear evidence linking the lack of electricity and heating to current migration trends.

In fact, those who are hit the hardest by adverse and deteriorating conditions – such as the elderly, poor, and handicapped, often in frontline communities – are typically the least mobile. The most vulnerable, possibly around 900,000, are likely to remain trapped in increasingly harsh conditions. If not supported or collected by relatives, evacuation might be their only option.

Conclusion

Until January 2025, Ukraine, supported by its allies, has managed to mitigate the energy crisis. Through a combination of measures, the breakdown of energy and heating supply – an issue that could act as another driver of forced migration – has been largely prevented. In most parts of the country, apart from some frontline communities, at least a temporary energy supply has been maintained. This has been an ongoing, Herculean task. As a consequence, while one survey shows that lack of electricity could drive forced migration for some, another recent survey suggests that the current level of degradation of the energy situation has had little, if any, impact on the resilience of the people of Ukraine, and thus does not significantly contribute to current migration trends.

Despite plausible warnings from various actors, no major outflow of people has been observed during the winter of 2024/25. Presently, the direct impact of the electricity and heating shortfall on migration appears limited. Domestic capacities, bolstered by Western technical and development aid, have prevented the worst, ensured enough energy supply for people to remain in the country, and contributed significantly to preventing further large-scale forced migration.

From Belarus to the EU: Migration Trends and Strategic Responses

Policy Brief

Agnieszka Kulesa

June 2025

Executive Summary

In recent years, Belarus has experienced profound migratory shifts, driven by political repression, geopolitical tensions and regional conflicts. Follow-ing the disputed 2020 presidential elections, up to 500,000 Belarusians fled to neighbouring countries, with many seeking stability and opportunities in the European Union (EU). At the same time, Belarus became a transit hub for migrants from the Middle East, as part of state-orchestrated migration flows aimed at pressuring the EU, and a refuge for over 20,000 Ukrainians dis-placed by war. These dynamics have challenged regional migration policies, highlighting tensions between national security, economic interests and hu-manitarian obligations. The evolving landscape underscores the need for EU Member States to develop balanced and adaptive migration strategies that effectively respond to state-orchestrated migration pressures from Belarus. This Policy Brief discusses Belarus' migration trends and their implications for the EU.

Setting the Scene

Belarus, while not traditionally a major player in global migration flows, has emerged as a highly consequential actor in Europe's migration governance landscape. This is not due to the absolute number of migrants it produces or hosts, but rather because of the strategic and political context in which these movements take place.

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Under Alexander Lukashenko's centralised rule since 1994, Belarus has maintained limited political pluralism and a state-controlled economy. The 2020 presidential election, widely deemed fraudulent, saw Alexander Lukashenko re-elected for a seventh consecutive term[1] and sparked mass protests, exposing a deep divide between the regime and its citizens, particularly in urban centres. The regime responded with a harsh crackdown and widespread repression[II], and has grown increasingly authoritarian[III]. The government has prioritised internal security, loyalty of its security forces, and suppression of both domestic opposition and perceived external adversaries[IV]. The 2020 crisis also deepened Belarus' long-standing but cautions relationship with Russia. While Minsk had historically benefitted from Russian energy subsidies and financial aid, it resisted full political integration into the Union State with Russia[V]. It equally resisted deeper economic integration: Belarus joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, alongside Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, gaining access to a larger market, but was reluctant to cede control over key industries[VI]. This dynamic shifted after 2020, as Lukashenko has since almost exclusively relied on Moscow for economic support, political backing, and security guarantees. The alignment intensified further following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with Belarus facing enhanced Western sanctions for siding with Moscow – resulting in greater political isolation and diminished strategic autonomy.

Belarus' economy continues to operate under a Soviet-style model dominated by state enterprises, with only limited and sporadic market-driven reforms. While this model has provided a measure of stability, with Belarus maintaining slow by steady GDP growth before 2020, it has stifled innovation, deterred foreign investment, and left the country reliant on exports – particularly to Russia, which accounted for more than 40% of its total trade[VII]. However, structural challenges such as an ageing workforce, a stagnant private sector, and recurrent financial crises persisted and were compound-ed by the post-2020 political turmoil and international sanctions.

In January 2024, Belarus adopted a new Migration Policy Concept for 2024-2028[VIII]. The policy underscores the country's alignment with Russia and seeks to strength-en national security, promote sustainable economic growth, improve the quality of life of citizens and address demographic challenges. It envisions a unified migration space with Russia under the Union State framework, deeper cooperation on migra-tion within regional organisations such as the EAEU and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and measures to combat irregular migration. It also promotes voluntary resettlement of persons, including among Belarusian expatriates, aligned with stat-edefined values.

Relations between Belarus and the European Union have followed a cyclical pattern, alternating between engagement and isolation, depending on the political situation in Minsk. The EU's dualtrack approach involved cooperation during periods of relative openness, and the imposition of sanctions during times of repression[IX]. Prior to 2020, Belarus cooperated with the EU and international organisations on migration management, border security, irregular migration prevention, and anti-trafficking. This cooperation halted following the 2020 elections and the EU imposition of sanctions. Belarus subsequently suspended the Readmission Agreement with the EU and left the Eastern Partnership (EaP) multilateral cooperation framework[X].

Post-2020 developments have reshaped Belarusian migration dynamics, compounding issues such as de-mographic decline and brain drain. Since then, Belarus has become both a growing source of migrants and a facilitator of irregular migration to the EU. In addition to that, the country has seen arrival of Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war. For the EU, the Belarusian case em-bodies multiple migration challenges: the need to offer protection to individuals fleeing political persecution, the risks posed by state-facilitated irregular migration, and the opportunity to integrate skilled professionals.

Post-2020 developments have reshaped Belarusian migration dynamics, compounding issues such as demographic decline and brain drain.

Belarus has become both a growing source of migrants and a facilitator of irregular migration to the EU.

1 In early 2025, Lukashenko was re-elected to serve another term as President.

Belarusian Emigration

Shifting Destinations and Growing Challenges post-2020

Before 2020, migration patterns in Belarus were shaped by the steady outflow of Belarusians seeking better opportunities abroad and the inflow of labour migrants from Russia and other post-Soviet states[XI]. Young Belarusian professionals, especially IT specialists, were drawn to countries like Poland, Lithuania, and Germany by higher salaries and greater political freedom. Facilitating this trend were policies such as Poland's Karta Polaka (Pole's Card)[XII] and Lithuania's relaxed visa rules, making it easier for Belarusians to emigrate. At the same time, Belarus remained attractive for workers from Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia due to visa-free travel and employment agreements under the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),[XIII] the Belarus-Russia Union State, and the EAEU frameworks, which ensured smooth labour mobility and kept Belarus' workforce diverse, even as skilled Belarusians looked abroad[2].

The 2020 post-election crackdown, however, marked a turning point. Repressions extended beyond activists to ordinary citizens, prompting a wave of migration driven by fear and uncertainty. Political dissidents, skilled workers and professionals and many others left the country, seeking safety and stability abroad. While the data is fragmented, among others due to the issuance of multiple documents in the EU, such as short-term visas and long-term residence permits, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe estimates that 200,000 to 500,000 people left Belarus post 2020 election[XIV].

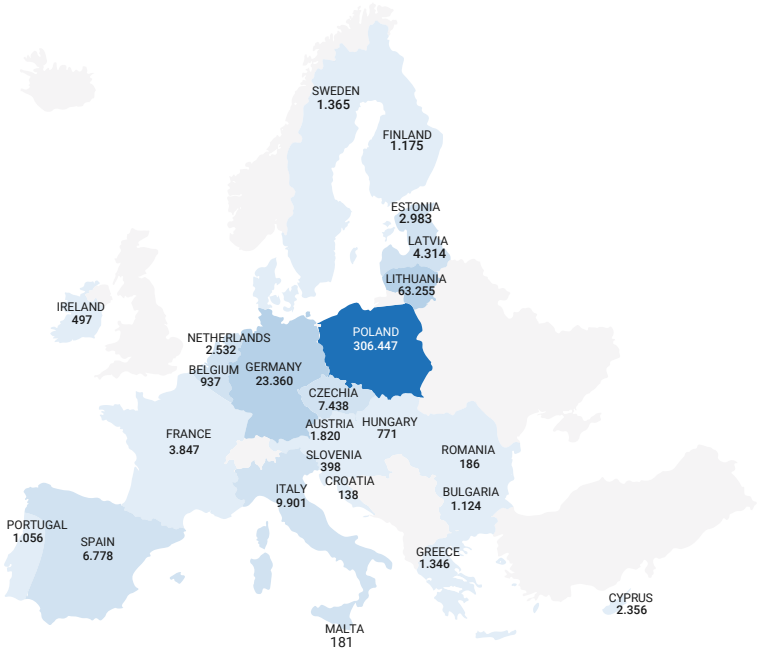
Among the most affected sectors was IT, once a pillar of Belarus' economy. Since 2020, an estimated 20,000 IT professionals have fled the country, driven by political repression, economic uncertainty and a deteriorating business environment[XV]. Their departure halved the IT sector's contributions to GDP, from nearly 6% in 2021 to approximately 3% in 2023[XVI]. Several leading IT companies have either relocated their headquarters or downsized their Belarusian operations, seeking more stable environments. In response to the growing outflow, Belarusian authorities attempted to curb the brain drain through retention measures, including extending mandatory work requirements for graduates of state-funded universities and even limiting English language instruction – an apparent attempt at discouraging westward migration. Nonetheless, these efforts have done little to reverse the trend[XVII].

2 In addition to that, Russia and Belarus on 19 June 2020 signed the Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Visas and Other Issues Related to the Entry of Foreign Citizens and Stateless Persons into the Territory of the State Parties. The Agreement came into force in early 2023.

Most emigrants chose EU destinations such as Poland and Lithuania. Between 2020 and 2022, EU countries issued more than 500,000 first residence permits to Belarusian citizens, with Poland accounting for around 95% of them[XVIII]. It is estimated that Poland hosted 100,000 to 150,000 Belarusians during this period[XIX]. Still, not all Belarusian migrants moved west. Many, particularly those with family or cultural ties, migrated to Russia. Shared language, visa-free travel through the Union State agreement, and a large labour market make Russia a viable destination among Belarusian migrants seeking opportunity and stability, despite Moscow facing international sanctions.

Between 2020 and 2022, EU countries issued more than 500,000 first residence permits to Belarusian citizens, with Poland accounting for around 95% of them.

Map 1. The number of Belarusian holders of valid residence permits in the EU at the end of 2023



Source: Eurostat

Poland and Lithuania actively supported Belarusian migrants through targeted programmes for professionals like *'Poland.Business Harbour' initiative* (PBH), launched in 2020. This programme facilitated the relocation of Belarusian startups and IT companies by offering streamlined visa procedures and incentives for setting up businesses, considering Poland's needs for highly skilled IT workers. By 2023, nearly 90,000 PBH visas had been issued. However, only about 13,500 Belarusians moved to Poland under the scheme.

Some PHB visa recipients stayed in Belarus and worked remotely, while others used the programme to pursue non-IT jobs in the EU, leading to concerns about visa misuse. Belarusian entrepreneurs also faced hurdles in Poland despite the offered PBH's support. Legal complexities, administrative delays, bureaucratic and structural obstacles to securing business partnerships, limited access to financing, and banking restrictions for non-residents made it difficult for Belarusian businesses to gain a foothold in Poland. These various challenges prompted the initiative's suspension in early 2024.

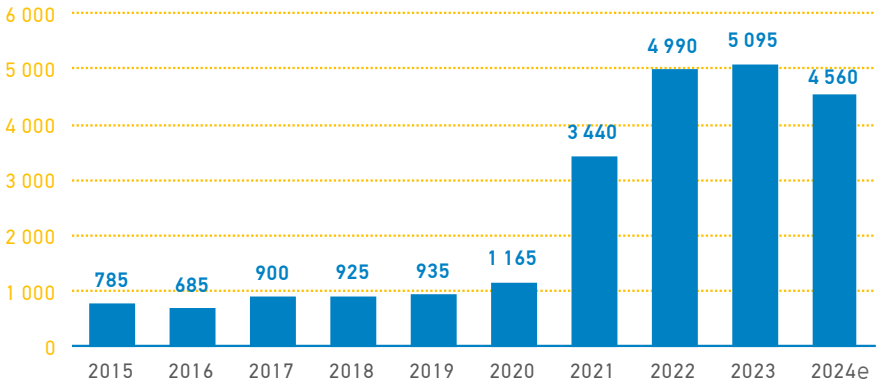
Lithuania also welcomed Belarusian migrants and businesses, particularly in the IT sector, and provided strong support through programmes such as Invest Lithuania and International House Vilnius. By 2023, more than 850 Belarusian companies were registered in Lithuania, including major ones such as EPAM and Wargaming, which relocated from Belarus. Latvia also tried to attract Belarusian professionals and companies, offering support through the Investment and Development Agency of Latvia, though it introduced no specific measures despite a growing IT talent need.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine sustaining emigration impetus

The outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has reinforced existing migration dynamics in Belarus. As political repression deepened and economic conditions deteriorated due to Belarus' alignment with Russia, the outflow of Belarusian citizens persisted and even intensified. According to Eurostat, the number of first-time asylum applications by Belarusian nationals has steadily increased over the past four years – from 3,440 applications in 2021 to 4,990 in 2022 and 5,095 in 2023. Preliminary estimates for 2024 suggest a slight decrease to around 4,560 applications[XXI].

The outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022 has reinforced existing migration dynamics in Belarus.

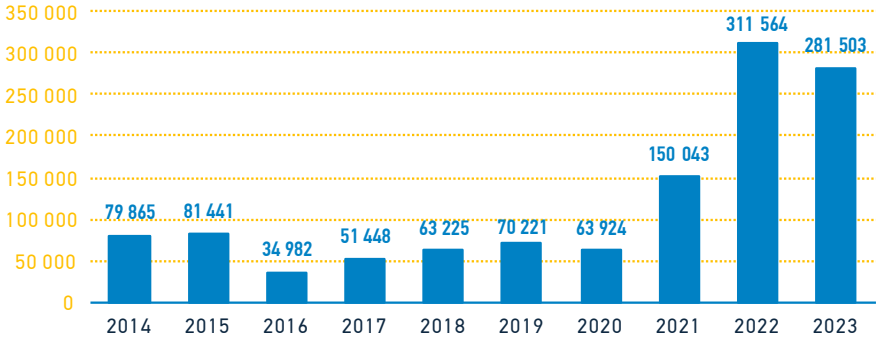
Chart 1. First-time asylum applicants from Belarus in the EU-27, 2015-2024



Source: Eurostat

Data on first residence permits issued to Belarusian nationals in the EU-27 also reflect a sustained migration flow. In 2021,150,056 Belarusians received first residence permits. This figure more than doubled in 2022, reaching 311,567 – likely due to both the domestic situation in Belarus and regional destabilisation due to the war in Ukraine. In 2023, the number slightly declined but remained high at 281,279[XXII], suggesting that many Belarusians continue to seek more stable living conditions abroad.

Chart 2. First-time residence permits issued to Belarusian nationals in the EU-27, 2014-2023



Source: Eurostat

Western sanctions, imposed in response to Belarus' complicity in the war, have restricted access to international markets and weakened the national economy[XXIII]. Job losses and inflation have compounded the challenges faced by ordinary Belarusians. Fear of being drafted into a conflict has become another driver of migration. While Belarus has not officially committed troops to the war, its close alliance with Moscow has fuelled anxiety – particularly among young men – about potential mobilisation[XXIV]. Many have tried to leave the country pre-emptively[XXV], contributing to the population outflow and straining Belarus' already dwindling labour force. Albeit not solely due to emigration, the country's total population also decreased from 9,200,617 on 1 January 2023 to 9,155,978 on 1 January 2024[XXVI].

Despite mounting pressures, reaching EU countries has become more difficult. Initially welcoming, countries like Latvia and Lithuania have tightened migration policies. Lithuania suspended national visa issuance for Belarusians, refused or revoked residence permits, and scrutinised applicants' ties to the Belarusian military or nuclear industry. Latvia adopted similarly restrictive policies on visa and residence permits for Belarusian nationals. However, specific categories, such as residence permits for employment purposes, continued to grow, reflecting a selective openness towards skilled labour migration amid broader restrictions.

While many Belarusians continued to try to head westwards, others were seeking alternative destinations with more lenient entry conditions. Countries such as Georgia, Armenia or Kazakhstan have emerged as viable options due to visa-free travel agreements and fewer migration barriers. According to available estimates, over 45,000 Belarusians and Russians had moved to Georgia by May 2022[XXVII], while between February and July 2022, some 12,050 Belarusian citizens arrived in Armenia[XXVIII]. This wave of migration has had a significant impact on the economies and societies of the host countries. In Georgia, migrants notably boosted GDP growth and strengthened sectors such as technology, finance and hospitality[XXIX]. Favourable conditions such as low living costs also contributed to Tbilisi becoming a hub for Eastern European talent[XXX]. Migration from Belarus thus reflected both a search for safety and a strategic pursuit of economic opportunity.

Countries such as Georgia, Armenia or Kazakhstan have emerged as viable options due to visa-free travel agreements and fewer migration barriers.

At the same time, Belarus itself has served as a destination for those fleeing conflict. The country has become a temporary refuge for people displaced by the ongoing war in Ukraine. According to the Belarusian State Border Committee, in 2022 around 70,000 Ukrainian individuals have entered Belarus[XXXI]. As of February 2023, the Belarusian government reported hosting 20,536 Ukrainian refugees, with women making up 66% of this population[XXXII]. According to UNHCR, there were 44,260 refugees from Ukraine recorded in Belarus as of 31 March 2025[XXXIII]. Refugees face several challenges, including securing adequate housing, accessing employment opportunities and obtaining necessary legal protection. A report by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) highlights that many Ukrainian refugees in Belarus face financial instability and need assistance with accommodation and integration into the local labour market[XXXIV].

State-Orchestrated Migration: Instrumentalising Borders

In retaliation for EU sanctions introduced in 2020, Belarusian leader Lukashenko openly threatened to relax border controls. By 2021, his regime began facilitating travel for migrants from the Middle East (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, etc.) toward the EU. Evidence[XXXV] suggests that the Belarusian government cooperated with travel agencies and possibly criminal networks, encouraging migrants to cross into EU territory via Belarus, while providing visa and coordinating travel. The result was a manufactured border crisis, particularly affecting Poland, Lithuania and Latvia.

EU officials described Belarus' actions as 'hybrid warfare' or 'lawfare'XXXVI, accusing Lukashenko of weaponizing migration.

Thousands of migrants were pushed toward the EU borders, and many were left stranded. EU officials described Belarus' actions as 'hybrid warfare' or 'lawfare'[XXXVI], accusing Lukashenko of weaponizing migration[XXXVII]. Eu-ropean Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen underscored that this was not a migration crisis but "an attempt of an authoritarian regime to destabilise its democratic neighbours"[XXXVIII].

In response, the affected Member States tightened their migration and asylum policies and secured their borders to maintain national security[XXXIX]. Lithuania declared a state of emergency in the regions bordering Belarus, erected a physical barrier along the border, increased border personnel, and sought support from the EU and Frontex to coordinate efforts and address humanitarian needs[XL]. Latvia took similar steps, reinforcing its border and cooperating with neighbouring countries and EU institutions[XLI]. Poland, recording around 9,400 irregular border crossing attempts in a month in the second half of 2021, responded with a heavily securitised approach. It deployed 4,000 border guards and 25,000 soldiers, declared a state of emergency and built a fortified barrier along the Belarusian border[XLII]. These measures, coupled with restrictive legislation aimed at preventing irregular entry, drew criticism for contradicting EU migration policy.

The situation also exposed the dehumanisation of migrants. One of the examples occurred in Usnarz Górny, where Afghan migrants were stranded in harsh conditions between the Polish and Belarusian borders. Polish authorities reportedly refused to process asylum applications, failed to provide necessities, and ignored European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) orders for humanitarian assistance[XLIII]. While Poland insisted the migrants were on Belarusian territory, continued border enforcement and surveillance raised serios legal and ethical concerns.

In October 2024, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced plans to temporarily suspend the right to asylum, arguing that it was being exploited in ways that undermined its original purpose. A new migration strategy introduced the same month included a controversial provision allowing authorities to halt the acceptance of asylum applications in certain areas if migrant inflows are deemed a threat to national stability – a response, according to Tusk, to Belarus' instrumentalisation of migration. In February 2025, the Sejm (Poland's lower house of Parliament) passed the law enabling this suspension, reinforcing Poland's stance that Belarus continues to use migration as a tool of hybrid warfare. The law was passed by the Senate (Poland's upper house of Parliament) on 13 March and signed by the President on 26 March 2025. A decree was immediately issued, suspending the possibility of applying for international protection at the Polish-Belarusian border until 25 May 2025.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Policy and operational responses to instrumentalization must not erode the foundations of European law and values.

The migration dynamics surrounding Belarus call for a coherent and forward-looking EU response that balances security with legal and humanitarian obligations and reinforces its global leadership on human rights. While the use of migration as a geopolitical tool has tested the resilience of EU border and asylum systems, policy and operational responses to instrumentalization must not erode the foundations of European law and values. Member States facing direct pressure from Belarus require flexible tools and strong solidarity mechanisms, without compromising the rights of those genuinely in need of protection. A two-pronged approach is essential: one that reinforces border security and strategic preparedness, and another that preserves access to asylum and supports structured, legal migration channels.

The following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen border security without undermining asylum rights

By streamlining security screening while ensuring due process for genuine asylum seekers, the EU can safeguard both its borders and its ethical and legal commitments. **Increased financial and operations support** for frontline states such as Poland, Lithuania and Latvia **should enable integrated solutions** – such as temporary humanitari-an facilities, independent monitoring and rapid response teams – to ensure that security measures do not undermine fundamental European values. This recommendation aligns closely with the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, which seeks to balance border security with humanitarian responsibilities through a comprehensive and coordinated approach to migration management. The Pact emphasises solidarity among Member States and proposes mechanisms for fair burden-sharing, streamlined asylum procedures, and improved border controls. Conversely, Poland's move to suspend the right to asylum represents a significant challenge to these principles. The Polish proposal, driven by security concerns and the perceived threat of hybrid warfare tactics used by Belarus, risks undermining EU law and the non-refoulement principles of the Geneva Convention. Instead of generalised suspension of asylum, the EU and Member States should focus on **improved screening mechanisms, accelerated but fair processing of asylum claims, and secure border infrastructure with built-in humanitarian safeguards**. By **strengthening regional cooperation and intelligence sharing**, frontline states can reduce security risks without undermining asylum rights, ensuring that security policies remain legally sound and in line with EU values. A coordinated response among EU Member States should prevent Belarus from exploiting migrants' vulnerabilities.

Establish legal and safe pathways for at-risk Belarusians

To maintain legal pathways for Belarusians the EU and Member States should provide structured and regulated mobility options, reducing the risks associated with irregular migration while reinforcing the EU's humanitarian commitments. Specialised **humanitarian visa or sponsorship programmes** for politically persecuted Belarusians would create safe and legal channels for those in need, ensuring that those genuinely at risk can access protection without resorting to dangerous migration routes or exploitation.

To prevent individuals collaborating with the Belarusian regime from abusing such pathways, these programmes must include **robust and transparent security and vetting mechanisms**. A **multi-layered screening process** should be implemented, including comprehensive background checks in cooperation with EU intelligence services, national security services and civil society organisations. Applicants should be subject to rigorous vetting, including a review of their political history, employment background and potential links to Belarusian state institutions involved in repression. **Databases tracking known regime associates**, including individuals linked to security services, state media and sanctioned organisations, should be consulted before visas or asylum are granted. To increase reliability, humanitarian visa and sponsorship applications should include **supporting documentation from independent sources**, such as human rights organisations, opposition groups or international NGOs monitoring political persecution in Belarus.

Retain and integrate skilled Belarusian migrants

An often-overlooked dimension of Belarus-related migration is the retention of skilled migrants. Countries like Poland and Lithuania have already benefited from Belarusian professionals, but more targeted efforts and proactive policies are needed to ensure that this potential is fully harnessed, and that these highly skilled workers stay and contribute to their new communities. **Streamlining residency and work permit procedures, reducing red tape and improving business support systems** can encourage skilled Belarusians to build long-term careers in host countries. This is particularly important in sectors such as technology and innovation, where the EU can benefit from Belarusian expertise while countering the brain drain to other regions.

Beyond retention, supporting integration and economic contributions is key to fully unlocking the potential of Belarusian migrants. Host countries should prioritise **policies that facilitate access to housing, education, language training, and employment opportunities** to enable new arrivals to settle and integrate effectively. Tailored **programmes to promote entrepreneurship and business development** can further maximise the economic contributions of Belarusian migrants, particularly in high-demand sectors such as digital services, fintech and artificial intelligence. By providing mentoring networks, start-up grants and simplified business registration procedures, EU states can turn emigration from Belarus into an engine of economic dynamism rather than a challenge to be managed.

Improve public communication and counter disinformation

A **proactive and transparent communication strategy** is crucial to counter disinformation and ensure public trust in migration policies in general, and in the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum in particular. Belarus and other actors have deliberately distorted migration narratives to sow division, making it essential for the EU to take control of the conversation. The public needs to be well informed about the rationale behind EU migration policy, including the Pact's focus on fair burden-sharing, efficient asylum processing and strengthened border management. A coordinated EU-wide communication campaign – involving civil society, independent media and digital platforms – should explain how the Pact addresses both security and humanitarian concerns. Ensuring public awareness of legal migration opportunities, asylum procedures and border policies should prevent disinformation from shaping political discourse and undermining social cohesion. By improving communication and fostering an informed public debate, the EU can build trust in its migration governance while countering external attempts to manipulate the issue for geopolitical gain.

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MIGRATION GOVERNANCE & POLICY

The EU Accession Path for Ukraine and Moldova: Anticipated Reforms on Migration, Asylum and Border Management

Analytical Report

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April 2025

Executive summary

This analytical report explores the challenges Ukraine and Moldova face in aligning their migration, asylum, and border management policies with EU standards as part of their accession process. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, both countries received EU candidate status, sparking a renewed focus on the enlargement process. Ukraine's unique position as a country in active conflict and Moldova's geopolitical vulnerabilities amplify the complexity of their accession.

The EU accession process is structured around 35 acquis chapters, with Chapter 24 – Justice, Freedom and Security – playing a pivotal role. This Chapter encompasses policies on migration, asylum, and border management, demanding legislative alignment, institutional reforms, and capacity building. Both countries must implement the EU laws, address demographic crises, and invest in technological and operational upgrades to manage borders effectively.

Ukraine faces immense challenges due to war, displacement, and emigration. With millions of citizens abroad and internally displaced, its labour market struggles to meet demands in key sectors. Legislative reforms have largely aligned with EU standards, but practical implementation lags, particularly in asylum and refugee integration as well as border management.

Moldova, grappling with demographic decline and emigration, has made progress in modernising institutions and aligning policies. However, resource constraints, inadequate infrastructure, and reliance on international aid hinder long-term sustainability. The country also must enhance border management and improve asylum procedures.

The report concludes by emphasising the need for sustained reforms, financial investment, and public support to navigate the accession process.

Introduction

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the EU's enlargement process gained renewed momentum. Ukraine's prompt application for EU membership on 28 February 2022, followed closely by Moldova on 3 March 2022, catalysed a strong response from the EU. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's swift endorsement, stating that Ukraine is "one of us and we want them in the European Union"[1], signalled a decisive political commitment. This was further reinforced by the European Parliament's call for Ukraine's EU candidate status just days later[2]. The Versailles Declaration, adopted by EU heads of state or government on 10–11 March 2022[3], affirmed Ukraine's European ties and the EU's commitment to support its European path. This rapid mobilisation by EU institutions and Member States, including the eventual support from French President Emmanuel Macron, who shifted from caution to advocacy for swift accession, underscored the high stakes involved.

By June 2022, the European Commission recommended candidate status for both Ukraine and Moldova, reflecting the progress in implementing their Association Agreements with the EU[4]. On 23–24 June 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova[5], balancing the geopolitical urgency against the long-term requirements of the Copenhagen criteria and the EU's capacity to integrate new members. This decision also reaffirmed the EU's broader commitment to the Western Balkans, signalling a renewed vigour in its enlargement policy.

On 8 November 2023, the European Commission published a new Enlargement Package[6], proposing the conditional opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, while also providing a comprehensive assessment of the key areas where reform progress is needed in each country. Additionally, the Enlargement Package included the Commission's existing proposal for a €50 billion financial support instrument for Ukraine. The decision to open accession negotiations was made by the European Council during its meeting on 14-15 December 2023[7].

Following the European Commission's confirmation in early June 2024 that Ukraine and Moldova had met the necessary prerequisites, EU ambassadors "agreed in principle" on the negotiating frameworks for the accession negotiations with both countries[8]. On 25 June 2024, the EU formally opened negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova during the first intergovernmental conferences, marking the transition from political endorsement to technical scrutiny[9].

These negotiations will cover 35 chapters of the EU acquis, with Chapter 24 on Justice, Freedom, and Security being particularly pivotal. Progress in Chapter 24 is not merely a bureaucratic requirement but a crucial test of each country's readiness to align with EU norms and values. The pace and success of the accession process will hinge on advancements in the areas included in Chapter 24. Under Chapter 24, Ukraine and Moldova must implement specific solutions that align their laws and practices with EU policies, including the newly adopted EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

This Analytical Report explores the specific challenges Ukraine and Moldova face in aligning their migration, asylum, and border management systems with EU standards under Chapter 24. It aims to support strategic planning and policymaking by identifying key gaps in the adoption of the EU acquis and offering actionable recommendations to guide both countries on their path toward EU membership. The report begins with an overview of the main provisions of Chapter 24, assesses the current standing of Ukraine and Moldova, highlights areas requiring reform, and concludes with a synthesis of key insights and final reflections to support effective alignment with EU requirements.

1. Chapter 24

1.1. Key Policies and Areas Covered

Chapter 24 is central to establishing the core elements of safety, stability, and governance that are essential for both candidate countries and the EU. It is positioned within the **Cluster Fundamentals**, which is opened first and closed last in the negotiation process, determining the pace of accession. This Chapter encompasses **critical policies and regulations designed to maintain public order, protect citizens' rights, and ensure effective judicial and law enforcement cooperation.** For candidate countries, adherence to these standards is non-negotiable; it is vital for upholding the rule of law, safeguarding human rights, and bolstering EU security. This demands substantial reforms, including the modernisation of legal frameworks, enhancing institutional capacities, and promoting international cooperation.

A key focus of Chapter **24 is the judicial system and the protection of fundamental rights.** Candidate countries must ensure that their judiciary operates without political interference, upholding the rule of law with efficiency and impartiality. This independence is crucial for maintaining public trust and delivering justice fairly. The Chapter also mandates universal access to justice, guaranteeing that every individual can seek legal remedies and receive a fair trial.

Box 1. Areas covered by Chapter 24

19.10.10	**Elimination of internal border controls**
19.10.20	**Crossing external borders**
19.10.30	**Asylum policy**
19.10.40	**Immigration & the right of nationals of third countries**
19.20	**Judicial cooperation in civil matters**
19.30	**Police & judicial cooperation in criminal & customs matters**
19.40	**Programmes**
19.50	**External relations**

See: Directory of European Union legislation

Migration and asylum policies are another cornerstone of Chapter 24. Establishing asylum procedures that align with EU standards is paramount not only for protecting those in genuine need but also for maintaining the integrity of the asylum process. **Effective border management** is equally important, as it prevents irregular migration and secures the EU's external borders. Additionally, policies that support the **integration of migrants into society** are vital for inclusive communities.

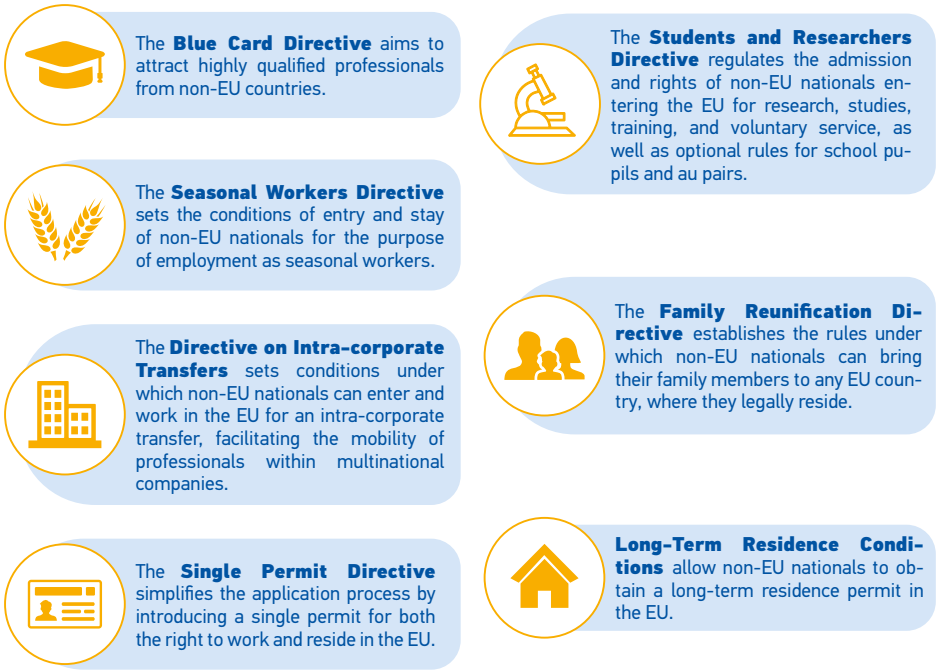
Chapter 24 also covers **police cooperation and the fight against crime**. Enhancing cooperation between national police forces and EU agencies like Europol is vital for combating cross-border crime. This collaborative approach ensures a unified response to law enforcement challenges across the EU. Developing strategies to combat organised crime, terrorism, human trafficking, and drug smuggling is essential for dismantling criminal networks and safeguarding public safety. Moreover, robust anti-corruption measures are necessary to maintain transparency, integrity, and public trust in institutions.

Visa policy is another significant part of Chapter 24. Aligning national visa policies with EU requirements, including the issuance of Schengen visas, is essential for facilitating seamless travel and enhancing security. Travel documents must meet EU standards to help prevent fraud and improve overall security, protecting the integrity of cross-border movement.

1.2. Migration, Asylum and Border Management Provisions

The EU's approach to migration, asylum and border management is dynamic, continually evolving to address emerging challenges. The EU acquis in these areas comprises a wide range of legislative and policy measures designed to manage both legal and irregular migration, ensure the rights of migrants, and establish a common approach to asylum and refugee protection. The overarching objective is to manage migration in a way that benefits both migrants and host societies, while maintaining security and upholding international protection standards. Candidate countries must comprehend and implement a comprehensive list of instruments on migration, asylum and border management policies, key of which are listed below.

Legal migration and integration. The EU promotes legal pathways for migration, particularly for skilled workers, students and researchers. Relevant policies include:



Asylum and refugee protection. The EU's **Common European Asylum System (CEAS)** sets out the legislative framework and practices in the area of asylum, whereas the **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)** contributes to improving the functioning and implementation of the CEAS by providing operational and technical assistance to Member States in the assessment of applications for international protection. The CEAS is governed by the following instruments:

The **Asylum Procedures Directive** aims at setting out the conditions for fair, quick and quality asylum decisions.

The **Reception Conditions Directive** sets common standards for reception of asylum seekers across the EU, such access to housing, healthcare, education and employment under certain conditions, ensuring a dignified standard of living in accordance with the Charter of fundamental rights.

The **Qualification Directive** clarifies the grounds for granting international protection and provides access to rights and integration measures for beneficiaries of international protection.

The **Dublin Regulation** streamlines the process of establishing the state responsible for examining an asylum application, enhancing protection of asylum seekers, and clarifies the rules governing inter-state relations.

The **EURODAC Regulation** supports the Dublin system by enabling the determination of the Member State responsible for processing an asylum application through the use of the EU fingerprint database, while also allowing law enforcement under strictly limited conditions access to this database to prevent, detect or investigate serious crimes, such as murder, and terrorism.

Border management and security. Candidate countries must demonstrate their ability to manage and secure their borders effectively, which is essential for preventing irregular migration, human trafficking, and smuggling. On their path to accession, they should comply with the **Schengen acquis**, as part of the EU acquis, which includes rigorous border checks and efficient border control systems. This step is also essential to become part of the Schengen Area, which facilitates passport-free travel among most EU countries. Once a country joins the EU, it does not automatically become part of the Schengen Area but must first undergo an evaluation process to demonstrate its ability to manage external borders effectively and meet the requirements of the Schengen acquis.

Management of EU external borders is a shared responsibility of EU Member States and of the EU, including the relevant institutions and EU agencies. An important policy instrument in this context is **European integrated border management (EIBM),** implemented by the **European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)** and the **European Border and Coast Guard** composed of the Member States' border and coast guard authorities. The EU also closely works with non-EU countries to prevent irregular migration, combat human trafficking and improve living conditions in countries of origin. To this end, the **EU Return Directive** serves the framework for returning irregular migrants to their countries of origin in a humane and dignified manner.

Crisis Response and International Cooperation. The EU has mechanisms to respond to migration crises, such as sudden increases in refugee flows. This includes the Temporary Protection Directive, which provides immediate protection to displaced persons, and the EU's efforts to relocate asylum seekers among Member States during times of high influx. In addition to that, the EU engages in partnerships with countries of origin and transit to address the root causes of migration, such as poverty, conflict, and climate change. These partnerships often include development aid, support for capacity building and agreements on readmission.

The Pact of Migration and Asylum. The EU policy on migration, asylum and borders is continuously evolving in response to changing migration patterns and geopolitical developments. On 14 May 2024 the Council of the EU formally adopted the **new Pact on Migration and Asylum** – a prime example of this evolution. The Pact is anchored on four main pillars to ensure comprehensive and cohesive migration management across the EU.

The first pillar, **securing external borders**, involves robust screening processes to identify and manage those entering the EU, enhancing the **EURODAC database** for tracking asylum seekers and irregular migrants, and implementing mandatory border procedures for high-risk individuals, alongside crisis protocols for emergencies. The second pillar focuses on **fast and efficient procedures** by establishing clear asylum rules to determine responsible EU countries, ensuring adequate living conditions for asylum seekers, harmonising refugee status qualifications, and preventing abuses through stringent asylum procedures. The third pillar emphasises an **effective system of solidarity and responsibility**, with a permanent framework for EU countries to receive support, including relocations and financial contributions, supported by EU agencies and funds. It also clarifies responsibility rules for asylum applications and prevents secondary movements by requiring applications to be made in the first entry country. The fourth pillar **integrates migration into international partnerships**, aiming to prevent irregular departures by strengthening border management in partner countries, combating migrant smuggling through tailored partnerships, enhancing cooperation on readmission, and promoting legal migration pathways through initiatives like the EU Talent Pool and Talent Partnerships.

Candidate countries need to understand and effectively integrate these comprehensive measures into their national policies during their accession journey. The complexity and breadth of issues covered necessitates extensive reforms to achieving full compliance with EU standards in Chapter 24.

2. Ukraine: Current State of Play and Key Challenges

2.1 Accession Context

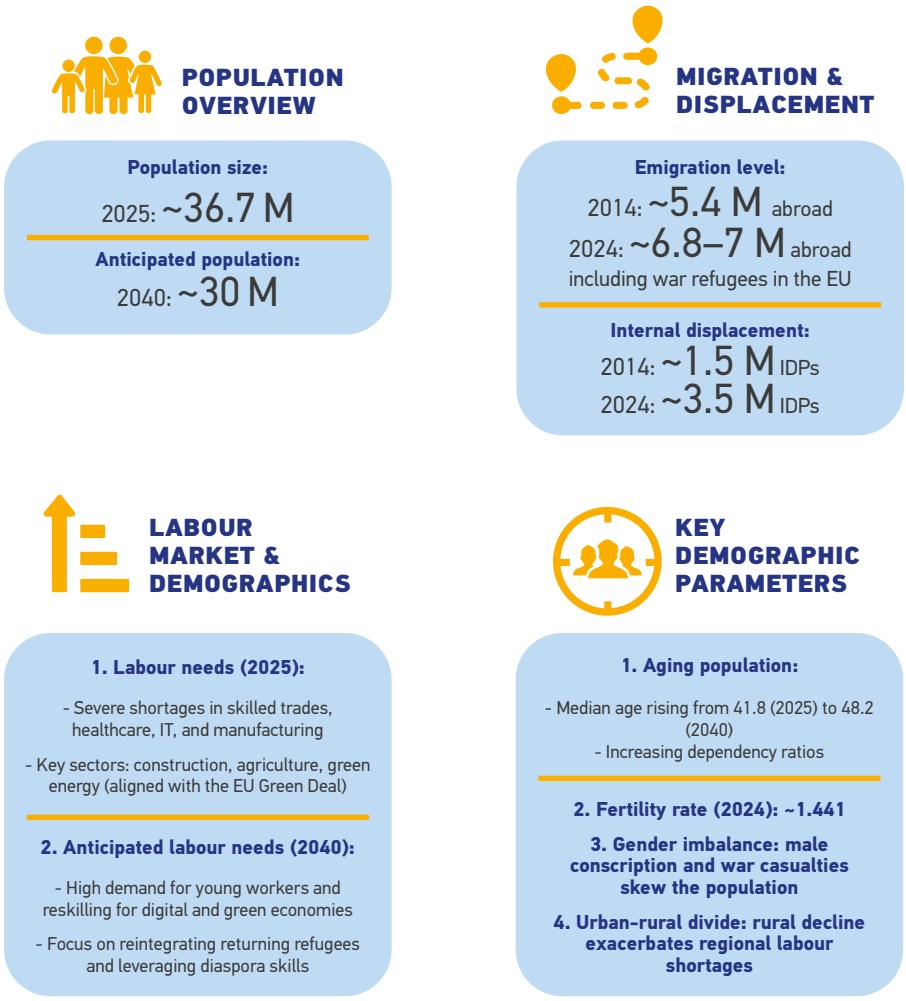
Ukraine is the first country to apply for EU membership while actively engaged in a full-scale war on its territory, making its candidacy uniquely complex from both geopolitical and security perspectives. Its accession path is not only about aligning with the EU acquis but also closely tied to the broader security of Europe. Ukraine, as a prospective EU member state, will serve as a frontline defender of the EU's eastern borders, which brings additional expectation in managing migration flows, upholding refugee protection standards, and safeguarding the EU's future external borders – all amidst an ongoing war economy and wartime governance.

The war with Russia has dramatically reshaped Ukraine's migration landscape, bringing both immediate challenges and profound long-term implications. The invasion has triggered a **severe displacement crisis, adding to an already high displacement and emigration rates** seen over the past decade. According to UNHCR, more than 6.8 million displaced Ukrainians have sought protection worldwide, as of December 2024[10], creating a **demographic shift** that threatens Ukraine's recovery. The eventual return of these displaced people will be critical for Ukraine's reconstruction, but it is uncertain, as many may establish permanent lives abroad by the time circumstances allows for their return. This poses a risk to Ukraine's labour market and its stability, particularly in sectors that rely on female workers, given that 70% of displaced adults are women[11]. Moreover, the potential for a sustained "brain drain" of skilled workers who choose not to return may further impede the country's economic growth and technological advancement[12].

Both the 2023 and 2024 Ukraine Reports, which accompanied the EU's Communications on Enlargement Policy, highlighted Ukraine's progress in implementing the EU acquis in the area of justice, freedom and security[13]. However, the 2023 Report also underlined the urgent need for a **context-sensitive migration policy strategy** and a revised Integrated Border Management Strategy, while the 2024 Report underlined the need for **greater alignment with EU IBM standards and enhanced inter-agency cooperation**, among other things.

In February 2024 the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine approved an Action Plan to implement the European Commission's recommendations from the 2023 EU Enlargement Package report[14]. This document, spanning over 100 pages, outlines more than 350 specific measures to address political and negotiating recommendations aimed at preparing Ukraine for EU accession talks. However, the Action Plan's emphasis on **flexible and adaptive policies** suggests a potential shortfall in long-term, proactive planning. The ongoing conflict has compelled Ukraine to focus on immediate migration crises rather than developing sustainable, forward-looking migration policies – an approach that will soon become essential for both EU integration and long-term national post-war recovery.

Figure 1: Key population and migration dynamics, Ukraine, 2024/25 & 2040



Sources: World Bank DataBank, IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, Operational Data Portal UNHCR, World Population Review, Macrotrends, Statista

2.2 Assessing Policy Shortfalls

Migration Policy and Key Reforms for EU Accession

The State Migration Policy Strategy 2017-2025 was updated in January 2024. The amendments made to the Strategy represent a pivotal **evolution in the country's migration policy, shaped by the dual imperatives of wartime resilience and European integration.** Confronting the immense displacement caused by Russia's invasion, the Strategy prioritises the protection and integration of IDPs and refugees, while simultaneously crafting incentives for the return of Ukrainian migrants essential to post-war recovery. By harmonising migration frameworks with EU standards – through visa policy updates, interdepartmental coordination, and enhanced data systems – Ukraine signals its readiness to align with European norms. The amendments also address broader demographic challenges by encouraging repatriation, attracting skilled labour, and bolstering the labour force needed for economic reconstruction. However, the Strategy highlights several critical gaps, including the **absence of comprehensive repatriation programmes for Ukrainians abroad, inadequate integration policies for foreigners, limited job prospects for foreign graduates of Ukrainian institutions, and ongoing challenges related to irregular migration**. Addressing these issues would mark a significant advancement in Ukraine's migration policy; however, they alone may not suffice to guarantee progress towards EU accession. These efforts must be complemented by additional measures, such as strengthening legal frameworks to combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination, as well as ensuring humane treatment of migrants, among other essential reforms.

The initial action plan designed to implement the Strategy lacked coherence and depth needed to achieve its stated objectives. Instead of delivering a clear roadmap, the plan contained scattered measures that were neither aligned with the Strategy's goals nor actionable. In 2024, the State Migration Service published a draft order for the Cabinet of Ministers to approve the action plan for 2024–2025, aimed at implementing the final stage of the Strategy. The draft plan, developed with input from state authorities, regional councils, scientific institutions, and international organisations, included interdepartmental measures to achieve the Strategy's goals, considering the impact of Russia's military invasion. Although the document invited public comments and suggestions, no feedback was received. The lack of public engagement suggests a **disconnect between policy-makers and the wider population**, raising concerns about the transparency and inclusiveness of the policy-making process.

The action plan was approved by the Cabinet of Ministers on 3 September 2024. This rather ambitious **framework for modernising migration management** emphasises digital transformation, administrative efficiency, and inclusiveness. It outlines specific tasks, measurable indicators, and defined responsibilities for key agencies, with the aim of streamlining processes such as the issuance of digitised document and integration measures. However, while the plan demonstrates strategic intent, its effectiveness depends on the precision of its indicators and the feasibility of its timelines. Some objectives remain vaguely defined and lack quantifiable benchmarks or intermediate milestones, which could make it difficult to track progress. In order to fully achieve its objectives and be consistent with EU accession aspirations, the **future strategy and related action plans must prioritise clear, measurable results, robust inter-agency coordination, and proactive risk management.**

In response to anticipated labour market challenges, the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine released a draft Demographic Development Strategy until 2040 in May 2024, which was adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers on 30 September 2024. The Strategy focuses on promoting population growth through migration, including efforts to attract foreign workers. However, gaps in the legal framework, such as **the lack of single residency and work permits, inconsistent rules for labour market access for students, asylum seekers, and stateless persons**, hinder effective labour market integration for immigrants. These shortcomings may lead to a mismatch between policy goals and the actual capacity of Ukraine to attract and retain the skilled immigrant workforce, crucial for reconstruction and post-war recovery.

Several other gaps in Ukraine's migration management legal framework could affect its ability to meet EU accession standards. The **absence of approved inter-agency coordination mechanisms for migration crises** suggests a lack of preparedness for managing large-scale influxes of migrants and refugees. The **limited application of voluntary return** due to funding shortages signals weaknesses in the return system. The integrated migration management information system, albeit being put in place, remains underutilised due to insufficient legislation governing biometric data processing. This limitation weakens the **capacity for inter-agency cooperation**, a critical component of effective migration management. Without robust data-sharing and coordination mechanisms, Ukraine may struggle to meet the EU's stringent standards for managing migration, particularly in terms of identifying and tracking irregular migrants and combating human trafficking.

Finally, the substantial scale of Ukrainian migration to the EU raises concerns about a potential **over-reliance on EU labour markets**. While addressing gaps in its migration management framework, **Ukraine needs to develop strategies to effectively manage both outward and inward migration** in order to integrate smoothly into the EU, particularly given its experience with the large number of non-EU migrants living on its territory before the outbreak of the full-scale war with Russia[15]. Aligning its migration policies with EU standards is crucial, but it is equally important to ensure that Ukraine's domestic labour market remains resilient, competitive and capable of meeting its own workforce demands. Achieving this balance will be vital for Ukraine's long-term economic recovery and successful EU integration.

Asylum: The Gap Between Legislation and Its Implementation

Ukraine's asylum **legislation broadly aligns with EU standards**, but practical implementation faces obstacles, particularly in the context of the ongoing war. Capacity constraints, legal adjustments under martial law, and bureaucratic inefficiencies are weakening the system's functionality, revealing a gap between policy and practice.

The 2024 Ukraine Report highlights the need to **further improve the management of asylum**. A crucial pillar of any robust asylum system – refugee integration planning – has faced serious setbacks. Although Ukraine began crafting a **refugee integration plan** in 2021, the process was disrupted by the outbreak of war. Without this framework, asylum seekers risk being left on the margins of society, making it harder for them to build stable lives and contribute to their new communities. Adding to the challenge, financial constraints and the limited capacity of local authorities are making matters worse. The war has pulled resources away from long-term refugee integration and redirected them towards urgent, immediate needs. Without adequate funding and strong local support, integration efforts risk being reduced to mere surface-level fixes – turning the asylum system into a temporary crisis management tool rather than a sustainable, long-term solution.

Although the 2024 Report confirms that no cases of refoulement or non-admission at the borders were reported, recent amendments to the Law on Refugees in April 2023 may rise another critical issue. By **restricting the State Border Guard Service (SBGS) from accepting asylum applications** from persons arriving from safe countries during martial law, Ukraine risks violating the principle of non-refoulement. While the restriction may be framed as a wartime necessity, it raises ethical and legal concerns, particularly for individuals fleeing persecution and transiting through safe countries. Such measures could undermine Ukraine's compliance with international obligations, including the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

The 2024 Ukraine Report highlights a second major area for improvement: the limited support available to asylum seekers due to staffing shortages and capacity constraints. A particularly pressing concern is the limited provision of **psychological and social support for asylum seekers**, which remains underfunded and understaffed despite being legally mandated. Ukraine's **asylum infrastructure**, including its accommodation centres, is **under-resourced**, providing minimal integration support and psychosocial care. This disparity between legal obligations and practical realities weakens the credibility and impact of the asylum system, revealing a lack of preparedness to handle large-scale of long-term asylum demands.

Lastly, despite its legislative alignment with EU asylum standards, Ukraine lacks an established roadmap for cooperation with the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA). This gap indicates **insufficient international coordination**, which is essential for managing asylum claims efficiently and ensuring Ukraine's practical alignment with EU norms. The 2024 Ukraine Report identifies this issue as the third critical issue and states that Ukraine should be ready to start discussions with the EUAA.

Border Management: Navigating EU Accession Amid Conflict a Migration Pressures

Ukraine's future role as a "border guard" on the EU's eastern frontier introduces a range of complex challenges in the context of EU accession. While its geographic position makes it crucial for controlling migration flows from Asia to the EU, it also places an **immense pressure on Ukraine's infrastructure and resources**. Managing the transit of migrants – including those in irregular situation – will require resources to implement and enforce EU migration standards, including in areas like border control and combatting human trafficking.

The 2023 amendments to Ukraine's Integrated Border Management (IBM) Strategy reflect the dual pressures of the ongoing war with Russia and the demands with EU candidacy. With a focus on modernising infrastructure, adopting cutting-edge technologies like biometric checks and automated risk analysis, and enhancing cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA), the updates aim to transform border management into a streamlined, secure, and human-rights-centred system. Proposed measures prioritise the reconstruction of borders in de-occupied areas, completion of demarcation efforts, and improved conditions at border crossings to meet growing needs.

Despite such an ambitious vision, the Strategy still faces significant gaps that challenge its effectiveness. **Limited funding, understaffed border operations, and outdated infrastructure** are critical weaknesses, especially in de-occupied and remote areas of the country. While the Strategy emphasises modernisation and EU alignment, delays in demarcation, incomplete IT systems, and weak inter-agency coordination are hampering progress. Additionally, the 2023 Ukraine Report highlighted the **absence of sufficient monitoring mechanisms** and a lack of concrete, quantitative indicators to track progress related to the implementation of the Strategy. The 2023–2025 action plan for the implementation of the IBM made only some progress in these areas.

Legislatively, Ukraine has aligned many of its border control policies with the EU. The remaining gaps, as highlighted in the 2023 Ukraine Report, include the absence of **legislation requiring airlines to provide Advanced Passenger Information** (API), a key component of modern EU border control systems. Despite pilot testing at Kyiv Boryspil International Airport, the lack of a nationwide API system hampers Ukraine's ability to prevent irregular migration and enhance security. In parallel with tackling existing issues in this area, Ukraine shall also consider expected legislative changes in the EU. On 1 March 2024, the European Parliament and the Council reached a provisional agreement on new legislation requiring air carriers to collect and transmit API to improve security at the EU's external borders and combat crime.

The new rules will standardise and harmonise how passenger data is collected during check-in and shared with authorities, while minimising disruptions to the travel experience. Ukraine will face the task of adapting to these new standards too.

Another challenge is Ukraine's **delayed development of a Schengen action plan**, a crucial step toward eventual membership in the Schengen Area. This delay raises concerns about Ukraine's ability to adapt its border management practices to Schengen requirements, particularly in areas of surveillance, risk analysis, and inter-agency coordination. While Ukraine's risk analysis mechanisms are reportedly progressing toward compliance with EU standards, significant gaps remain in operational cooperation and information exchange, limiting Ukraine's situational awareness at the borders.

The **war has also strained Ukraine's border management capabilities**. The State Border Guard Service has redeployed over half its workforce. Combined with pre-existing infrastructure and technical deficiencies, this reduction in personnel undermines Ukraine's ability to carry out effective border surveillance and anti-smuggling operations. Furthermore, while the Inter-Agency Working Group on Integrated Border Management has been reactivated, the war disrupted its operations, and interagency cooperation, especially in real-time information sharing and joint risk analysis, remains limited.

Equipment shortages, particularly for detecting weapons and concealed persons in vehicles and containers, pose additional security risks, both in the context of the ongoing war and meeting EU requirements. Efforts to modernise border infrastructure, such as the expansion of the eQueue program, aim to improve the efficiency of border crossings for citizens and businesses alike. However, the digitalisation of international passenger routes and trade facilitation processes remain in their early stages, limiting the full potential of these initiatives to streamline border management.

Corruption remains a persistent issue also at the border, where preventive measures by the SBGS and the State Customs Service are deemed insufficient. Despite anti-corruption efforts, more robust strategies are necessary to combat systemic issues effectively.

Ukraine has benefited from substantial EU support through programs like the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) and the EUAM Ukraine mission, which provide guidance and capacity building. However, the **reliance on external missions** to implement and enforce EU border management standards raises concerns about Ukraine's ability to sustain these improvements independently. EU-funded projects such as the EU4IBM-Resilience project are crucial for immediate capacity building, but long-term success will depend on Ukraine's ability to institutionalise these changes beyond donor-driven initiatives.

2.3 Key Areas for Improvement

Key areas for improvement for Ukraine's migration, asylum and border management include:

New migration strategy. To support Ukraine's EU accession aspirations, the country must adopt a comprehensive and forward-looking migration strategy that integrates demographic needs, labour market demands, and EU migration standards. The strategy should focus on the following key priorities:

1. **Developing a comprehensive migration framework.** Ukraine should transition from reactive, short-term migration policies to a holistic framework that anticipates demographic and migration trends post-war. This framework must include: 1) proactive policies for managing future migration crises; 2) comprehensive repatriation programs to encourage the return of Ukrainian migrants while offering reintegration support such as housing, education, and employment assistance; 3) legal pathways for skilled foreign workers and simplified residency and work permit systems, aligning with EU standards.

2. **Prioritising economic recovery and labour market needs.** Addressing labour shortages and demographic imbalances requires policies that: 1) attract foreign workers in key sectors, particularly skilled professionals, through streamlined procedures and incentives; 2) promote voluntary return programmes for displaced Ukrainians abroad and reintegration measures to support their economic participation; 3) remove legal barriers for students, asylum seekers, and stateless persons to access the labour market effectively.

3. **Addressing social and human rights concerns.** To align with EU standards, Ukraine must strengthen protections for migrants and ensure human treatment by: 1) combatting racism, xenophobia, and discrimination through legal reforms and public awareness campaigns; 2) expanding social services and integration programs, including language training, job placement, and access to healthcare for both returning Ukrainians and foreign migrants.

Refugee integration framework and preparing for EUAA discussions. To strengthen its refugee integration framework and prepare for discussions with the EUAA, Ukraine should adopt a strategic and comprehensive approach that aligns with EU standards while addressing the unique challenges posed by the ongoing war and post-war recovery. Ukraine should revive the refugee integration action plan, which was suspended due to the war, and ensure that it reflects current challenges and post-conflict realities. It should include benchmarks in line with EU standards and focus on access to housing, healthcare, education, employment, and language training. Civil society, international organisations, and local communities should be involved in the process developing and implementing the plan.

New border management strategy. The new strategy should focus on the following critical areas:

1. **Modernising border infrastructure**. Ukraine should prioritise the reconstruction and modernisation of border facilities to meet EU standards, ensuring proper surveillance, security, and capacity for growing transit demands. Investments in advanced equipment for detecting weapons, concealed persons, and illicit goods in vehicles and containers are needed.

2. **Advancing digitalisation and data systems**. A unified platform for tracking migration, trade, and risk analysis should be established, ensuring compatibility with EU systems. Also, legislative gaps to ensure collection, processing, and sharing of biometric data in compliance with EU standards should be addressed.

3. **Strengthening human resources and operational capacity**. Ukraine should reinforce the workforce of the SBGS, particularly in high-risk and remote areas. It should also train border personnel in EU-aligned practices, anti-corruption measures, risk analysis, and the use of advanced technologies. Ukraine could also consider creating specialised teams equipped to handle emergencies, irregular migration, and smuggling operations.

4. **Establishing robust legal and policy frameworks**. Ukraine should establish a roadmap to meet Schengen requirements, focusing on surveillance, risk analysis, and inter-agency coordination. Nationwide API system to align with EU border control standards should be implemented.

Coordination and inter-agency cooperation. The lack of a unified, inter-agency coordination mechanism for managing migration crises is a significant weakness in Ukraine's migration management. Strengthening inter-agency cooperation, particularly in data sharing and coordination of responses, is essential for effective management of large-scale influxes of migrants. However, the need to improve coordination and cooperation also applies to general areas of migration, asylum, and border management. Ukraine should streamline its efforts to improve coordination and cooperation between key institutions in these areas (e.g. through leveraging advanced IT systems for real-time data sharing, joint training, regional hubs, etc.).

Strategies' and action plans' progress monitoring and accountability. For national strategies and action plans on migration, asylum, and border control, Ukraine should develop clear benchmarks and timelines for implementing their objectives, with regular reporting to track progress. Ukraine could also partner with international or domestic organisations to audit implementation and ensure compliance with EU standards.

During the active phase of the war, Ukraine can advance its migration, asylum, and border management efforts by focusing on immediate, scalable reforms in line with long-term EU integration instruments. In the longer term, the overlap between Ukraine's post-war recovery and its EU accession process presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the prospect of EU membership could provide a strong incentive for reform and attract international investment. On the other hand, meeting the EU's strict criteria in areas such as governance, human rights, and economic reform may prove more difficult amid the immediate demands of reconstruction.

3. Moldova: Current State of Play and Key Challenges

3.1 Accession Context

Moldova's EU accession path is affected by its geopolitical position between the EU and Russia, which has historically involved political and economic pressure from Moscow, particularly due to Moldova's dependence on Russian energy and the unresolved conflict in Transnistria. This territorial dispute, a frozen conflict, adds complexity to Moldova's accession, making it more challenging than most other candidate countries. In addition to the security-related context, the country is facing a profound demographic crisis, characterised by massive emigration and a shrinking population. Almost a quarter of Moldovans live abroad, and more than a third of the country's workforce is employed in other countries[16]. This ongoing exodus has had far-reaching short-term and long-term effects on Moldova's society, economy, and its labour market. The country is heavily reliant on remittances from its emigrant population, making it unusually dependent on its diaspora for economic stability. The high emigration rates highlight the need for policies that balance outward migration, return migration, and the reintegration of Moldovans who may return if EU membership offers improved opportunities.

Compounding the complexity of Moldova's migration landscape is the presence of some 120,000 displaced Ukrainians on its territory[17] – an influx that Moldova is managing despite its limited resources – the pressing issue of human trafficking, and Moldova's own rich mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and religions. Many Moldovans due to the historical ties with Romania also hold Romanian passports, giving them access to EU labour markets, which creates a unique cross-border dynamic between Moldova and the EU.

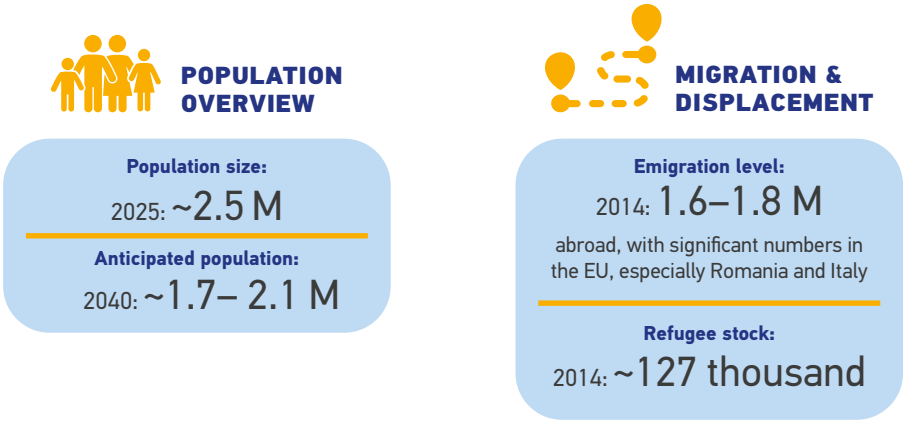
Against this backdrop, Moldova has established **a sound institutional framework in the areas of migration, asylum, and border management**, and has significantly progressed in aligning its policies with European standards and global best practices. The 2023 Moldova Report, accompanying the EU's 2023 Communication on Enlargement Policy, recognised these achievements, noting that Moldova has

partially aligned its legislation and is reasonably prepared to implement the EU acquis in the area of justice, freedom, and security. The Report also acknowledges Moldova's strong efforts to strengthen its institutional capacity in related areas, particularly through the modernisation of its central structures, including the General Inspectorate for Migration (GIM), and the reorganisation of the border police. The integration of the Migration and Asylum Directorate, responsible for processing asylum applications, into the GIM has enhanced the country's capacity to prevent, monitor, and combat the irregular presence of foreigners in the country. Moldova continues to engage constructively with EU Member States and EU law enforcement agencies in furthering cooperation on migration, asylum, and border management.

Moldova's journey toward EU membership is coordinated by the **Bureau for European Integration (BEI)**[18], a key department within the State Chancellery, which operates under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration. This team is at the forefront of coordinating the country's accession efforts, also in the fields of migration, asylum, and border management.

In January 2024, in response to the 2023 EC Moldova Report, the country updated its National Action Plan for EU Accession, covering the period 2024–2027[19]. This update introduced 134 new actions, expanding the original plan first presented in October 2023 and bringing the total number of actions to 1,328. The Plan is structured around negotiating clusters and chapters, with 126 actions related to Chapter 24. By August 2024, Moldova was set to implement 386 of these 1,328 actions, with over half directly addressing the Commission's recommendations from the 2023 Enlargement Package.

Figure 2: Key population and migration dynamics, Moldova, 2024/25 & 2040/50



Sources: Macrotrends, Statista, IPN Agency, Operational Data Portal

3.2 Assessing Policy Shortfalls

Migration Policy: Balancing a Whole-of-Government Approach with EU Integration Challenges

Moldova has adopted a **"whole-of-government" approach to migration**, integrating it into more than 25 sectoral policies. This reflects notable progress in recognising the multifaceted nature of migration and its far-reaching impact across various sectors of society. While this comprehensive framework is a commendable step forward, also in terms of EU accession, its practical implementation and long-term sustainability may face challenges. Amongst others, the country will need to **ensure policy coherence across the diverse sectors** – such as health, education, labour, social protection, and security – integrating migration there within. Successful integration requires **consistent inter-ministerial coordination, clear lines of responsibility, and shared goals**. Without these, there is a risk of conflicting policies or ineffective interventions that could undermine the benefits of this approach. A key challenge, however, lies in the **capacity of government institutions to manage such a comprehensive policy framework**. Moldova faces resource constraints and institutional limitations, particularly under economic pressures and external shocks, like the war in neighbouring Ukraine. Moldova's ability to sustain and implement such ambitious reforms will be tested by these challenges.

The whole-of-government approach to migration is reflected in several policy documents. In 2022, Moldova approved the **European Moldova 2030 National Development Strategy**, which aims to improve the living standards and accelerate economic development, largely shaped by migration. The creation of decent jobs, the promotion of entrepreneurship and the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, among other things, are intended to stimulate repatriation and attract foreign talent. Another ambitious document aimed at modernising the country is the **Digital Transformation Strategy for 2023–2030**, adopted in 2023. One of its main objectives is the creation of an efficient, smart and transparent digital state by digitizing all public services for citizens and entrepreneurs. However, for this strategy to be inclusive, it must also ensure that digital services are accessible and secure for all, including digitised procedures for foreigners.

Other relevant policy documents include the **National Strategy "Diaspora 2025"** and its Action Plan, as well as the **Program on Migration Flow Management, Asylum, and Integration of Foreigners for 2022–2025**. The latter, while ambitious in aiming to align migration and asylum practices with European standards and international agreements, faces criticism for its emphasis on combating irregular migration, as this push to control migration flows may conflict with the need to protect the human rights of vulnerable groups such as refugees and undocumented migrants. Stricter policies, though addressing security concerns, risk marginalising undocumented individuals, potentially forcing them into even more precarious situations without access to essential services or legal protection. Here, Moldova faces the delicate task of **balancing national security with humanitarian responsibilities**.

Another challenge lies in Moldova's **attempts to improve data collection, centralise foreigner registration and ensure GDPR compliance**. While aligning with European standards is important, implementing complex data management systems with limited resources and administrative capacity poses a significant hurdle. Migrants, especially those fleeing conflict, often bring unique data security and privacy concerns. Moldova's ability to adequately protect sensitive information while maintaining compliance with EU regulations is uncertain. Moreover, beyond mere data collection, Moldova must **introduce coherent and standardised definitions related to migration**, in line with EU standards, as a fundamental element necessary to guide both data collection and policy making.

Equally important is **improving infrastructure and information for returnees and immigrants**, as well as addressing the interconnected challenge of **building trust in public administration**. While providing better information is a necessary step, the more fundamental issue lies in the low levels of public trust in governmental institutions, which presents barriers to effectively managing Moldova's migration landscape.

Complicating matters further, Moldova's **heavy dependence on partnerships with the EU and international organisations** like the IOM raises concerns about its ability to shape its migration policies. Moldova risks being swayed by external pressures that prioritize EU security concerns over its domestic interests and the well-being of migrants. The country's internal economic and social limitations could struggle to keep pace with international demands. For example, focusing on European integration and GDPR compliance may unintentionally divert resources from addressing more immediate local challenges, such as improving basic infrastructure, health care, and social services for migrants. This disconnect between international policy frameworks and Moldova's on-the-ground realities could lead to critical needs being overlooked.

Asylum Policy: Navigating EU Alignment, Refugee Influx, and Limited Resources

The 2024 Moldova Report makes a strong statement: the management of asylum needs to be improved. Moldova's asylum system, though aligned with EU standards, faces **challenges in handling the increased complexity caused by the Ukraine crisis**. The sharp rise in asylum applications has overwhelmed its infrastructure, creating backlogs despite efforts to reorganise institutions and increase staffing. Budgetary constraints and inadequate resources exacerbate bottlenecks in asylum processing and integration efforts. The Report underlines that the **financing of protection and asylum is the main challenge for national authorities** dealing with an unprecedented number of protection requests.

As noted in the 2023 Moldova Report, **Moldova's institutions have been reorganising and upgrading their infrastructure** to cope with the increasing number of asylum seekers. However, without **adequate funding and long-term planning**, these efforts could fall short. The 2024 Moldova Report confirms that the Moldovan authorities should continue the ongoing process of reforming the Bureau for Asylum and Migration into the General Inspectorate for Migration and provide it with more staff and equipment. Financial pressure remains high.

Another critical issue, mentioned in both 2023 and 2024 Moldova Reports, is the **limited access asylum seekers have to information** about their rights and the asylum process. Asylum seekers do not have adequate access to information and counselling at Chișinău International Airport, what is particularly important in the context of preventing refoulement[20]. Despite efforts to address human trafficking and related crimes, many asylum seekers face barriers in understanding the complex legal procedures, increasing their vulnerability.

Last but not least, the **reliance on international donor funding**, particularly for refugee integration programmes, calls into question long-term sustainability as humanitarian aid dwindles. While Moldova's response to the Ukrainian crisis has been commendable, the transition from international aid to government-led responsibility – particularly in social protection, healthcare, and education – remains unclear, risking inconsistent support for refugees over time.

Border Management: Striving for EU Alignment Amidst Infrastructure and Capacity Gaps

Moldova's border management framework demonstrates a complex mix of progress and ongoing challenges as the country strives to align with EU policies. While Moldova has developed a national integrated border management strategy (2018–2023) and a follow-up program for 2022–2025 based on the 2006 EU concept, significant **gaps in infrastructure and technical capacity** continue to hinder full effectiveness. Efforts to align Moldova's border legislation with the Schengen Borders Code are underway, but significant gaps remain between strategic goals and operational realities, making compliance with EU standards a distant objective.

The National Council for Integrated State Border Management oversees the Action Plan, reflecting a structured approach, yet the **need for upgraded technical equipment** indicates how Moldova's border control mechanisms may struggle to keep pace with increasing migration and security risks. Initiatives such as integrating Moldova's systems with Interpol's Stolen and Lost Travel Documents database and using biometric readers and video surveillance are steps in the right direction, but they remain insufficient. The delayed implementation of a national Advanced Passenger Information system at Chisinau airport – scheduled for 2025 – further weakens Moldova's security infrastructure.

A major shortcoming is the **lack of an electronic biometric database for fingerprints and photos**, which is critical for border security and asylum management. Without this system, Moldova cannot fully integrate with the EU's Eurodac system, a key element for managing asylum applications and identifying irregular migrants. This gap leaves Moldova vulnerable to irregular migration and exploitation by criminal networks, undermining broader efforts to strengthen border control.

One of the most pressing challenges for Moldova's border management is the **need for improved inter-agency cooperation**. While collaboration between the Border Police and Customs is considered satisfactory, the lack of mutual access to databases and a secure, formalised system for information exchange limits the potential for truly integrated border management system. Plans to modernise the existing information system, developed by the Border Police under the Ministry of Interior's guidance, offer an important opportunity to improve information exchange between the Border Police and Customs, which is essential for enhancing border security.

Although the drive to harmonise border control standards and facilitate real-time data exchange is a positive step, success depends on Moldova's **ability to secure additional technical resources and develop its internal capacity**. Efforts to align legislation and reduce waiting times at border crossings are important, but they address only part of the issue. Without addressing deeper infrastructural and organisational weaknesses, Moldova risks falling behind in its broader efforts to secure its borders and meet EU expectations.

Balancing **border security with the protection of human rights** is another critical challenge as Moldova works to harmonise its legal framework with EU standards. Moldova's border strategy focuses on tightening border controls and mitigating security risks, but it must also ensure that increased security measures do not marginalise vulnerable populations, including refugees and survivors of trafficking. A robust border management system must protect both national security and human rights.

Finally, Moldova's **reliance on international expertise for border management reforms** highlights the need for greater self-sufficiency. Since 2005, the EU Border Assistance Mission has been instrumental in guiding Moldova's reforms, particularly in combatting trafficking in human beings and irregular migration. Such continued dependence on external bodies suggests the need to strengthen internal mechanisms to ensure long-term sustainability. The renewal of the status agreement with Frontex and the presence of a Frontex liaison officer demonstrate Moldova's commitment to international cooperation. These efforts, however, require stronger internal capacity to meet the country's long-term border management objectives.

3.3 Key Areas for Improvement

Key areas for improvement for Moldova's migration, asylum and border management include:

Strengthening institutional capacity and resource allocation. Moldova's ability to implement EU-aligned migration, asylum, and border management policies is constrained by limited institutional capacity and resource availability. In this context, Moldova could: 1) increase investment in human resources by recruiting and training additional staff across migration and border management institutions, focusing on EU-compliant practices; 2) diversify funding sources by integrating migration and asylum priorities into the national budget and reducing reliance on international aid; 3) build institutional resilience by enhancing technical capacity, streamlining workflows, and ensuring access to advanced equipment and technology; 4) establish a robust national training programme to build internal expertise and reduce reliance on international expertise.

Modernising border infrastructure and enhancing operational capacity. Improved border infrastructure and operational readiness are vital for security and compliance with EU standards. In this respect, Moldova should: 1) invest in modern border crossings, focusing on surveillance, detection equipment, and biometric systems; 2) train border personnel in risk analysis, anti-corruption measures, and the use of advanced technology; 3) expand digitalisation efforts to streamline border operations and risk management, prioritising high-traffic areas.

Improving policy coherence, coordination, and data systems. Strengthening inter-agency cooperation and integrating migration policy across sectors is

crucial to avoid inefficiencies and policy conflicts. Adequate coordination should be ensured to align migration-related objectives across the health, education, labour, and social protection sectors. Moldova could also make efforts to modernise IT systems for real-time and secure data exchange between agencies and to establish a central platform for migration data collection. Particularly in the context of EU accession, the Bureau for European Integration should play a central coordinating role, and it is essential to ensure that it is adequately staffed and funded.

Promoting integration and human rights. The measures should include: 1) expanding access to counselling and information for migrants and returnees, particularly at key transit points like Chișinău International Airport; 2) developing tailored integration programmes offering housing, education, healthcare, and employment support; 3) balancing security measures with human rights protections for vulnerable groups, including victims of trafficking and undocumented migrants.

Ensuring sustainability and long-term planning. Moldova should acknowledge that in the longer term it should start transitioning from reliance on international aid to a self-sufficient, government-funded migration, asylum, and border management system. In this context, Moldova should: 1) develop a transition strategy to shift refugee and asylum programme funding to national resources, with private sector co-funding where feasible; 2) establish mechanisms for regular evaluation and adjustments of migration, asylum, and border management strategies to align with emerging challenges; 3) secure long-term funding through targeted grants, EU support, and domestic allocations to modernise asylum and border systems.

Moldova's integration of migration into more than 25 sectoral policies reflects a progressive and forward-thinking approach, but it also reveals considerable challenges in terms of coordination, capacity, geopolitical pressures, human rights, and public support. To ensure alignment with EU standards, Moldova must prioritise cross-cutting initiative that amplify their impact and sustainability. These include: inter-agency coordination; introducing measurable benchmarks and conducting regular evaluations; and building public trust in institutions by improving transparency and adopting inclusive policy-making practices. This ambitious approach has the potential to transform the way Moldova manages migration, both within its borders and in the wider European context.

4. Conclusions

Ukraine and Moldova face shared challenges in their pursuit of EU accession, particularly in addressing the substantial investments needed for implementation of EU acquis. Both countries must meet complex EU standards in governance, migration, border control, human rights, and economic regulation, requiring significant financial and infrastructural resources. Upgrading border management systems is a critical priority, involving investments in digitalisation, advanced equipment, data systems, and staff training. While Moldova has made progress in modernising its workforce, it still struggles with limited resources, and Ukraine faces even greater challenges due to the ongoing war and its demographic pressures. The economic strain in both nations compounds the difficulty of funding these necessary upgrades. Ensuring a professional, well-trained workforce capable of managing the complexities of migration and border control remains a costly yet essential step for both countries to align with EU standards.

Ukraine and Moldova can benefit greatly from the experiences of other countries that have gone through the EU accession process, including those from Central and Eastern Europe that faced similar challenges. Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, for instance, have had to overhaul their migration policies and border management systems during their EU accession processes. These countries implemented large-scale reforms, including digitalisation of border management, staff training, and significant investments in data-sharing systems. Inspiring examples might also come from the Balkans. Croatia, which became a member of the EU on 1 July 2013, had to considerably strengthen its institutional capacity to manage its borders effectively and handle migration flows in line with EU requirements. The country had to establish and enhance its border management systems, including the training of personnel, the modernisation of infrastructure and the introduction of new technologies for border surveillance and control. This process highlighted the importance of robust institutions capable of managing complex migration and asylum systems. As a country bordering non-EU states, Croatia needed to engage in effective cooperation with its neighbours to manage migration flows and ensure border security. This included bilateral agreements, joint border patrols and information-sharing mechanisms, which were critical in preventing irregular migration and enhancing border control.

Long-term sustainability is key. Countries that rushed through reforms without ensuring their sustainability often faced difficulties after EU accession. Ukraine and Moldova must not only focus on immediate reforms but also ensure that their systems are designed to handle future challenges, including changes in migration patterns and potential economic downturns.

Finally, there is the question of public perception and political will. Migration, both internal and external, is politically sensitive. Public attitudes towards migrants and government migration policies can significantly influence how these policies are implemented and whether they succeed. Ensuring broad-based public support for a comprehensive migration strategy may require strong communication efforts, particularly to counter xenophobic or anti-migrant sentiments that might emerge.

Annex

Stages of the EU accession process and key terms

The EU accession process is a structured and multi-step journey, governed primarily by Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) . Each step in this process is crucial in assessing and preparing candidate countries for integration into the EU's political, economic, and legal systems. It starts with the expression of interest and ends with official membership. The process includes the following steps:

1. **Expression of Interest:** A country interested in joining the EU often begins by expressing its interest informally. This can include diplomatic discussions, visits from EU officials, and participation in EU programs or partnerships. Many countries in Southeast Europe, for instance, start by signing a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU. This agreement sets out the framework for cooperation and gradual alignment with EU standards and policies. It is often seen as a first step towards eventual membership.

2. **Application for Membership:** A country submits a formal application to the Council of the EU ("the Council"), declaring its intention to become a member of the EU.

3. Decision on Membership Suitability: After the application is submitted, the European Commission, at the Council's request, evaluates the country's eligibility and issues recommendations on whether it should be granted "candidate" status or whether additional reforms before grating such status are required. To qualify for EU membership and receive candidate status, countries must meet the Copenhagen criteria, which include *stabile institutions*, guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a *functioning market economy* and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU; and the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the *capacity to adopt EU laws and policies* (the acquis communautaire or simply EU acquis), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.

4. **Granting of Candidate Status:** After consulting the European Commission and receiving the consent of the European Parliament, the Council decides whether to grant the country candidate status and to begin formal negotiations for its accession to the Union. All EU Member States (EU MS) must agree on this decision.

5. **Negotiation Phase:** The European Council decides whether to start negotiations. To initiate them, the Council of the EU must unanimously approve a negotiation framework that has been proposed by the European Commission. The EC may suggest that applicant countries meet specific benchmarks before starting negotiations. These negotiations can only commence once all EU MS agree to proceed. Negotiations are conducted in intergovernmental conferences involving the candidate state and the EU Member States. The European Commission plays a critical role in the negotiation phase. The EC screens the candidate country, evaluating its readiness to meet the EU acquis. This assessment is divided into six thematic clusters and 35 policy or thematic chapters. The Commission collaborates with the candidate country to gauge its preparedness for each chapter and then reports to the Member States, highlighting potential issues for negotiations and setting priorities for reforms or benchmarks. The Commission monitors progress and advises on opening or closing chapters based on the candidate's compliance. It informs the Council and the European Parliament continuously, including through an annual Enlargement Package that provides a detailed assessment and recommendations on the candidate's progress towards EU accession.

6. **Conclusion of Negotiations and Accession Treaty:** Negotiations conclude when all chapters of the EU acquis are satisfactorily closed, and the Commission recommends proceeding with accession. The Council and European Parliament must also agree. An accession treaty is then drafted, detailing membership terms, including any transitional arrangements and financial considerations. This treaty requires unanimous approval by the Council, a consent vote by the European Parliament, and signature and ratification by the candidate country and all current EU Member States.

7. **Integration:** Countries that sign the accession treaty become "acceding countries" and are expected to become full members on a specified date. During this interim period, they benefit from special arrangements, including being informed of EU legislation, commenting on proposals, and holding active observer status in relevant bodies, allowing them to speak but not vote.

Key involved institutions

The Council of the EU, the Council is a key EU decision-maker. It brings together the ministers of the 27 EU countries. Under the General Affairs Council configuration, it establishes and supervises the EU enlargement process and the accession negotiations. On matters related to the enlargement policy, the Council generally operates by way of unanimous agreement between all the EU Member States.

The European Commission plays a central and multifaceted role in the EU enlargement process. Its responsibilities include assessing the preparedness of candidate countries (examination of the application in light of the accession criteria) and guiding them through the steps required for membership.

The European Parliament has an important oversight and approval role in the enlargement process. Its consent is required for any country to join the EU.

The European Council, composed of heads of state or government of EU Member States, provides overall political direction in the enlargement process. It makes the most important political decisions, such as granting candidate status and determining the political framework for enlargement.

The Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee are advisory bodies that provide opinions and recommendations on how enlargement might impact regional development, civil society, and the socio-economic fabric of the EU.

Key terms

Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria) – a set of criteria that must be met for accession, notably the institutions to preserve democratic governance and human rights, a functioning market economy and the ability to accept the obligations and intent of the EU.

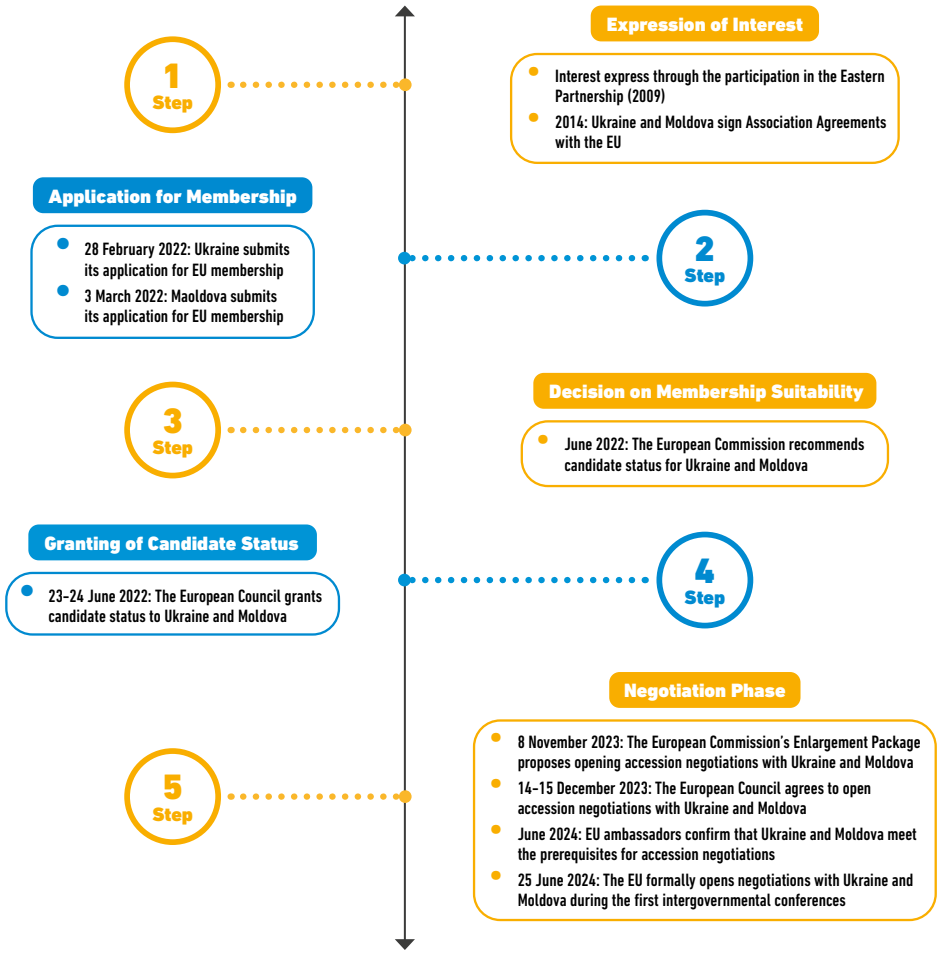
Accession negotiations – the process of agreeing the conditions under which the country will be admitted to the EU with the end point being an accession treaty.

EU acquis – a body of accumulated legislation, legal acts, and court decisions that constitute the body of EU law.

Screening – a formal and technical exercise conducted by the European Commission to prepare for negotiations; it allows the candidate country to familiarize itself with the EU acquis, indicate its level of alignment with EU legislation and outline plans for further alignment.

Negotiating chapters – sets of issues for which the candidate country needs to take on the EU's body of law and other requirements of membership.

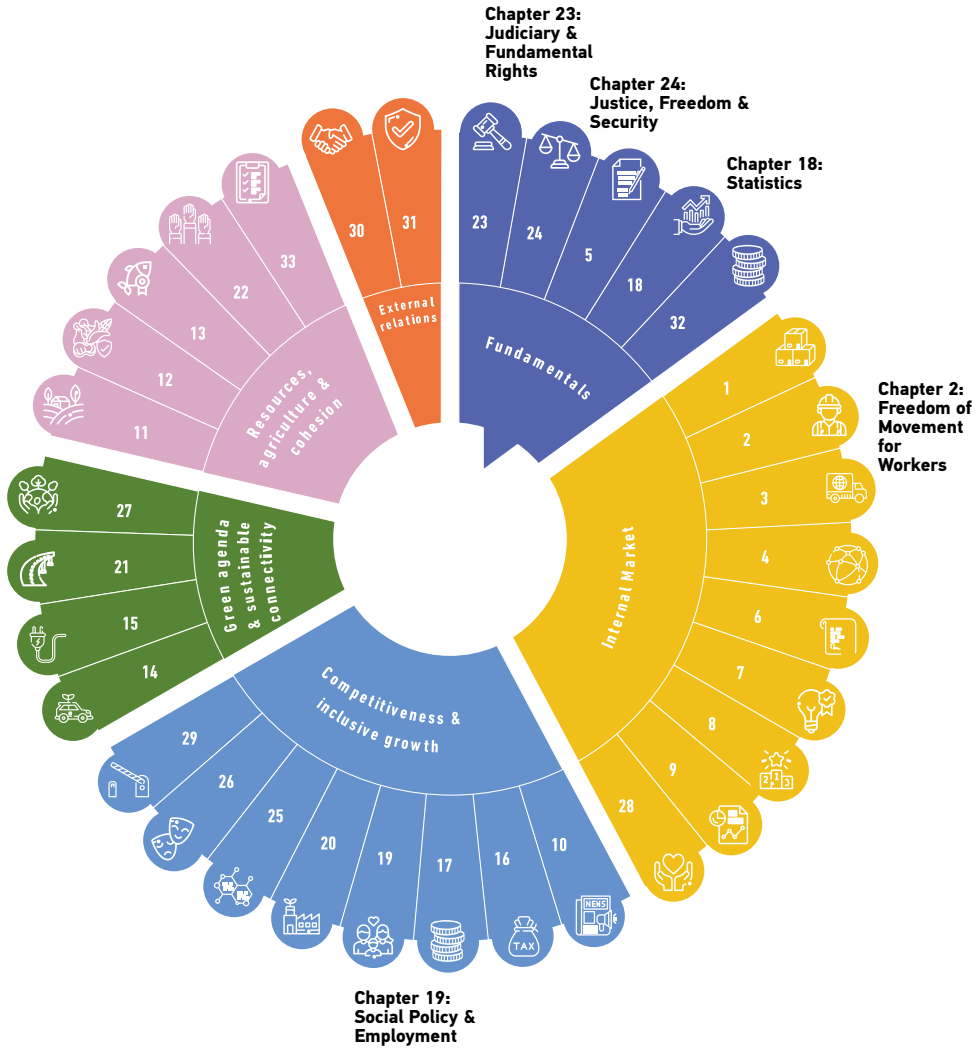
Figure 1. Ukraine and Moldova's path to EU accession



Source: own elaboration

The 2020 revision of the enlargement methodology, which grouped negotiating chapters into six thematic clusters (see Figure 2.), introduced greater dynamism to the enlargement process, particularly for the Western Balkan countries. Negotiations for each cluster of chapters begin only after the country fulfils the opening benchmarks. Meeting the interim benchmarks for Chapters 23 and 24 is a precondition for advancing in all other clusters.

Figure 2. Clusters of negotiating chapters, highlighting chapters relevant to migration, asylum and border management



Source: European Commission

Overview of EU acquis chapters relevant to migration, asylum and border management

While the accession process can be lengthy – often taking a decade for countries transitioning from different political and economic systems – it is essential for ensuring that new members are fully equipped to contribute to and benefit from the EU. Both Ukraine and Moldova will have to apply the EU acquis as it stands at the time of accession. This alignment goes beyond legislative changes; it requires effective enforcement of these evolving standards.

The acquis encompasses a vast array of content, principles, and legal frameworks, including[21] the foundational Treaties of the EU, acts adopted by EU institutions, case law from the Court of Justice of the EU, and various inter-institutional and international agreements concluded by the EU, between the EU and its Member States, and between EU Member States regarding Union activities.

The 35 negotiating chapters within the acquis collectively establish the legal and regulatory architecture necessary for the smooth integration of new Member States into the Union. From the perspective of migration, asylum, and border management, several chapters stand out as particularly critical:

Chapter 2: Freedom of Movement for Workers is pivotal in establishing the right of workers to move freely across the EU and reside in any EU Member State, eliminating discrimination based on nationality concerning employment, remuneration, and other working conditions, and ensuring mutual recognition of professional qualifications. It also ensures that people moving to another EU MS do not lose their social security cover, such as pension rights.

Chapter 18: Statistics focuses on reliable and harmonised statistics across EU Member States, being the backbone of evidence-based policymaking in the EU. It ensures that Member States align their data collection and dissemination practices, which is crucial for monitoring migration flows, amongst others, and implementing related policies.

Chapter 19: Social Policy and Employment underpins the EU's commitment to high levels of employment, improved living and working conditions, and adequate social protection. It encompasses labour law, health and safety at work policies, social dialogue, measures supporting gender equality and anti-discrimination, and integration of people at risk of social exclusion, while considering options in response to societal changes such as aging populations and evolving labour markets.

Chapter 23: Judiciary and Fundamental Rights focuses on the judiciary system and fundamental rights. The chapter emphasizes the importance of judicial independence, the protection of human rights, and the fight against corruption, all of which are essential for maintaining the rule of law and public order.

Finally, **Chapter 24: Justice, Freedom, and Security,** discussed in detail below, covers measures to manage external borders, ensure internal security, and protect fundamental rights. Unlike Chapters 2, 18, 19, and 23, Chapter 24 directly governs the policies related to migration, asylum, and border management, making it the primary chapter where these issues are addressed comprehensively.

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Skills Mobility Partnerships in the Prague Process Region

Report

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September 2026

Executive summary

Skills mobility partnerships (SMPs) are emerging as an increasingly important policy tool for addressing labour shortages, skills mismatches, and demographic pressures, while expanding legal migration opportunities and promoting skills development. SMPs combine mobility and training components through bilateral or multilateral cooperation between the origin and destination, with the aim of generating mutual benefits for governments, employers, and migrants.

This study examines governmental SMPs involving selected non-EU Prague Process participating states, focusing on the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) and Eastern European and Central Asian countries (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan). Based on desk research and comparative analysis of 39 identified SMPs, this paper provides an overview of partnership design and highlights takeaways for states in the region wishing to launch or refine SMPs, whether as an origin or destination.

This mapping illustrates that the states under study currently act primarily as an origin of skills mobility within SMPs, although several countries, particularly in the Western Balkans, are increasingly also becoming destinations. Most partnerships involve EU Member States, especially Germany, and are commonly structured either as formal agreements or as project-based initiatives. SMPs in the region frequently target specific labour shortages in the destination, particularly in sectors such as construction, healthcare, tourism, and ICT.

The analysis demonstrates that SMPs are highly flexible in design: They vary in terms of mobility duration, targeted skill levels, skilling approaches, and institutional arrangements. Most partnerships target medium- and high-skilled individuals and combine mobility with skills development measures such as apprenticeships, other on-the-job training, language learning, or professional development courses. While many SMPs foresee participants' return to the origin, reintegration support remains limited. Similarly, although qualification recognition is a key challenge for labour migrants, only a few partnerships actively incorporate mechanisms to support recognition or alignment of qualifications. The findings also highlight several emerging trends. Dual 'home and away' track models, where only part of the trained cohort migrates while others remain in the origin labour market, are becoming increasingly common, particularly in project-based initiatives.

Overall, the study suggests that SMPs can offer Prague Process states a flexible framework for developing mutually beneficial labour mobility arrangements. They can support skills development, facilitate better-managed migration pathways, strengthen cooperation between countries, and help address labour shortages while mitigating risks associated with brain drain. At the same time, the analysis highlights the importance of ensuring that future partnerships systematically address issues such as qualification recognition, reintegration support, and long-term sustainability not yet consistently visible in existing partnerships.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Introduction

As Prague Process participating states continue to strengthen cooperation on legal migration and work to make mobility a positive force for development, skills mobility partnerships (SMPs) offer a practical and proven tool for aligning skills development with labour market needs across Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) and the Western Balkans (WB) – supporting countries of origin and destination alike to manage labour migration in a way that is orderly, mutually beneficial, and sustainable. The Prague Process Action Plan 2023-2027[1] explicitly calls on participating states to strengthen cooperation on the assessment of migrants' skills and competencies, to avoid brain waste, and to maximise the benefits of circular migration and return – priorities that SMPs are well placed to advance. This paper examines current and recent governmental SMPs in Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Georgia, Kosovo*, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. It explores different aspects of their design, based on a mapping conducted by ICMPD. This exercise builds on ICMPD mappings of SMPs in other countries (referred to as the 'overall mapping' in the text) and regions, and compares SMPs in the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states with this broader pool of data. Based on the analysis, the paper draws takeaways for Prague Process participating states wishing to launch or refine such initiatives.

SKILLS MOBILITY PARTNERSHIPS

For the purposes of this paper, SMPs are understood as government-to-government partnerships that integrate practical skills development with mobility for some or all participants, with the aim of generating concrete benefits for all parties involved. In recent years, SMPs – including similar frameworks such as Global Skill Partnerships[2] and Talent Partnerships[3] – have gained considerable momentum, though they still represent a small share of overall global labour mobility. SMPs have gained prominence in the context of labour shortages and demographic challenges in many origin and destination societies, as well as concerns about potential negative impacts of traditional labour migration approaches.[4]

SMPs can offer greater mutual benefits compared to more traditional (and more prevalent) labour migration approaches, which often rely on the skills migrants have already acquired – often invested in by origin countries – and disproportionately benefit destination countries.[5] This is particularly relevant for countries of origin, given the potential impact of emigration on their labour markets and societies. In this regard, SMPs are envisioned as an innovative mechanism to more fairly share the costs and benefits of migration and mobility – and to serve the interests of migrants, communities, and employers. While SMPs vary in terms of design and specific objectives, all SMPs include some form of skills development alongside a mobility component.[6]

How are such mutual benefits achieved, given the wide range of priorities held by these stakeholders, public and private, individual and institutional? Rather than draining human capital from countries of origin, well-structured partnerships can help offset or even reverse the fiscal losses associated with migration, while still enabling worker mobility and addressing skill shortages in destination countries.[7] This can be done, for example, by investing in skilling to expand the available pool of skilled individuals through internships, traineeships, and apprenticeships – in other words, investing in skills development rather than simply recruiting those who already possess the desired skills. The use of dual 'home' and 'away' tracks is another way that some SMPs aim to address needs in both origin and destination countries, by targeting sectors that are in-demand in both places facilitating the skilling of persons, some of whom are planned to move and some to stay. Yet other SMPs offer different types of mobility duration, combining short-, medium-, and/or long-term mobility so that some skilled individuals remain in the destination country longer, aligned often with employer needs, while others return (sooner) to work in origin countries.

LABOUR MOBILITY TRENDS FROM EASTERN EUROPE, CENTRAL ASIA, AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Looking at labour mobility more broadly, the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states act as both origin and destination, although emigration continues to outweigh immigration in almost all cases. In 2023, all selected countries except Montenegro experienced negative net migration, as more individuals left than arrived. Combined, the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states saw the emigration of over 19 million people in 2024 (including war-related displacement from Ukraine).[8] Migration patterns are characterised by considerable heterogeneity and evolving pressures. Migration comes in response to various drivers, including income differentials, economic opportunity, quality of services and governance, demographic pressures, and networks, in addition to displacement spurred by war.[9] It encompasses temporary and long-term movements for formal and informal work in a variety of sectors at a range of skill levels.[10]

Emigration

Emigration rates vary considerably across the region.[11] Between 1990 and 2020, the Western Balkans recorded the highest emigration rate relative to population (30%), followed by the Caucasus (17%) and Eastern Europe at 15%.[12] BiH is the largest sending country in relative terms, with an estimated 46% of its population living outside the country, followed by Moldova (41%), Albania (40%), Armenia (29%), and Georgia and Kazakhstan (approximately 22% each).[13]

International migration represents a crucial source of employment opportunities and income for workers from EECA and the WB, whilst creating benefits for migrants and their places of origin.[14] Emigration can generate benefits for origin countries via remittances, knowledge transfers, development of human capital, and return.[15] The researched countries in EECA, for instance, gained more than USD 45 billion in 2024 in remittances; the WB gained over USD 12 billion that same year,[16] illustrating that migration generates considerable financial transfers. In the medium term, emigration can reduce labour market pressures by offering employment opportunities, especially for youth.[17] Many of the researched countries depend on labour migration, particularly to address labour surpluses and youth unemployment. For example, demographic pressure in Uzbekistan, whose annual population increases by 700-800,000 per year, combined with limited labour market absorption capacities, are important factors in emigration from the country.[18] In the long term, emigration can spur interest in investing in tertiary education systems; additionally, migrants may return and contribute their skills and finances to the origin labour market, bringing further benefits to origin countries.[19]

Although the EU is a key destination for most migrants from the EECA and WB regions,[20] destination patterns vary sharply by subregion. While WB emigrants are concentrated heavily in the EU-15[21] (from just over half of Serbian emigrants to roughly three-quarters of Albanians), the majority of emigrants from Central Asia head instead to Russia,[22] despite recent geopolitical developments, growing xenophobia, and tightening migration controls.[23] At the same time, migrants from the region have also gone to other destinations, including the United States, Gulf countries, and the European Union.

In EU Member States, at the end of 2024, more than 1.33 million residence permits issued for employment were held by EECA nationals – almost one-quarter of all valid work permits held by non-EU nationals that year – illustrating the important role that migrants from EECA countries play in EU economies.[24] Within the EU, migrants from EECA countries are concentrated particularly in Poland, Lithuania, and Italy, while traditional destinations for migrants from the WB include Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden, as well as Italy and Greece for Albanians.[25] Migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Moldova, and Georgia together accounted for over 90% of all valid (1.25 million) and 90% of first-time (366,000) employment-related residence permits held by EECA nationals in 2024. Ukrainians are the largest group by far among both EECA and all non-EU employment permit holders in the EU.[26] Data on the number

of permits increasingly reflects the retention of existing migrants in EU countries more than the arrival of new immigrants from the Eastern Europe.[27] Meanwhile, labour migration from Central Asian countries remains low – representing approximately 1.5% of all valid work permits issued to third country nationals in EU Member States in 2024 and 6.4% of such permits issued to EECA nationals – yet the number of permits has increased sharply since 2018. The largest increases have come from Uzbekistani workers, followed by those from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.[28] Meanwhile, EU-27 countries issued almost 88,000 first residence permits to WB nationals in 2024 specifically for employment reasons, with BiH (24%), Serbia (27%), and Albania (22%) the largest origin countries.[29]

Alongside traditional labour migration drivers in the EECA region, newer factors such as the war in Ukraine and both economic and geopolitical uncertainties are shaping migration patterns in the region.[30] Yet shifts in (labour) mobility trends should be attributed not only to changes in the EECA region, but also to parallel ones in Europe, which is looking to new countries of origin for foreign workers. Aside from concrete labour migration policies, including skills mobility partnerships, other policy decisions can be supportive of labour mobility. Notably, the EU has visa-free arrangements with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, which allow stays of up to 90 days in any 180-day period for purposes like tourism, business, or family visits. While work permission requires a separate permit, visa liberalisation can strengthen migration networks and lower the cost of exploring work opportunities abroad. In some instances, such as seasonal work in Germany, visa-free arrangements have facilitated labour mobility.[31] In other cases, policies grant access to the labour market more explicitly: Germany's Western Balkans Regulation, for example, simplifies access to the German labour market for WB nationals.[32]

Impacts of emigration

While emigration has brought opportunities for many, it has also created challenges for countries in the region, especially where it leads to shortages in key sectors or occupations that are in demand domestically.[33] Impacts of high-skilled emigration are especially strong if emigrants have a higher skill level than the general (non-migrant) population – which is the case for most origin countries in Europe and Central Asia – and when emigration occurs at higher rates – as is the case in parts of the WB.[34] Emigration can contribute to labour shortages, including in essential occupations, if policies are not in place to address this. It may also increase gaps between lower and higher income countries.[35] Additionally, emigration can contribute to population decline. Moldova, for example, has seen a population reduction of 14%, driven primarily by emigration, particularly of youth, over the past decade. Similarly, the WB continues to experience net emigration, leading to local labour shortages and brain drain, as here too particularly young and educated populations tend to emigrate.[36] Given high emigration rates and demographic decrease, WB economies simultaneously experience acute labour shortages, necessitating growing reliance on foreign labour. An estimated 40% of employers report difficulties in finding required skills, particularly in (health)care, construction and skilled trades, manufacturing, transport and logistics, tourism, agriculture, and IT – many of which have been traditional sectors of employment among WB emigrants.[37]

Immigration

Local demographic shifts and labour market needs, exacerbated by the emigration of skilled migrant workers, have compelled those in the WB region to examine ways to foster labour immigration. As a destination, work permits in the region have doubled in just a few years, from approximately 46,000 in 2018 to over 100,000 in 2024. These are primarily from countries in South and Southeast Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and the Philippines). According to the World Bank, of the top 15 migrant-receiving countries in Europe and Central Asia[I] between 1990 and 2020, only two are non-EU Prague Process participating states: Ukraine and Kazakhstan.[38] However, when measured as a share of the population, only Kazakhstan ranked among the top 15 destinations.[39] Administrative and structural barriers, such as quota-based systems and slow administrative procedures, hinder recruitment and labour retention efforts,[40] highlighting room for improvement in labour migration governance.

Analysis of skills mobility partnerships in selected Prague Process states

This section shares the key findings of ICMPD's mapping of SMPs in selected non-EU Prague Process participating states (see Annexes 2,3 and 4 for more information on the research methodology). It analyses the various aspects of SMP design – i.e. how SMPs have been structured in terms of stakeholders involved, planned mobility, and skilling elements. While most of the SMPs identified include EECA or WB partners as origins rather than destinations, the insights also point to lessons that can be taken up for those engaging in SMPs as a destination. This section also highlights how SMPs involving partners in the EECA and the WB compare to the complementary mappings conducted by ICMPD both in an international research project (Link4Skills) and also in support of other regional consultative processes, including the Budapest Process and the Africa-EU Migration and Mobility Dialogue (the Rabat and Khartoum Processes).[II]

I "Europe and Central Asia," as used in the World Bank report, refers to: EU-27, Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia), Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Russian Federation, Türkiye, Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine), EFTA (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland), and the United Kingdom. See Bossavie, L., Garrote Sánchez, D. & Makovec, M. (2024), The Journey Ahead: Supporting Successful Migration in Europe and Central Asia, Europe and Central Asia Studies, Washington, DC: The World Bank, p. liii.

II This includes mapping under the EU-funded Link4Skills project covering SMPs involving Austria, Canada, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, and Ukraine, alongside ongoing mappings in West and South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Pakistan, Jordan, and Lebanon) and West and East Africa (Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritania, Nigeria, and Senegal). As of 14 July 2026, 176 SMPs had been mapped. The mappings were supported through the Prague Process Migration Observatory, Link4Skills Horizon Europe, PSIMM, the Budapest Process, and the EU-funded MMD III programme. The Prague Process and PSIMM are EU-funded through the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF), while the Budapest Process combines EU/MPF and bilateral funding from Türkiye, Hungary, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Australia. These initiatives are implemented by ICMPD.

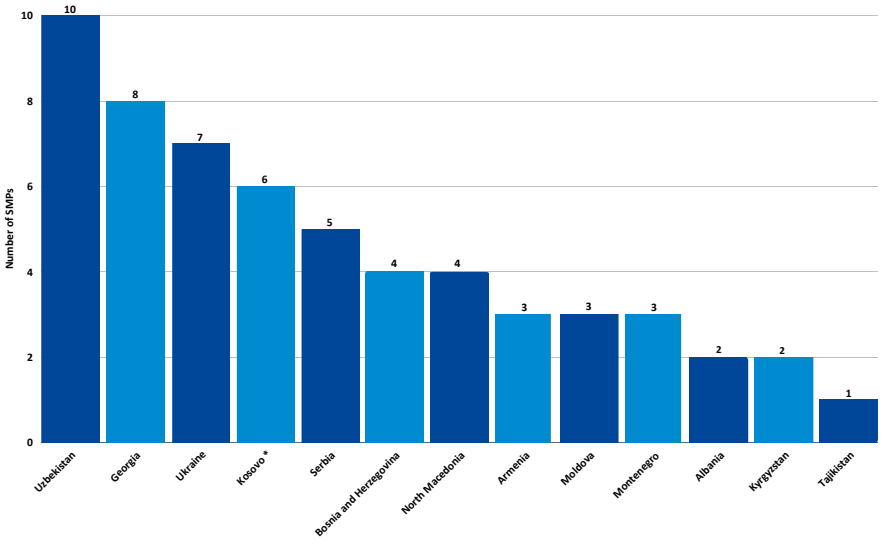
The mapping includes SMPs that:

- engage government bodies on both sides (at any level);
- combine practical skills development with mobility for some or all participants;
- include one of the selected EECA countries (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, or Uzbekistan) or WB partners (Albania, BiH, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Serbia); and
- were launched or in operation at any point between January 2015 and December 2025.

Based on these criteria, 39 SMPs in total were identified in the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states – 27 SMPs in EECA and 16 SMPs[III] in the WB (see Annex 1). For the purpose of this mapping, all the selected countries are referred to as 'selected non-EU Prague Process participating states'.

Engagement level

Figure 1: Some governments engage more frequently in SMPs than others.



*Note: All references to Kosovo in this content should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

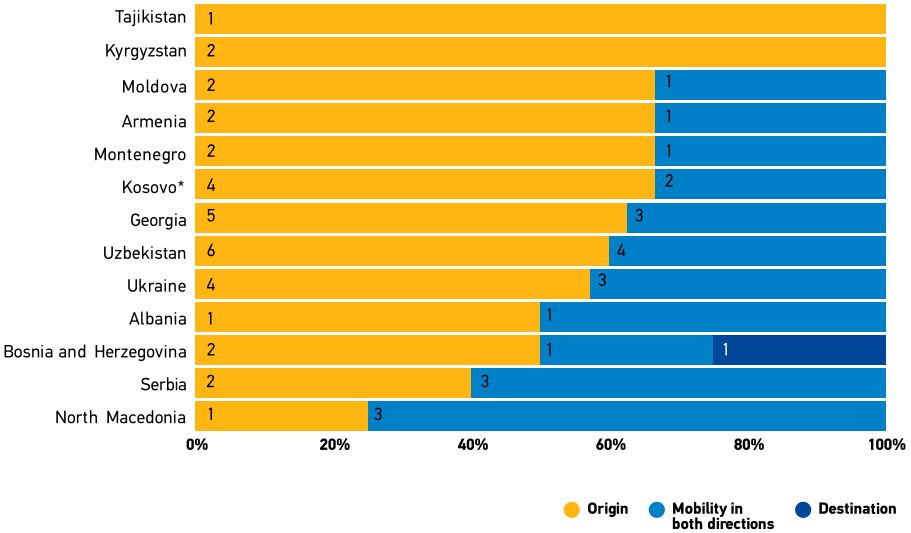
III Some SMPs involved partners in both the EECA and WB regions and are counted in both regional figures accordingly. The overall total avoids this duplication by counting each SMP only once, which is why the total SMPs is lower than the numbers both regions calculated together.

Figure 1 illustrates how often each partner has participated in an SMP, whether as the origin, the destination, or both. All the selected geographies have at least one SMP between 2015 and 2025. While there is some variation, all partners are currently engaged in a relatively small number of SMPs (between 1 and 10 SMPs). Many of the 39 identified SMPs engage multiple countries as origin or destination.

Uzbekistan is the most active country among the cases examined, reflecting its high population growth, substantial labour surplus, and limited domestic employment opportunities, which has increased the importance of international labour mobility as a pathway for employment. Accordingly, the Government of Uzbekistan has actively promoted labour migration through bilateral and multilateral initiatives.[41] A recent example is the *Comprehensive migration and mobility partnership agreement* signed with Germany in 2024, which includes training measures for prospective labour migrants from Uzbekistan. In comparison, engagement in SMPs has been more limited elsewhere in Central Asia in the period studied, with Kyrgyzstan participating in two SMPs and Tajikistan in one. There is also variation in terms of the number of SMPs in the WB, although to a more limited extent.

Direction of mobility

Figure 2: EECA and the WB act primarily as an origin within SMPs; however, most are engaged in reciprocal SMPs that facilitate mobility in both directions.



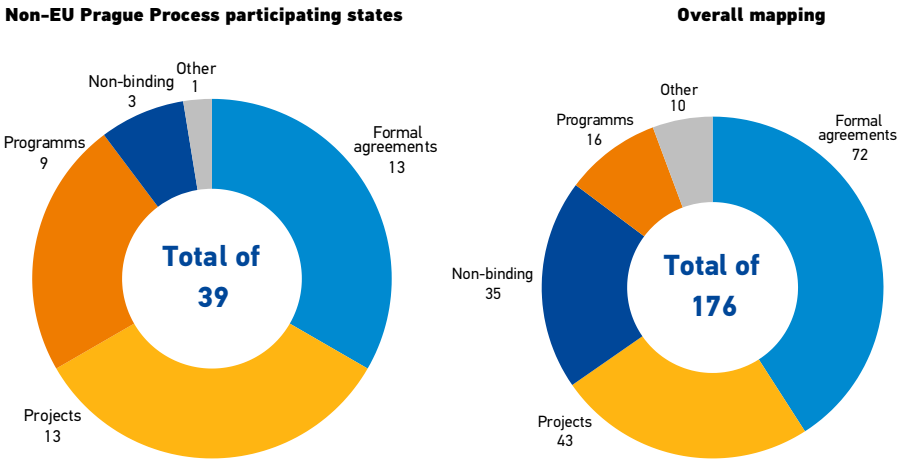
Although EECA and WB primarily act as places of origin, most of those studied (11 of the 13) are part of reciprocal SMPs that allow mobility in both directions, as shown in Figure 2. One example is the Erasmus+ Traineeships programme, which supports two-way mobility and includes, among other partners, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The main destinations for SMPs involving the non-EU Prague Process participating states are EU+ states: 31 of the 39 SMPs include the EU itself, at least one EU Member State, and/or Switzerland. Germany stands out as particularly active, participating in 14 of these partnerships. This is also the case in the overall mapping,[iv] where Germany was the most active among countries studied.[42]

The sole example in which a country acts as a destination partner is the bilateral *Cooperation Protocol* to enhance labour mobility signed between BiH and Egypt in December 2025. Focused on strengthening labour mobility, skills exchange and workforce development, the agreement may reflect the Western Balkans' emerging role as a destination region for labour migration, particularly given that all other SMPs identified in the WB were concluded before 2022.

Types of partnerships

Figure 3: Most SMPs are formal agreements or projects.

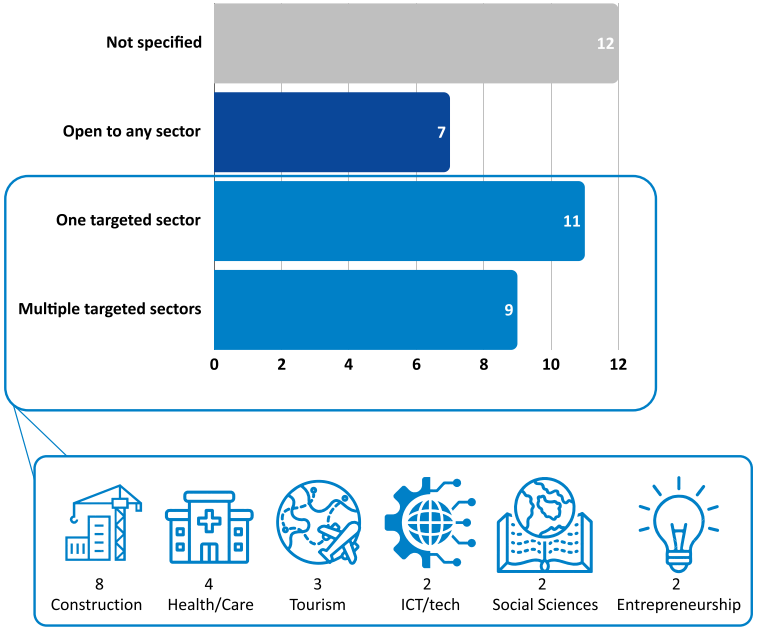


SMPs are flexible and may adopt a range of approaches, reflecting the different forms and needs of current and potential cooperation between partners. These may include formal agreements, such as legally binding bilateral accords that set out clear obligations between parties; non-binding arrangements, such as memoranda of understanding or memoranda of cooperation, which define shared objectives and frameworks for future collaboration without creating legal enforceability; and projects, which are specific, often time-limited initiatives designed to achieve particular outcomes, including pilot activities. Each form of cooperation may offer distinct advantages, depending on the specific objectives of the partners and stakeholders involved. Formal agreements are often broad and flexible, with limited specification of sectors or entry requirements. In contrast, project-based SMPs tend to be more targeted, operating within a defined timeframe and focusing on specific labour market sectors. Projects, therefore, may be utilised to pilot labour mobility among partners and to address acute labour shortages/surpluses in specific sectors.

Figure 3 illustrates the various types of partnerships identified in the overall mapping and the mapping of the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states. Formal agreements and projects are the most common types in both cases; however, unlike the overall mapping, where formal agreements are considerably more common than projects, the non-EU Prague Process participating states show an equal distribution between the two. Among the non-EU Prague Process participating states, formal agreements are typically bilateral migration or cooperation agreements, in which mobility and skills development form one part of a wider framework. An example is the *Agreement between the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Government of Georgia on Migration and Mobility*.[43]

Sectors targeted

Figure 4: Approximately half of the SMPs target specific sectors or occupations, while the remaining half leave the sector or occupation open or unspecified.



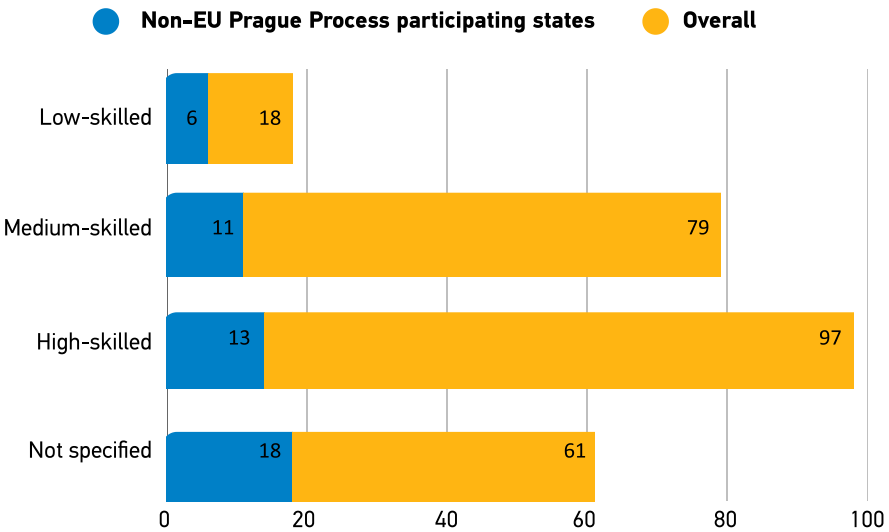
Some SMPs target one or multiple sectors to address specific labour market needs in the origin and/or destination, while other SMPs do not identify a sectoral focus. In

IV Refer to the previous footnote.

both the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states and overall mappings, around half of the identified SMPs target one or more sectors. Construction and healthcare are the most common sectors involving both EECA and WB partners (see Figure 4). Beyond these sectors, SMPs involving EECA countries also target tourism, ICT, entrepreneurship, and the social sciences, including history and international relations, whereas SMPs involving WB partners also target the care sector. Germany dominates among the SMPs facilitating mobility in the sectors of construction and healthcare, reflecting its own labour shortages and needs. Of the eight SMPs targeting construction, six include Germany as a destination. Of the four health and care initiatives, three facilitate mobility to Germany. The three SMPs targeting the tourism sector are all agreements involving Uzbekistan, which specifically promote cooperation in tourism, including internship opportunities. While Uzbekistan has concluded tourism agreements with several countries, not all include a skilling element, and other agreements therefore fall outside the scope of this research. Entrepreneurship is a relatively niche focus area within the overall mapping, with only three SMPs identified. Notably, two of these involve Georgia: *Strengthening the Development Potential of the EU Mobility Partnership in Georgia through Targeted Circular Migration and Diaspora Mobilization with Germany and Strengthening the Partnership between Belgium and Georgia through Temporary Mobility of Entrepreneurs (EMLINK)*. This suggests a special emphasis on entrepreneurship and business mobility within Georgia's SMP portfolio.

Skill levels targeted

Figure 5: SMPs in non-EU Prague Process participating states most commonly target high-skilled and medium-skilled participants.



Note: Overlap exists, as SMPs may enable the participation of more than one skill level.

Figure 5 shows the skill levels targeted by the SMPs in terms of entry requirements for participants at the start of their participation, both for the non-EU Prague Process participating states and for the overall mapping. High-skilled participants are those with advanced expertise and qualifications, often evidenced by higher education degrees or specialised certifications in their respective fields. They have acquired in-depth knowledge and technical capabilities, enabling them to perform effectively in complex roles. Middle-skilled participants may hold technical or vocational qualifications, such as associate degrees, and possess intermediate-level skills that enable them to carry out specialised tasks across various industries. Current students who are still working towards a higher education degree are also included in the middle-skilled group. By contrast, low-skilled participants have basic skills and limited formal education or training, and are often engaged in routine, manual, or unskilled work that does not require extensive qualifications.

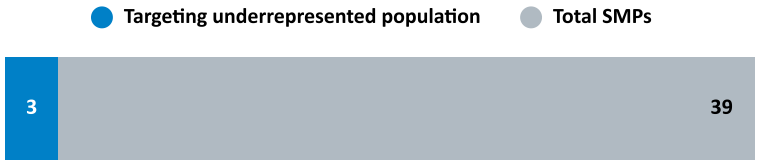
In the non-EU Prague Process participating states, the most commonly targeted skill level in SMPs is high skilled, followed by middle skilled, with only a few SMPs targeting lower skilled individuals. Compared to the overall mapping, the gap between SMPs targeted high- and medium-skilled in non-EU Prague Process participating states is smaller. Notably, SMPs involving the WB are more likely to facilitate skilling and mobility for middle skilled individuals compared to those in the EECA. Most SMPs in the EECA do not specify a specific skill level – of the SMPs that do specify this, most require a high skill level, followed by middle and then low. Some SMPs use terms that could not be categorised along the high/medium/low continuum, e.g. 'skilled workers'. One reason for the higher level of SMPs leaving the skill level unspecified is the high number of formal agreements; such agreements typically leave many specificities open in the initial SMP design.

The SMPs that require middle or high skills upon entry specify the sector more often than not in the mapping of SMPs in the non-EU Prague Process participating states; common sectors include ICT and engineering. This suggests that skilled SMPs tend to be more sector-specific by design – reflecting both the structured training pathways that exist in these fields and employers' need to recruit for clearly defined technical roles.

Of the SMPs that require lower skills as an entry requirement, the most common sector (where specified) is construction. This aligns with broader labour market trends in receiving countries, where demand for low-skilled workers is concentrated in manual and trades-based industries – yet it also highlights a gap, given how rarely SMPs target this skill level overall. A key reason for this is that most labour migration pathways to EU countries focus on higher skilled occupations.[44]

Underrepresented groups targeted

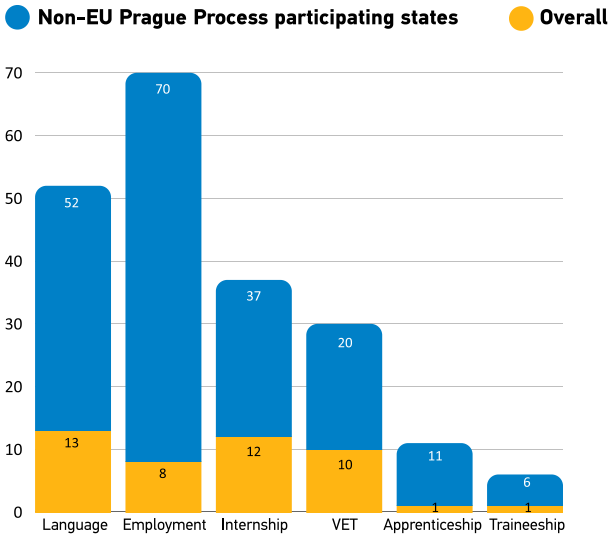
Figure 6: Three out of 39 SMPs specifically target underrepresented groups in their design.



In the overall SMP mapping, nine out of 176 (5%) SMPs target underrepresented groups – such as women, persons with disabilities, minorities, and vulnerable persons – in their design in some way. In comparison, three out of the 39 (8%) SMPs involving the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states explicitly target or include measures to facilitate the participation of underrepresented groups. The *Youth, Employment and Skills in Kosovo* (YES) project*, an SMP between Kosovo* and Germany, actively supports the inclusion of women, people with disabilities, and vulnerable groups. The *Cooperation Protocol to enhance labour mobility from Egypt to BiH* prioritises support for women, youth, and people with disabilities. Moreover, the *Labour Mobility programme of ICT graduates between Slovakia, Ukraine, and Moldova (DIGI TALENTS)* project targets women.

Skilling elements

Figure 7: Around ¾ of SMPs offer on-the-job training as a skilling element.



Note: Overlap exists, as SMPs may inlcude multple training types

SMPs adopt different types of skilling approaches: Some primarily provide training that enables individuals to practise the same occupation in another country (e.g. language training and/or support with recognition of qualifications), while others aim to more substantially expand the global skills pool (e.g. multi-year apprenticeships). Skilling may take place in the country of origin, in the destination country, or in both.

The non-EU Prague Process participating states closely mirror the overall trend, with three in four SMPs offering some form of an on-the-job training (the types of which are bolded in Figure 8, above). Such training is typically delivered in the country of destination and may take the form of internships, vocational training, or traineeships. The remaining 25% of SMPs do not include on-the-job training. Instead, they entail a range of skilling components such as language training, professional development courses, and specialised courses in areas such as ICT and management (not included in the figure above). These skilling components can be delivered in both the origin and destination. In the non-EU Prague Process participating states, skilling primality takes place in the destination, with on the-job-training or internships. The training that takes place in the origin is primarily pre-departure language training.

Mobility models

Figure 8: Most SMPs facilitate mobility for all participants.

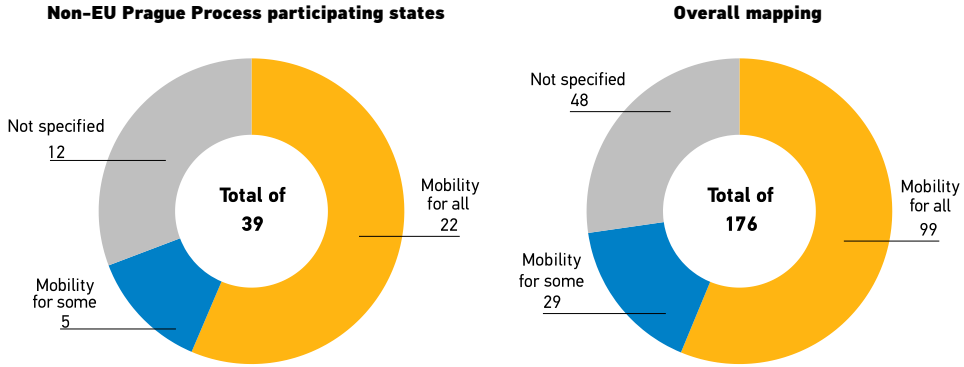
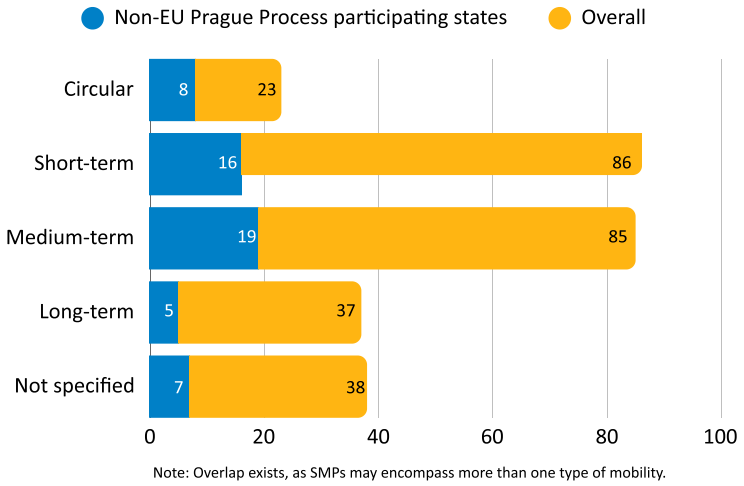


Figure 8 indicates whether SMPs facilitate mobility for all participants or only for a subset of them. In EECA and the WB, more than half of SMPs identified facilitate mobility for all participants, meaning that every individual participating in the initiative moves to the destination for a certain amount of time. By contrast, dual home and away tracks are less common, with only five SMPs using the two-track model: Digital Explorers II; *DIGI TALENTS; Temporary Labour Migration of Georgian Workers to Poland and Estonia; tQMP Bau Academy; and YES*. Of these, four are projects. In the overall mapping, 16 out of the 29 SMPs offering home and away tracks are also projects, suggesting that this model is most commonly implemented through project-based partnerships.

Furthermore, the overall mapping indicates growing interest in this approach: 55% of the identified SMPs with two tracks were launched in 2023 or after. This suggests that the model is gaining popularity and may offer a useful option for the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states to consider in future SMP negotiations. With the promotion of the Global Skill Partnership and EU Talent Partnership approaches to combining skilling and mobility, SMPs combining home and away tracks are becoming increasingly common as a strategy for generating mutual benefits by providing skilling both for those meant to move to a destination abroad for a certain period of time and those meant to remain in origin labour markets. At the same time, there have been concerns that the skills development taking place in origin countries is often not aligned with the needs of origin labour markets[45] and that access to SMP participation (training and/or mobility) is typically still limited to those who have already benefitted from educational opportunities.[46]

Length of mobility

Figure 9: SMPs in non-EU Prague Process participating states most commonly facilitate medium- and short-term mobility.



Note: Overlap exists, as SMPs may encompass more than one type of mobility.

SMPs facilitate different lengths of mobility and may offer more than one option. Short-term mobility refers to periods of less than one year; medium-term mobility encompasses one to five years; and long-term mobility refers to movements of five years or longer, often intended to lead to permanent settlement and sometimes including a pathway to citizenship.

In the WB region, the most common length facilitated is short-term mobility (38%), followed by medium-term mobility (25%) and then circular and long-term mobility (13% each). This trend is roughly in line with the overall mapping. In EECA, however, the most common type is medium-term mobility (67%), followed by short-term (40%), circular (22%), and long-term (11%) mobility.

While these findings reflect the design of SMPs, actual mobility trajectories may differ in practice. For instance, individuals who are expected to return may instead transition to another status and remain in the destination, while those initially envisaged as long-term migrants may at some point decide to return. Such developments are not captured in this mapping, as they go beyond the data collected on the design of the partnerships.

Types of mobility design

Figure 10: More than half of mapped SMPs foresee the return of participants to the origin.

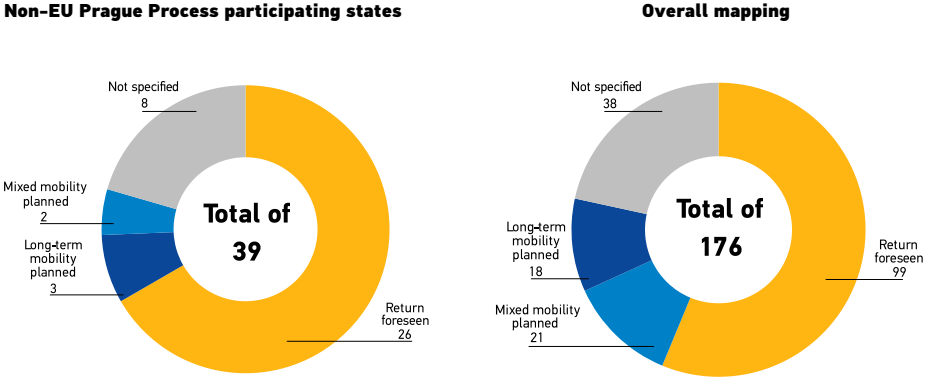


Figure 10 categorises the SMPs into three types of mobility design:

1. *Return foreseen* – Participants are expected to return to their country of origin after completing the mobility scheme. This is typically the case in SMPs based on short-term or circular mobility, and in some partnerships, return is explicitly noted.

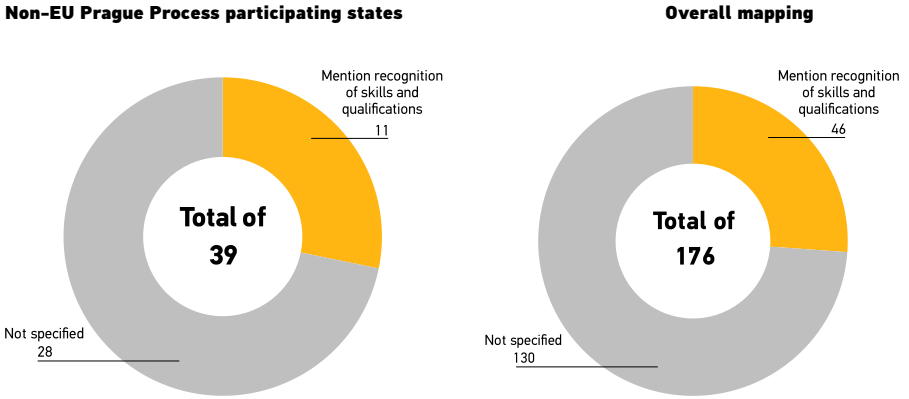
2. *Long-term mobility planned* – SMPs facilitate long-term mobility, generally through mobility pathways lasting more than five years.

3. *Mixed mobility planned* – SMPs combine different forms of mobility, facilitating long-term stays for some participants while offering short-term, medium-term, and/or circular mobility opportunities for others.

In the overall mapping, the most common type is return foreseen, followed by mixed mobility planned and long-term mobility planned. In the non-EU Prague Process participating states, return foreseen is also the most common design; however, more SMPs facilitate long-term mobility than mixed mobility. Notably, none of SMPs identified in the WB region envisaged mixed mobility arrangements.

Recognition of skills and qualifications

Figure 11: A little over ¾ of SMPs do not account for the recognition of skills and qualifications.



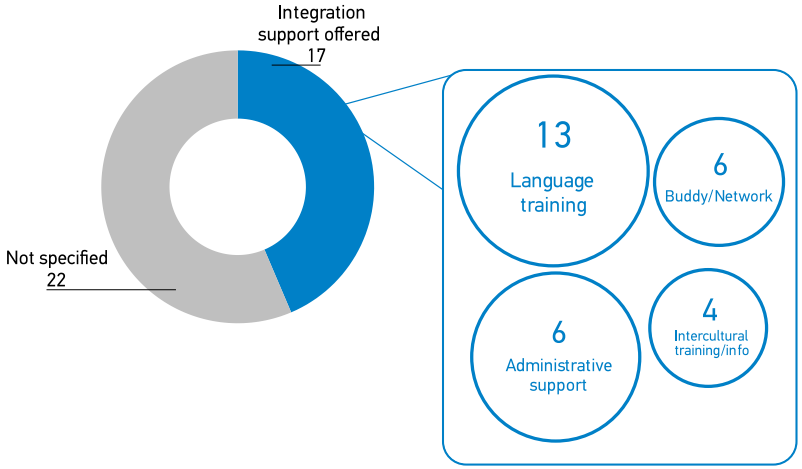
One of the key challenges faced by migrants in the context of labour mobility and labour market integration is the recognition of their existing skills and qualifications.[47] Effective validation and recognition mechanisms are essential to enable individuals to get a job that matches their existing experience and qualifications, thereby reducing the risk of deskilling and supporting sustainable labour market integration and thus talent retention. It also means that migrants – and employers – can make full use of skills and competencies obtained.

Of the 39 SMPs identified in non-EU Prague Process participating states, 11 include some form of support for the recognition of skills or qualifications. Such measures are slightly more common in SMPs involving WB partners, where they are included in 31% of cases, compared to 22% of SMPs involving EECA countries. However, it is important to note that five of these SMPs merely require participants to complete the standard recognition procedure upon arrival in the destination country, rather than providing dedicated recognition support or adapted procedures. As these procedures can be lengthy and complex, current SMPs relying on existing procedures do not necessarily reduce the barriers faced by participants. By supporting qualification recognition and alignment, SMPs can help participants make effective use of their skills in the destination country, while ensuring that the competencies acquired through the skilling component of the SMP are recognised and relevant in both the origin and destination labour market.

Some SMPs go beyond standard recognition procedures by actively supporting the recognition or alignment of skills and qualifications. For example, *Handwerk bietet Zukunft* between BiH and Germany assists participants with the recognition of their qualifications and provides adaptation training to help them acquire any skills needed for full recognition within the German vocational training system. Similarly, *tQMP Bau Academy* applies a curriculum co-design approach: the Bau Academy offers a three-year apprenticeship in Pristina based on the professional standards of the German vocational training system, while also tailoring the training to labour market needs in Kosovo*. *Future International Talents for German Climate Businesses*, between Uzbekistan, Colombia, and Germany, also supports adaptive qualification measures within the project where relevant. In some SMPs, consideration of qualification recognition is less concrete and remains at the level of policy commitments, such as within high-level agreements. For example, the *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt* states that the parties will consider the mutual recognition of academic, professional, and vocational qualifications.

Integration and reintegration support

Figure 12: Around 40% of SMPs in non-EU Prague Process participating states specify the provision of integration support.



Note: Overlap exists, as SMPs may include more than one integration meassure

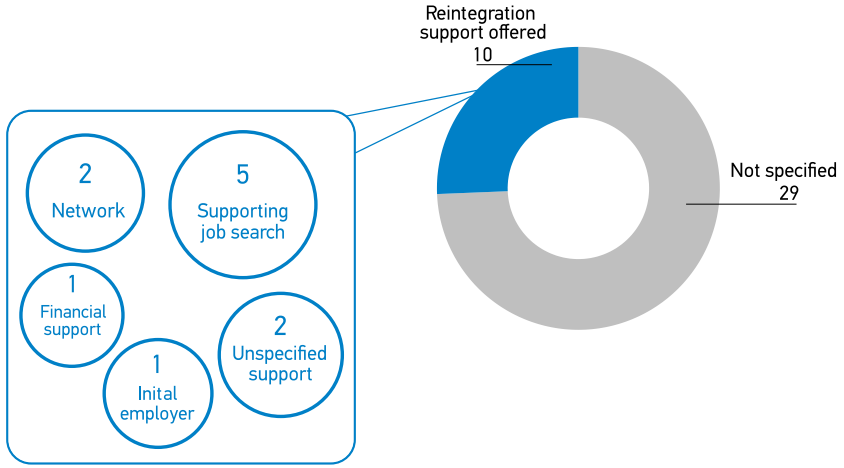
Social integration support, aimed at assisting in the settlement process, can take many forms. Examples include language instruction, cultural orientation activities, administrative support, and mentorship programmes. Integration support can help reduce underemployment and improve the alignment between migrant skills and labour market needs, as well as support SMP participants after their move. Such support becomes increasingly important in the context of longer-term mobility and is closely linked to talent retention.[48]

44% of SMPs in non-EU Prague Process participating states specify the provision of some type of integration support, most commonly language training (13 of 17 SMPs). In 9 of these 13 SMPs, integration support goes beyond language training alone, including buddy schemes, administrative support, or intercultural training upon arrival

in the destination country. In comparison, in the overall mapping, social integration support was specified in 39% of SMPs, most commonly in the form of language training.

In the SMPs in non-EU Prague participating states, all of the SMPs that facilitate longer-term mobility in some way – either mixed mobility or long-term planned – also include some form of integration support. Similarly, in the overall mapping, 31 SMPs of the 39 SMPs that plan long-term mobility for some or for all include some form of integration support, showing when longer-term mobility is planned, integration support is more likely to be included.

Figure 13: 26% of SMPs in the non-EU Prague Process participating states offer reintegration support.



Note: Overlap exists, as SMPs may include more than one reintegration meassure

Reintegration support refers to measures that help (prospective) returnees settle back into their origin; this could be offered before return (in the destination) or after return (in the origin). Examples include job search support, grants, alumni networks, buddy programmes, CV and interview preparation, professional guidance, and reintegration opportunities at the former employer.

Among the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states, two-thirds of SMPs foresee the return of participants (Figure 10), while a further 8% facilitate mixed mobility, meaning that at least some participants are expected to return. This illustrates that return is a significant feature of SMPs in the region. Yet, reintegration support is offered less often than integration support (see Figures 12 and 13). Nevertheless, only 10 of the 28[V] partnerships that envision return for some or all participants include specific reintegration support for returning participants; the most common measure is assistance with job search upon return. This points to an opportunity to enhance current SMPs by adding such support or linking returning participants with existing assistance.

A similar pattern can be observed in the overall mapping: Although 119 SMPs envision the return of some or all participants, only 25 of these SMPs include reintegration support. Despite this relatively low share, the inclusion of reintegration support appears to be gaining in importance – one-third (nine of 27) of the SMPs in the overall mapping that include such measures were launched since 2023.

Key takeaways for the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states

SMPs hold significant potential to address labour shortages while promoting skills development and youth exchange in ways that reflect the priorities of both countries of origin and destination. The analysis presented in this paper highlights the main characteristics of SMPs concluded with the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states, providing an evidence base to inform future negotiations, the development of new SMPs, and the enhancement of existing ones. The key takeaways below may serve as useful considerations in these efforts.

SMPs can serve as an effective diplomatic tool to strengthen international partnerships and formalise existing labour migration channels. The mapping of SMPs in the region indicates that both formal bilateral agreements and project-based partnerships are widely used for this purpose. For example, the *EMLINK* project between Georgia and Belgium explicitly identifies the strengthening of political and economic relations between the two countries as one of its intended outcomes.

The findings also demonstrate the flexibility of SMPs. They can take a variety of forms, from bilateral agreements to project-based initiatives, target specific sectors such as construction and healthcare, and incorporate diverse approaches to skills development, including language training, vocational education, and on-the-job training delivered either in the country of origin or destination. Likewise, mobility arrangements can be tailored to meet the needs of both partners through models such as dual home-and-away tracks, varying mobility durations, or circular migration schemes. Where partner countries seek to strengthen cooperation – for example by improving the recognition of qualifications, aligning training with shared standards, or addressing labour shortages in specific sectors – SMPs can provide a structured framework for negotiating arrangements that deliver mutual benefits for both countries of origin and destination.

While most SMPs in the region foresee the return of participants, reintegration support is not consistently incorporated into partnership design. Moreover, short-term mobility may not always align with the preferences and long-term needs of either migrants or employers.[49] For the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states that primarily serve as countries of origin, strengthening reintegration support should be an important consideration in future SMP negotiations to facilitate participants' smoother return and reintegration. Where such measures are not included in new or

V The overall supply of skilled workers available for employment across countries

existing partnerships, countries of origin can also ensure that returning participants are informed about and able to access available reintegration services. Conversely, should EECA or the WB engage in future SMPs as destination countries for longer-term migration, incorporating integration support into partnership design would be a valuable element to facilitate migrants' successful inclusion.

Many SMP participants already have qualifications, yet the recognition of these qualifications is not consistently part of the SMP design. Middle- and high-skilled individuals are most commonly targeted in SMPs among non-EU Prague Process participating states. However, only a little over one-quarter of SMPs elaborate an approach to the recognition of this experience – and half of these rely on the existing recognition processes. As the recognition of qualifications is widely acknowledged as a key enabler of skills mobility and skills-matched employment, countries should consider giving greater attention to this issue both within SMPs and through complementary policy measures. Potential approaches include investing in bridging courses, developing jointly designed curricula, establishing mutual recognition arrangements, and implementing other innovative mechanisms that facilitate qualification recognition beyond traditional approaches. In this context, the EU's forthcoming Skills Portability Initiative[VI] may provide a relevant framework for further action, including through proposed common rules to simplify procedures for the recognition of qualifications and skills of third-country nationals.

Dual home-and-away tracks have become increasingly common in recent years as a strategy to ensure that recruitment approaches contribute to building the global labour pool[VII] and to strengthening the sustainability of skills mobility. Although this model is not yet widely used in the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states, it may represent a valuable option for future SMPs, particularly where there are concerns about brain drain or skills needs in countries of origin. This should be approached and designed carefully to ensure equal access to training programmes and alignment with the labour market needs of the country of origin.

SMPs have potential to address labour and skills shortages and surpluses in the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states. Geopolitical and demographic developments are reshaping labour mobility across the region, opening up the possibility for states to use SMPs to facilitate mobility that meets the needs of all partners. SMPs can serve as a tool to recruit needed labour in a more targeted and sustainable way. They can also help to alleviate skills mismatches and start language training prior to arrival, helping to address government concerns. For emerging destination countries, previous experience participating in SMPs as countries of origin provides a valuable foundation for designing development-sensitive partnerships from the destination perspective. At the same time, the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states may continue engaging in SMPs as countries of origin, with the aim of leveraging migration as a tool for development and pursuing governmental cooperation to help protect migrants' rights. In this context, the dual home-and-away tracks may offer a promising approach to simultaneously address labour market needs in both countries of origin and destination.

VI Read more here: https://europass.europa.eu/en/news/strengthening-labour-mobility-through-skills-portability-initiative-spi

VII The overall supply of skilled workers available for employment across countries

Annex 1: SMPs identified in the selected non-EU Prague Process participating states

SMP name	Origin	Destination	Partnership type	Start year	End year	Target sector(s) or occupation(s)	Mobility type 1
Agreement between the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Government of Georgia on Migration and Mobility	Georgia	Germany	Bilateral agreement	2023	Not specified	Not specified	Circular (seasonal work), short-term, and medium-term
Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt	Egypt, Uzbekistan	Egypt, Uzbekistan	Bilateral agreement	2018	Ongoing	Humanitarian, natural, and applied sciences	Not specified
Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Arab Republic of Egypt on cooperation in the tourism sector	Egypt, Uzbekistan	Egypt, Uzbekistan	Multilateral Agreement	2019	Ongoing	Tourism	Not specified
Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Republic of India on cooperation in the tourism sector	India, Uzbekistan	India, Uzbekistan	Bilateral agreement	2018	Ongoing	Tourism	Not specified
Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Russian Federation on developing cooperation in the tourism sector	Russia, Uzbekistan	Russia, Uzbekistan	Bilateral agreement	2017	Ongoing	Tourism	Not specified
Agreement between Ukraine and Spain on the regulation and organisation of labour migration flows between the two states	Spain, Ukraine	Spain, Ukraine	Bilateral agreement	2010	Ongoing	Open to all	Short-term and medium-term (up to 12 months, extendable for 6 additional months depending on the employer's needs)
Comprehensive migration and mobility partnership agreement	Uzbekistan	Germany	Bilateral agreement	2024	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified
Cooperation Protocol to enhance labour mobility	Egypt	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Cooperation Protocol	Signed 2025	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified

Craftsmanship offers a future (Handwerk bietet Zukunft)	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Germany (Koblenz, Potsdam, Munich)	Project	2020	2023	Electrical trade, metal construction and plant mechanics, and heating and air conditioning technology	Long-term
Digital Explorers II	Armenia, Kenya, Nigeria	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	Project	2023	Ongoing (until September 2026)	ICT	Short-term, medium-term, and long-term
Employment Permit System	Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam	Republic of Korea	Programme based on a series of MoUs	2004	Not specified	Not specified	Medium-term (EPS allows foreigners to work for 3 years, but workers' contracts may be renewed, allowing them to stay for up to 4 years and 10 months; afterward, they must return permanently to their home countries, unless the employer makes a special request for the worker)
Erasmus+ Traineeships	European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Türkiye	European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Türkiye	Programme	2014	Ongoing (with a 6-year timeline - first phase: 2014-2020; second phase: 2021-2027)	Not specified	Short-term
Erasmus+ training courses	European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Türkiye	European Union, Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Türkiye	Project	2014	Ongoing (with 6-year timeline - first phase: 2014-2020; second phase: 2021-2027)	Open to all	Short-term
European Solidarity Corps	European Union Iceland, North Macedonia, Türkiye, Liechtenstein; partner countries neighbouring the EU: Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt,	European Union, Iceland, North Macedonia, Türkiye, Liechtenstein; partner countries neighbouring the EU: Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina,	Project	2016	Ongoing	Not specified	Short-term
	Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kosovo*, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, State of Palestine, Russia, Serbia, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine	Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kosovo*, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, State of Palestine, Russia, Serbia, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine					
Future International Talents for German Climate Businesses	Colombia, Uzbekistan	Germany	Project	2024	Ongoing (until 2027)	Electronics technician for energy and building technology, metalworker/ metal fabricator, road construction worker/road builder, bricklayer/structural engineering worker, concrete and reinforced concrete worker/structural engineering worker, automotive mechatronics technician, finishing trade worker (specialisation: carpentry), plant mechanic for sanitary, heating, and air conditioning systems, and roofer	Long-term
International Experience Canada, Young Professional Program (YPP)	Australia, Austria, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy,	Australia, Austria, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany,	Programme based on bilateral reciprocal youth mobility agreements	1951	Ongoing	Open to all	Short-term and medium-term (visas are granted for 24 months depending on the applicant's nationality and the length of the job offer)

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

	Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, United Kingdom	Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, United Kingdom					
Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET)	Argentina, Australia, Austria, Barbados, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Mongolia, Myanmar, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Republic of Korea, Russia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Türkiye, United Kingdom, United States, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam	Japan	Programme	1987	Ongoing	Education, sports, international relations (assistant language teachers (ALTs), coordinators for international relations (CIRs), or sports exchange advisors (SEAs)	Medium-term (minimum of 1 year, maximum of 5 years)
Joint Declaration of Intent between the Federal Ministry of Health of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Kosovo*	Germany, Kosovo*	Germany, Kosovo*	Declaration of intent	2019	Not specified	Health and care	Short-term

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Joint Declaration on a Mobility Partnership between the European Union and Georgia	Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Sweden, United Kingdom	Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Sweden, United Kingdom	Multilateral agreement	2009	Not specified	Not specified	Short-term, medium-term, and circular
Labour Mobility programme of ICT graduates between Slovakia, Ukraine and Moldova (DIGI TALENTS)	Moldova, Ukraine	Slovakia	Programme	2021	2024	ICT	Short-term and medium-term (12-month job for Ukrainian and Moldovan participants or 3-month traineeship for Moldovan participants)
Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies of the Italian Republic and the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the Republic of Albania concerning the Implementation of the Agreement on labour migration	Albania	Italy	Memorandum of understanding	2009	Ongoing	Not specified	Circular should be encouraged
Memorandum of understanding for the establishment of a bilateral skills and mobility partnership	Kosovo*	Germany	Memorandum of understanding	2016	Not specified	Construction	Not specified
Professional Qualification for Future Specialists and Managers for North Macedonia	North Macedonia	Germany	Project	2021	2022	Not specified	Short-term
Scholarship Programme of the Government of Poland for Young Scientists	Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan	Poland	Programme	2003	Ongoing	Priority sectors include specialisations within the humanities and social sciences such as history, international relations, political science, journalism, sociology, ethnology, cultural studies, social psychology, administration, management, law, and related fields	Short-term and medium-term mobility (10-12 months)

*This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Strengthening the Development Potential of the EU Mobility Partnership in Georgia through Targeted Circular Migration and Diaspora Mobilization	Georgia, Germany	Georgia, Germany	Project	2013	2016	Healthcare, hospitality, and entrepreneurship	Medium-term, long-term, and circular
Strengthening the Partnership between Belgium and Georgia through Temporary Mobility of Entrepreneurs (EMLINK)	Georgia	Belgium	Project	2023	2025	Entrepreneurship	Short-term
Sustainable recruitment of nurses from foreign countries for employment in Germany (Triple Win Nurses)	Bosnia and Herzegovina, India (Kerala and Telangana), Indonesia, Jordan, Philippines, Tunisia	Germany	Project	2013	Not specified	Healthcare	Long-term
Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)	Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Pakistan, Peru, Philippines, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam	Japan	Programme	1993	Ongoing	Multiple[7]	Medium-term (training up to 5 years)
Temporary Labour Migration of Georgian Workers to Poland and Estonia	Georgia	Estonia, Poland	Project	2015	2017	STEM, construction, and manufacturing	Circular
tQMP Bau Academy	Kosovo*	Germany	Project	2018	2021	Construction	Medium-term
Vocational Training Partnership: LBB Initiative	Kosovo*	Germany	Project	2017	Not specified	Construction	Circular mobility
Young Professional Bilateral Agreement	Switzerland, Ukraine	Switzerland, Ukraine	Bilateral agreement	2008	Ongoing	Not specified	Medium-term (18 months)

[7] Agricultural cultivation, livestock agriculture, silviculture, fishing boat fisheries, aquaculture, manufacture of food products, manufacture of marine processed foods, manufacture of agricultural processed foods, manufacture of livestock processed foods, manufacture of tea, manufacture of bread, manufacture of confectionery, manufacture of fermented food, manufacture of noodles, manufacture of ready-made meals, manufacture of pickles, manufacture of salt, manufacture of dried food, manufacture of soy sauce, manufacture of miso, manufacture of tofu, manufacture of frozen food, manufacture of non-heated processed foods, manufacture of bottled and canned foods, manufacture of side dishes, manufacture of instant foods, manufacture of seasoning, manufacture of beverages, manufacture of oil and fat products, manufacture of flour, manufacture of sugar, textile manufacturing, knitting, dyeing, sewing, embroidery, manufacture of bedding, manufacture of curtains, manufacture of carpets, manufacture of canvas products, manufacture of clothing accessories, manufacture of leather products, manufacture of footwear, manufacture of bags, woodworking, furniture making, printing, book binding, paper product manufacturing, cardboard manufacturing, plastic moulding, reinforced plastic products manufacturing, rubber products manufacturing, metal casting, metal forging, die casting, machining, metal press, sheet metal, iron work, metal surface treatment, electroplating, welding, metal heat treatment, finishing, machine assembly, machine inspection, machine maintenance, electronic device assembly, electronic circuit assembly, print wiring board manufacturing, construction work, plumbing, piping, tiling, interior finishing, heat insulation, painting, waterproofing, scaffolding, carpentry, stone work, concrete work, formwork, rebar placement, road paving, well drilling, heavy equipment operation, automobile maintenance, motorcycle maintenance, shipbuilding, ship machinery installation, industrial packaging, instrument assembly, measuring instrument manufacturing, watch assembly, jewellery processing, glass product manufacturing, ceramic product manufacturing, brick and tile manufacturing, concrete product manufacturing, building cleaning management, care work, airport ground handling, cargo handling, cabin cleaning, agriculture machinery maintenance, forestry machinery maintenance, food processing machinery maintenance, textile machinery maintenance, machine tool maintenance, construction machinery maintenance, electrical equipment assembly, electrical wiring, control panel assembly, air-conditioning equipment installation, refrigeration equipment installation.

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Young Professional System	Algeria, Argentina, Benin, Canada, Cape Verde, Congo, Gabon, Georgia, Morocco, Mauritius, Montenegro, New Zealand, Russia, Senegal, Serbia, Tunisia, United States	France	Programme	2013	Ongoing	Open to all; in New Zealand there is a focus on agriculture	Medium-term
Young Professional System	Serbia	France	Bilateral agreement	2013	Ongoing	Open to all	Medium-term
Young Professional System	Montenegro	France	Bilateral agreement	2013	Ongoing	Open to all	Medium-term
Young Professional System	Georgia	France	Bilateral agreement	2013	Ongoing	Open to all	Medium-term
Young Professionals Programme/ International Trainee Exchange Agreements	Argentina, Canada, Chile, Indonesia, Japan, Monaco, New Zealand, the Philippines, Russia, South Africa, Tunisia, Ukraine, United States	Switzerland	Programme	Not specified	Ongoing	Not specified	Short-term, medium-term, and circular (maximum of 18 months; several stays are possible as long as overall duration does not exceed a total of 18 months)
Young Professionals Programme/ International Trainee Exchange Agreements	Ukraine	Switzerland	Bilateral agreement	2002	Ongoing	Not specified	Short-term, medium-term, and circular (maximum of 18 months; several stays are possible as long as overall duration does not exceed a total of 18 months)
Youth, Employment and Skills in Kosovo* (YES)	Kosovo*	Germany	Project	2017	2021	Construction	Short-term

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Annex 2: Methodology

Drawing upon the broad definitions of SMPs articulated by IOM[50] and the OECD[51], this mapping of SMPs takes a broad approach to analysing partnerships at the intersection of skilling and mobility. It includes SMPs that:

- engage government bodies on both sides (at any level);
- combine practical skills development with mobility for some or all participants;
- include one of the selected EECA countries (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, or Uzbekistan) or WB partners (Albania, BiH, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Serbia); and
- were launched or in operation at any point between January 2015 and December 2025.

This paper builds on research conducted under the EU-funded Link4Skills project,[52] which mapped SMPs involving one or more project countries (Austria, Canada, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Morocco, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, and Ukraine). It also draws on ongoing mappings conducted by ICMPD in selected countries in the Mediterranean, South Asia, and Africa. All mappings are based on extensive desk research, drawing on publicly available primary sources such as international agreements, memoranda of understanding (MoUs), project websites, and news articles, as well as secondary sources. In addition, initial findings were shared with relevant partners of the selected countries at the Prague Process Workshop on Labour Migration (March 2026) for feedback and validation.

The inventory captures 18 data points (see Annex 3), which were selected and validated with partners and guided by both conceptual and practical considerations. The chosen parameters primarily reflect the design of SMPs, as these could be captured through desk research. They also include aspects that capture practical constraints and recurring criticism of labour mobility initiatives in the current policy debate; these include, for instance, the number of participants, and the recognition of qualifications.[53]

Annex 3: Inventory data collection points

Partnership **name** is listed (in English).

Origin and **destination** are specified, with subnational places of origin and destination highlighted where relevant.

Partnership type refers to the formal arrangement underpinning the cooperation between partners, which can take several forms.

Formal agreements, such as bilateral agreements, are binding arrangements between two or more states or organisations.

Non-binding agreements, including MoUs or memoranda of cooperation, are less legally binding; however, they outline shared intentions and frameworks for future collaboration between the signatories.

Projects are more specific and often more time-bound initiatives designed to achieve a specific goal, including pilots.

Finally, the "other" category encompasses a range of arrangements, such as scholarship agreements and recruitment agreements, which support cooperation between signatories in a targeted and specified way.

The **start year** and **end year** are marked, along with other relevant information such as the planned end date for ongoing initiatives or automatic renewal, when relevant.

Target sector(s) or profession(s) refers to the main labour market area(s) of focus of the partnership, where this is specified. Some SMPs are explicitly open to participants from all professional backgrounds, while others specify a certain field or occupation, and yet others do not specify a focus.

Main stakeholders outlines who leads, manages, and/or implements the partnership, including the signatories of agreements.

Funding indicates who finances the initiatives, whether this is a specific entity, a stakeholder type, and/or co-financed.

Number of participants records how many people were either planned to participate, or actually participated, in the partnership. Depending on the data available, this figure can refer either to the number of individuals named (e.g. capped participation) or targeted in the agreement regarding skilling and/or mobility, or to the number who have actually taken part in the SMP over a given period (for a particular year, cumulative, etc.).

Where applicable, the inventory notes whether the SMP aims to **target underrepresented populations** such as women, persons with disabilities, particular minority groups, or persons in need of international protection.

Mobility type describes the intended duration and scope of mobility planned under the SMP, including details where available.

Short-term mobility refers to mobility lasting less than 1 year.

Medium-term mobility refers to mobility lasting from 1 year up to 5 years.

Long-term mobility is 5 years or longer, often intended to lead to permanent settlement and sometimes including a pathway to citizenship.

Circular mobility refers to repeated movements between countries, where participants return and move again as part of a structured cycle, often short-term in temporality.

The inventory indicates whether an SMP provides **mobility opportunities for some or all** participants to another country. For example, some SMPs plan skilling for

a certain number of participants in a country of origin but plan mobility only for a smaller subset of them.

The inventory marks which **type of mobility design** each SMP uses, based on three approaches identified by the researchers across the mapped SMPs:

1. mixed mobility planned;

2. return foreseen; and

3. long-term mobility planned.

Participant eligibility requirements details whether the SMP targets a particular group, for instance related to career stage, occupation, or skill level. Eligibility requirements in the collected initiatives vary widely, from specific preconditions to have experience in a particular sector to broader classifications based on skill levels. To simplify this diversity of data, the requirements were categorised in three main sub-categories:

1. career stage (e.g. current student or recent graduate);

2. occupation (e.g. currently working in a certain field or profession); and

3. skill level as defined in the SMP agreement (e.g. high, medium, or low where this could be determined, or the specific language of the SMP if this did not align with the team's high/medium/low classification, e.g. "skilled talent").

Where additional criteria are explicitly stated in SMP documents, for instance relating to language proficiency or the lack of a criminal record, these are also included.

Training type and location summarises what kind of skills development is offered, such as on-the-job training including work placements, vocational training, and internships, as well as other skilling components such as language courses, professional development, and specialised training. The location is also mentioned where this information is available (i.e. in the origin or destination).

Recognition of qualifications and skills outlines whether and how participants' qualifications are recognised (if specified). Some SMPs do not mention the recognition of skills and qualifications or specify how this is to be dealt with.

Social **integration support** covers settlement assistance offered to participants, such as language instruction or cultural orientation activities, which may be offered pre-departure or post-arrival. This was not always specified.

Reintegration support refers to measures to help (prospective) returnees settle back into their home country, which may be offered before or after return. This was not always specified.

Evaluation lists publicly available evaluations and assessments, where applicable.

For more information lists the information sources used for each SMP.

Annex 4: Limitations

While the inventory offers a robust evidence base, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the inventory is limited to government-to-government partnerships. Although some of these include private sector or civil society actors, the mapping does not include SMPs in which there is only a government partner on one side. This scope was chosen to focus on the role of government-to-government partnerships as an interesting point of analysis and contribution to the research base. Second, the mapping concentrated on initiatives with a clear and structured practical skilling element. For this reason, while study-related internship programmes were included, the inventory does not cover SMPs that only include academic university study, such as student exchanges or scholarship programmes. Third, the inventory focused on partnership design; fewer data points are focused on outcomes and impact. This was purposeful in the research design due to the limited information typically available on SMPs via desk research, in particular public evaluations, as well as the understanding that broader success factors may not always be captured by evaluations or specific metrics (e.g. participation numbers). Finally, the depth of information available varies considerably across initiatives. Detailed data on design, implementation, and outcomes are often particularly scarce for high-level agreements and for newer initiatives that have not yet undergone evaluation (or where the evaluation is not publicly available).

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20 Ibid, p. 42.

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22 Bossavie, Garrote Sánchez & Makovec, The Journey Ahead, p. 22-23.

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DIGITALISATION & TECHNOLOGY

Time As Violence: A User-Centric Approach to Digital Migration Management

Policy Analysis Report

Andrew Fallone

November 2024

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork in Mexico was supported by the Centro Regional de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (CRIM UNAM) and the University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology.

While this research seeks to address and rectify policy failures that exacerbate the challenges faced by people on the move, it pales in comparison to the vital work carried out by Alburgue Casa Tochan, Casa Fuente de Apoyo a Mujeres Niñas y Niños Víctimas de Violencia A.C., Casa Frida, Refugio LGBTIQ+, and Casa del Migrante San Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin to provide food and shelter for people on the move. The author remains impressed by the strength and resolve of all the staff and volunteers of these shelters whose tireless work attends to the daily needs of people on the move.

The author owes great thanks to Claire Spangler for her voluminous support while writing this text and the joy she constantly shares. The author also owes thanks to Gabriel Delsol and Roberto Breitman for their adroit insights on the intersection of technology and governance. The author is grateful to Hannah Marshall and Arushi Garg for their feedback on the early concept of this piece.

The author deeply appreciates the support of the Centro Regional de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and the facilitation of this collaboration by Fernando Lozano and Miriam García. The fieldwork upon which this research is based would not have been possible without the support of Loraine Gelsthorpe, the University of Cambridge Institute of Criminology, Christ's College Cambridge, and Mary Franklin-Brown.

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Executive Summary

If improperly implemented, new digital migration management systems can foster the development of opportunistic economies that capitalize on both the protracted waiting periods that people on the move face and the information precarity that they experience in transit. The digitalization of migration management strategies often correlates with technical glitches and opaque selection mechanisms, thereby creating a specialized body of expert knowledge required to successfully navigate such systems. This knowledge allows some individuals to capitalize off the difficulties many people on the move face navigating new digital tools by offering their 'expert services' in incipient opportunistic economies.

Despite the lauded infallibility of the algorithms driving digital migration management tools, refocusing on a user-centric approach to the experience of individuals using these tools illustrates the failures of the assumed neutrality of technology. The enforced waiting periods and in-built randomness intended to confer greater equality in these bureaucratic tools may allow actors in opportunistic economies to profit off of the lost time and delayed life projects that the users of these digital policy tools experience. Given the importance of time for people on the move and the costs associated with waylaid journeys and enforced stagnancy, people frequently hope that purchasing services from opportunistic economies will speed up their interactions with digital migration management tools. For newly implemented digital migration management tools to serve as part of a growing Digital Public Infrastructure and provide transferable benefits for digital governance in other contexts, government actors would be wise to consider how the timeliness of digital systems influences the propensity for their intended users to participate in these systems.

This analysis roots itself in the socio-legal examination of individuals' experiences purchasing migration-related services from service providers in the opportunistic economy while navigating migration policy instruments. The findings of this analysis hold relevance for all types of digital pre-border processing systems, ranging from asylum to labour migration instruments. This research culminates in the development of clear criteria by which policymakers can counteract the emergence of illicit economies based on their migration systems, with benefits both for users navigating these systems and for states seeking to achieve the uniform and non-discriminatory implementation of their migration policies.

Keywords: *Digitalization; Digital Borders; Digital Governance; Waiting; Temporal Borders; Information Precarity; Illicit Economies; Asylum; Digital Public Infrastructure; Biometric Data.*

Introduction: Analyzing the Intersection of Digital Migration Management and Opportunistic Economies from a User's Perspective

Digitalizing migration management presents government actors with the alluring idea of radically expanding border policy apparatuses without incurring the costs associated with hiring the personnel traditionally needed to staff mammoth bureaucracies. While the advancing progress of digitalization is in many ways inevitable, the rise of digital borders means that now many people on the move carry borders in their pockets, contained within a small square app on their phones. Inefficiencies

in these digital migration tools open the door for the emergence of opportunistic economies that exploit slow digital processes and opaque selection mechanisms, meriting consideration during the design phase of digital migration tools before their widespread implementation. If people are to use new digital systems, government actors must ensure that such tools are attune to their intended users' specific needs and challenges. These digital tools must emphasize equitability and expediency, so that opportunistic economies do not turn digital migration policy tools into a pay-to-play system.

The primary way in which government actors can design digital migration management tools that do not create new opportunistic economies is to approach these tools in a user-centric manner that is responsive to the context-specific dynamics where they intend to implement these digital tools and the unique needs of the populations they target. Government actors contemplating new digital strategies for migration management can take warning from the way in which the implementation of the CBP One™ by the United States targeted at people on the move through Mexico engendered the appearance of opportunistic economies that profit off the long waiting times, frequent errors, veiled operating logic, and lack of effective redress experienced by people using this new digital tool. Designers of digital migration policies and platforms in Europe and across the entire Prague Process region – far beyond North America – will benefit by learning from these failures.

The primary way in which government actors can design digital migration management tools that do not create new opportunistic economies is to approach these tools in a user-centric manner that is responsive to the context-specific dynamics where they intend to implement these digital tools and the unique needs of the populations they target.

This article, based on fieldwork with people on the move in four migrant shelters in the Mexico City area conducted between August 2023 and March 2024, **provides a theoretical context for understanding the digitalization of migration management and the way in which individuals' time lost using such digital tools should be understood as a form of violence**. After defining 'opportunistic economies', analyzing the example of the CBP One™ app's implementation illustrates how opportunistic economies emerge, how errors reinforce the strength of such opportunistic economies, and how the design of tools such as the CBP One™ app allows alternative authorities to benefit from purported specialized knowledge. Drawing from these examples, the article concludes with ten criteria that empower government actors to proactively design their digital migration management tools in a way that adopts a user-centric approach and impedes the emergence of opportunistic economies.

1. Digital Migration Management and Border Bureaucracies

From delivering more rapid status determinations to streamlining the costs of colossal bureaucracies and algorithmically-guaranteeing unbiased selection mechanisms, even a cursory glance at the ever-accelerating tempo of migration governance's digitalization appears to offer tangible benefits to both the state governments implementing innovative migration governance tools and the people on the move using these new digital policy instruments.

Two decades ago, scholars began predicting that the same potential governments first saw in New Public Management's promises of increased efficiency and reduced costs would naturally progress to imbue those same hopes in digitalization. These initial predictions, while recognizing the uncertainties and disruptive potential of digital governance, remained hopeful, with aspirations that the impending the rise of digitalization "...holds out the promise of a potential transition to a more genuinely integrated, agile, and holistic government...".[1] The logic behind such ambitions for digital governance lay in its forecasted potential to simplify people's interactions with complicated bureaucratic institutions, automate and expedite many routine government services, engender more rapid governmental adaptation to better reflect changing realities on the ground, and endow people with greater individual agency to access state resolutions to their personal problems. However, upon reviewing more than twenty years of examples from the digitalization of government services, government actors would be wise to eschew the rose-coloured glasses of techno-optimism when considering the ancillary effects enacted by digital migration management tools. Failure to do so will diminish state authority and give rise to the emergence of opportunistic economies that capitalize on digital migration tools' inefficient and opaque implementation.

Digital Public Infrastructure for Migration

The platforms and tools used to deliver digital migration governance constitute a part of an emerging Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), which is best understood as the digital networks that enable people to interact with other people, businesses, and their governments. Although DPI itself is not digital governance, the building blocks that DPI provides support the realization of digital governance. Much as physical infrastructures expedite the circulation of goods and people, **DPI represents the underlying digital systems that expedite the provision of "essential, society-wide functions and services in the public and private sectors"**.[2] The United Nations Development Programme lists DPI as an enabler of governance and a key facilitator of governance's digital transformation.[3] Commonly referenced forms of DPI include platforms that enable unique digital identity, the storage and transfer of data, and digital payments. The components of migration governance that hold the greatest

potential to contribute to DPI are the digital identities of people on the move when accessing migration tools and the way in which government actors store and transfer data related to their migration procedures.

Understanding digital migration governance as a component of this emerging digital public infrastructure allows us to recognize the benefit of investing in the development of digital tools that quicky and equitably deliver services to people on the move. Outsourcing the facilitation of digital migration governance to third-party vendors in the private sector risks creating market distortions by concentrating power into the hands of a few dominant vendors, both reducing these actors' accountability to data protection standards and curtailing governments' abilities to regulate these actors.[4] Rather than adopting a siloed approach that would develop distinct digital tools to connect labour migrants and asylum seekers with members of the state administration and mediate their ability to cross borders, with duplicative costs and varying levels of efficacy, **treating digital migration governance as DPI allows us to envision a shared set of transparent and accountable digital platforms that safely expedite these migration-related interactions between individuals and state governments**.

When reviewing the potential of DPI, a Brookings Institution working paper by Priya Vora and Jonathan Dolan found that governments often focus too much on the broad potential of digital governance and overlook its impact on individuals.[5] They also found a pervasive lack of existing indicators for official redressal systems to allow individuals to contest and seek resolutions to potential problems tied to the implementation of digital governance policies.[6] **Given that people using digital migration tools are often not citizens of the nations whose tools they access, they may experience severely restricted access to legal recourse, emphasizing the need for standardized and effective redressal systems as a part of any migration-related DPI**. As Vora and Dolan explain, "Digital services and the infrastructure that enable them must be understood as offering new choices and new capabilities. But their presence, no matter how well designed, does not guarantee positive outcomes".[7]

> **Emphasizing the principles of user-centricity, privacy, and inclusivity in the creation of migration-related DPI would provide a foundation upon which government actors could build new tools to deliver positive outcomes for people on the move.**

Emphasizing the principles of user-centricity, privacy, and inclusivity in the creation of migration-related DPI would provide a foundation upon which government actors could build new tools to deliver positive outcomes for people on the move. When discussing priorities for digital governance, the OECD recommends that government actors consider adopting "a user-centric approach in the design and delivery of government services".[8] The European Union's eGovernment Benchmark also identifies user-centricity as one of the key dimensions for evaluating the success of nations' digital transitions.[9] Careful attention to the modalities of data collection at the design stage would also allow government actors to ensure that digital migration management tools "embed values of privacy by design, inclusivity, and security into the technology", as prioritized in the Indian government's Digital Public Infrastructure Approach.[10] A key prerequisite for establishing the equitable function of digital migration management tools is therefore the inclusive participation of the populations that these tools seek to serve in developing grievance redressal tools, a point highlighted by the nascent United Nations DPI Safeguards initiative.[11] Without such in-built ability of target populations to address the shortcomings of newly implemented digital migration management tools and rapidly receive remedies for their failures, digital tools risk accelerating the proliferation of 'digital borders'.

The Rise of 'Digital Borders'

Digital borders expand the idea of a border beyond the physical demarcation of sovereign territory to now also include the digital processes dictating both **who** can and cannot move across such borders, and **when** they can do so. Digital borders operate as a power relationship, determining whose mobility and whose time is valuable, and mediating the experiences and trajectories of all people on the move.[12] Combining the capacities of a wide range of technological advances, including video surveillance, drones, thermal cameras, social media monitoring, biometric technologies such as fingerprint and facial recognition, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, among others, **digital borders endow states with a heightened level of discretion to selectively determine who can access their territory through regular migration pathways**. While these technologies alone do not create borders, they operate within broader socio-political frameworks to decide whose mobility and entrance is in the interest of the societies they encircle.[13] By operating at a distance, digital borders also enable states to simultaneously ignore the costly task of addressing underlying catalysts for people's displacement while also avoiding the humanitarian obligation to support global displaced populations. In the labour migration space, digital borders selectively enable the mobility of a small subset of the total population of would-be migrant workers whose skills meet domestic shortages and whose financial resources ensure they would never require state support.

> **By operating at a distance, digital borders also enable states to simultaneously ignore the costly task of addressing underlying catalysts for people's displacement while also avoiding the humanitarian obligation to support global displaced populations.**

The Collection of Migration Data as an Enabler of Algorithmic Violence

Any effort to digitalize migration management techniques transforms migrants' lives and movements into empirical datasets that become targets for new policies to act upon – numbers that policies can reduce and flows that policies can quell – rendering migration data a key policy objective. The collection of migration data through digital

means therefore not only results from policy decisions, but also cocreates **new policies of surveillance and control that understand migrants' movements as predictable, actionable and preventable**. The collectors and cataloguers of migration data abound, extending beyond government actors to also include humanitarian organizations, tech start-ups, and private industries that people on the move purchase services from. Even when government actors themselves do not collect certain types of data due to regulatory restrictions, such data is available for purchase from private data brokers, exemplified by the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol purchasing "commercial telemetry data for the purpose of identifying irregular travel patterns".[14] Enumerating anticipated migratory movements intersects with the introduction of biometric border control technologies to inhibit individuals' movements before they ever depart.

The converging forces of fingerprint databases, retinal scanning, voice and face recognition technology, and the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning result in a critical mass of **biometric data related to migration. Amassed on server racks in cloud computing facilities, this biometric data and its constantly evolving interactions with new technologies are part of an effort to make the individual fit neatly into complex migration policy systems**.[15] The collection of biometric data radically expanded in recent years based on government bureaucracies' and private companies' increasing reliance on it to create a unique identity for the people they serve.



The volcano Iztaccíhuatl rises in the background behind the neighborhood where one of the migrant shelters sits.

Often, the spaces migrants occupy serve as testing grounds and migrants themselves as guinea pigs for the implementation of new and experimental uses of biometric technologies.[16] As early as 2002, the UNHCR began using iris recognition technology in an effort to prevent Afghan refugees from receiving multiple servings of aid, ignoring the potential for false matches in the identification system to entirely prevent people from receiving the aid they need.[17] Current reporting indicates the interest of the United States Office of Biometric Identity Management in expanding the collection of biometric data from migrant children younger than 14 to develop data sets to train artificial intelligence models that support its newly implemented craniofacial structural progression initiative.[18] The correlation between the collection of biometric data and the reliance of digital migration management systems on biometrics is not a spurious relationship. **The lack of clear guidance delimiting permissible uses for migrants' collected biometric data and absence of strong firewalls preventing its transfer and repurposing creates enormous potential for the function creep of biometric data collected through digital migration tools**.[19] Privacy and data ownership are too often treated as secondary in the interest of systematizing and automating the processing of people on the move's biometric data to fit the needs of new digital migration management tools.

Although some migrant data collection may exhibit constructive goals, such as expediting the adjudication of final status determinations, critical data studies elucidates that the conversion of people into data points is not benign. The systematic classification and categorization of people based on select features of their identity markers counterproductively reduces the nuance of their experiences and enables algorithmic violence. As explained by London School of Economics Professors Lilie Chouliaraki and Myria Georgiou, "...datafied systems of border control condense the migrant as a person into one category or the 'other' of a rigid binary of 'risky' or 'safe,' while rendering their origins, biographical narratives, and personal trajectories irrelevant to decision-making".[20] Algorithmic violence occurs through the collection of biometric data en masse even before any data is processed through potentially biased algorithms, illustrating the power hierarchies that skew data's eventual processing.[21] Distinct from the violence involved in the forced cataloguing of fingerprints, digital migration management tools risk engendering a different form of violence into the data infrastructure by **offloading the data collection process to migrants themselves and creating the potential for opportunistic actors to profit off the difficulty individuals experience making their lives machine-readable**.

2. Time as Violence: How technology enables temporal borders and forced immobility

It is impossible to understand how people will react to the implementation of digital migration management instruments without understanding how these tools impact the time of migration journeys. The time that people invest in submitting documents and awaiting responses through these systems influences whether intended users choose to use or avoid them. Opposed to the rapid and decisive violent acts involved

in forced displacement and border pushbacks, the stagnancy and ambiguity of waiting periods enforced by digital migration management tools is a form of 'slow violence'.[22] This slow violence arises from the inefficiency of digital migration systems, affecting all individuals who use them. The unique individual circumstances of people on the move makes the damage of this slow, systematic violence more acute for people who possess limited financial resources or whose journeys occur under conditions of heightened urgency.[23] Research on carceral geography illustrates that a state of imprisonment can occur both physically and temporally. **People relying on digital migration tools may feel like their time is being held hostage, limiting their ability to realize their life projects**.[24] The subjective experience of waiting influences perceived duration, thereby creating the potential for individuals' awareness of their own wasted time to exacerbate the violence enacted by inefficient digital migration tools.[25] By looking at how digital migration management tools affect their users' time, policymakers can understand both why users will react to the implementation of these new technologies in diverse ways, and how to reduce the potential for opportunistic economies to capitalize on such reactions.

The unique individual circumstances of people on the move makes the damage of this slow, systematic violence more acute for people who possess limited financial resources or whose journeys occur under conditions of heightened urgency.

Although individuals' specific temporal experiences relate to the unique circumstances of their migration, the thread uniting all of these times of migration is the capacity for border bureaucracies to artificially extend periods of uncertainty, precarity, insecurity, and ambiguity.[26] While crossing a border for some people occurs in a fleeting few seconds of pressing a passport to an electronic scanner, crossing that same border for others results in years of immigration detention. Stockholm University anthropologist Shahram Khosravi describes this disparity as 'racial time', arising from bureaucratic bordering mechanisms under which subsets of the broader global population are "subject to differential inclusion not only spatially but also temporally through keeping them in a prolonged period of waiting, constantly delaying them, postponing their arrival and future plans".[27] **The affective process of waiting that Khosravi references is precisely what gives rise to opportunistic economies wherein actors profit off of individuals' desire to reduce their required wait times and expedite their experiences navigating digital migration management tools**.

Waiting transpires as both **a temporal** and a **spatial process**. While many people wait for status determinations within host countries, digital migration management tools create the potential to create spatial 'waiting rooms' outside of states' sovereign territory. Bordering practices that rely on the containment of global migrant populations through **the externalization of migration management and regional protection programs perpetuate the lengthy in-betweenness and liminality of migration journeys**.[28] Such exclusionary policies enable governments to selectively filter migrant populations forced to wait within third countries and construct a false dichotomy that valorizes waiting patiently. Only those 'legitimate' migrants who endure the long waiting periods and whose skillsets are deemed economically expedient or who are offered the boon of humanitarian resettlement can enter a country. Those who do not wait and seek to enter by alternative means and claim asylum are deemed 'illegitimate'. In the context of asylum and humanitarian protection, the spatial element of this false dichotomy enables states to maintain physical manifestation of a state of exception. States can avoid accountability for the derivations from rule of law arising from the bureaucratic failures and technical errors that result in long waiting periods, given how states assume no responsibility for providing official recourse channels or error resolution systems for individuals contained outside of their territory.[29] However, akin to inland immigration detention, **offshoring long periods of waiting does not entirely prevent migration into states**; instead, it acts as a violent hurdle that will deter some people on the move but that others with sufficient resources and perseverance to endure will eventually overcome — at the cost of their time.

Waiting Creates 'Temporal Borders'

The price for territorial access that waiting exacts from people on the move is their lost time, conveying an inherent power imbalance related to who is forced to pay. Political scientists Brett Neilson and Sandro Mezzadra assert that "the deployment of technologies of temporal delay and filtering has become central to the spatial functioning of many of the world's most contested borders", resulting in the construction of what they term 'temporal borders'.[30] **By enforcing prolonged periods of waiting, these temporal borders subordinate individuals to bureaucratic systems that dictate the permissibility of their mobility, but do not allow individuals to challenge the inefficiencies and errors rife within these same systems**.[31]

The way in which waiting delays the realization of life projects for people on the move can be understood as stolen time. The scope of time stolen includes more than the time wasted that could otherwise advance life projects, also encompassing a theft of the time invested in working to earn funds to afford these periods of enforced stagnancy. The time invested in building personal relationships, friendships, and community bonds can similarly be understood as stolen time, for the products of this time spent will dissolve as soon as the waiting ends.[32] Even when in migrant shelters while en route or reception centres while awaiting a status determinations, people describe a feeling of life continuing but not moving forward, as if running in place.[33] University of Bologna Professor Martina Tazzioli advances that **technological solutions to migration policy can act as a carceral mechanisms**, because they not only exert **control over** migrants' time by enforcing waiting periods, but also seek to control migrants' trajectories **through** the reduction of the speed of their journeys and therefore the theft of their time.[34]

By fixing people into a position where they are permanently in transit, people are

forced to confront the decision of aborting their journeys or remaining indefinitely in limbo.[35] **The status of a person 'in transit' both impedes their access to state services in the locations where they wait, and imbues the omnipresent danger of never-ending deportability**.[36] Although speed of processing is clearly possible for those who can afford expensive services such as immigration lawyers and consultants, the only speed experienced by people on the move without significant financial resources is the speed of deportation and removal proceedings that sometimes neglect their right to due process.[37] Opportunistic economies entice their clientele by offering illusory access to the speed usually reserved for a privileged few.

The way in which waiting delays the realization of life projects for people on the move can be understood as stolen time.

3. Opportunistic Economies Created by Digital Migration Management

For people on the move, opportunistic economies capitalize on state inefficiencies, offering both licit and illicit services that hold the promise of more reliably achieving a desired migration outcome and expediting the waiting process involved by more adroitly navigating complex border bureaucracies. Opportunistic economies become especially pernicious when their profits derive from the urgency that people on the move seeking asylum experience. In this way, **opportunistic economies share some similarities to human smuggling service providers; while human smuggling service providers enable individuals with sufficient funds to hire their service to surpass topographic or political obstacles, opportunistic economies purport to allow those with sufficient funds to navigate border bureaucracies more quickly**.[38] This forces people on the move with limited financial resources to engage in an impossible cost calculation. The costs involved in the prolonged waiting arising from temporal borders may be untenable, yet paying exorbitant fees to actors in opportunistic economies offering supposedly expert services is at best a high stakes gamble. Frequently, the services advertised by actors in opportunistic economies have no bearing on the actual speed at which individuals will pass through bureaucratic processes. Independent of the intentions of state actors designing digital migration management tools, the confluence of the temporal borders arising from digital governance tools' inefficiency and the emergence of opportunistic economies creates a filtering mechanism. Only individuals with sufficient financial resources either to endure the costs of waiting for the result of bureaucratic processes or to muster the funds to pay for professional assistance maneuvering through such processes will ever pass through this filter and cross physical borders. The CBP One™ digital migration management tool implemented by the United States government is an example illustrating how opportunistic economies emerge around digital migration management, providing transferable lessons for government actors all over the world contemplating the implementation of such tools. Digital migration management tools must exhibit the ultimate goal of providing a service that streamlines individuals' interactions with state border policies, not erecting a new temporal and financial border.

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CBP One™: Background

First introduced in October of 2020, the CBP One™ initially served as a tool for travelers and goods importers to simplify their experience entering the United States through an official Port of Entry. Implemented in the context of Title 42's absolute restriction of access to asylum during the COVID-19 pandemic and building off the foundation of the Enforcement Integrated Database (EID) that already catalogued data collected through the Migrant Protection Protocols, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security introduced the CBP One™ app on 11 May 2023 as the default pathway through which people on the move without a visa to enter the U.S. could register their desire to enter and request an appointment to pass through one of eight selected Ports of Entry. The CBP One™ app is geo-blocked, so only individuals in the Mexico City region or further north in Mexico can request an appointment. Requesting an appointment through the CBP One™ app holds the promise of offering individuals a set time and location to enter the United States through a regular pathway.

By instituting a bureaucratic system through a digital app to restrict how many people per day can cross the U.S. Southern border, this system filters people and identifies perceived risks before they ever reach the border.[39] Opposed to systems that seek to prevent irregular crossings by using new technology to further securitize borders, CBP One™'s new digital border bureaucracy procedurally restricts asylum access by delimiting full access to the right to claim asylum to the limited number of people who enter with appointments allotted by the app, and punishing those who are unable to or chose not to use this digital system.

Requesting an appointment through the CBP One™ app is not an asylum application, because CBP does not adjudicate asylum claims, but the app mediates access to protection by controlling who will gain the territorial access required to lodge an asylum claim. At the time of fieldwork, crossing into the United States without a CBP One™ appointment could result in removal and a re-entry ban lasting for five or ten years, and could also delay people's ability to apply for employment authorization.[40] Since 4 June 2024, the Executive Order signed by U.S. President Biden enacts a de facto closure of the border and restriction of asylum access to only people who entered the U.S. with a CBP One™ appointment.[41]

The allocation of appointments in the CBP One™ app operates based on a supposedly unbiased and infallible algorithm that randomly selects applicants. According to implementing actors, the time when an appointment is requested, the demographic details of applicants, the port of entry selected, and the type of phone used will not influence the algorithm's likelihood of selecting an applicant. **This represents the techno-solutionist belief that an unbiased algorithm alone will create a fair and just system, ignoring the propensity for such digital migration management tools to engender sociolegal reactions in the populations using them that may result in the rise of opportunistic economies**. Despite the official stance that it is impossible to influence the algorithm to improve one's chances of selection, this algorithm is not publicly viewable.

In its current iteration, a total of 1,450 people who were allotted appointments through the CBP One™ app enter the United States each day, distributed across the eight ports of entry using the system, although these ports of entry are subject to unexpected closures.[42] Beyond access to the asylum system upon entrance to the United States, which is currently restricted for spontaneous arrivals who do not use this digital migration management system, a confirmed appointment through the CBP One™ app offers its users two other key benefits. First, although it is not a travel document, a confirmed appointment is accepted in the place of a travel document to allow people with irregular status in Mexico to board flights and thereby circumvent some of the challenges of the northward journey to the border, if they can afford to purchase plane tickets. Second, entering the United States with a CBP One™ appointment can eventually result in a temporary parole status that enables certain qualifying individuals to apply for employment authorization.[43] Based on discussions with members of the United States Departments of State and Homeland Security, roughly 150,000 people apply for an appointment per day. With only 1,450 appointments allotted daily, this results in a slightly less than 1% likelihood of receiving an appointment for applicants. If applicants request an appointment every single day without fail, officials report an estimated average wait time of three to four months; however, anecdotal evidence from people on the move waiting in shelters in Mexico indicates that some people have waited for their appointments for six or nine months.

CBP One™: Opening the Door for Opportunistic Economies

The entire process of completing relatively straight-forward forms remains rife with questions and anxieties when so much rides on the successful navigation of this digital migration management tool. Figure 1 illustrates these abundant questions arising from users of the digital tool.

Figure 1: The CBP One™ Registration & Request Process

Required Steps	User Questions
1. Create Unique Digital Identity • Create a login.gov account, with an email address and password • Select methods of two-factor authentication	Can you use the same email address you used previously if you had a different account? Can multiple accounts share the same phone number for this two-factor authentication? What if you don't have a phone plan in Mexico?
2. Register All Group Members • Take a photo of your face for biometric verification • Enter personal details such as name, birthdate, country of birth, nationality, country of residence, height, weight, etc. • Enter an unexpired identity document (either by entering this manually or using an artificial intelligence tool to scan a travel document) • Enter the names and nationalities of your parents, if they are alive • Enter the date of entry and exit of every country they "traveled to" in the last year • If traveling in a group, provide this same information for each member to complete the registration	Does the photo need to be in front of a blank wall? In front of a white wall? Should you remove eyeglasses or jewelry to take this photo? How do you make a baby look into the camera for the photo? What if you don't know your weight or height? Can you guess on these details? Is your country of residence where you were living before your departed on your journey? Or is it the country you are in when you are filling out the form? Does scanning a document give you an advantage? What if you don't have a travel document? Is a birth certificate an acceptable document? What if your passport expired but you received an official extension from the consulate? What if your child was born while en route so their identity document is from a different country than yours? Will they take your child away from you? What if your parents are alive but you don't know their full name? Or their personal details? Does it count as traveling to a country if you just passed through? What if you don't know the exact dates? Can you estimate? What if multiple people in the same group traveled through countries on different dates? Would this disqualify your group? Does it benefit you to be in a group? Does the order in which members of a group are registered impact your likelihood of selection? Should children and women be registered first?
3. Provide Arrival Details • Enter an address of where you will stay upon arrival in the United States (it is impossible to request an appointment without providing the address of someone who will receive you) • Enter the contact information of someone living at that address • Optionally, you may enter an emergency contact in the United States • Optionally, you may enter the address where you lived most recently outside of the United States	Does the state where this address is located influence your likelihood of receiving an appointment? Will this person be contacted by CBP? What if they aren't a U.S. Citizen? Would it impact their asylum case? What if this person can't speak English? Does the emergency contact person need to be the same as the person who will receive you? Does the emergency contact person need to be a family member? What does it mean when the form asks for the 'description' of the emergency contact? Does the previous address mean your address in your country of origin? Or your address in Mexico? What happens if you move where you are staying after you make your registration but before you receive an appointment?
4. Request Appointment • Applicants must select one of eight possible ports of entry • Request an appointment every day within a set time period	Are any of the ports of entry better than the others? Will the port of entry you select influence how quickly you will get an appointment? Is there a best time to request an appointment? Will the time when we request an appointment affect our likelihood of receiving one? Does your location when you request an appointment matter? Does being closer to the border increase your likelihood of selection?
5. Confirm Appointment • Once an applicant receives an appointment, which is roughly three weeks in advance, they have 24 hours to confirm the allocated location and time of this appointment through a biometric verification process using the phone's camera	What happens if you cannot confirm the appointment within 24 hours? Do all members of a group need to be together to confirm the appointment? What happens if some members of your group cannot come to the appointment at the border? Can other members of the group still cross if other members are missing?

Actors in opportunistic economies profit off assuaging people's anxieties by purporting to know the answers to all of the questions people have while completing digital migration forms. Once a registration is made, users cannot alter their details, with the app only allowing changes to the port of entry requested. If errors in the registration exist, it is recommended to delete the registration and create a new one. Ostensibly, this is to prevent registrations from being sold between different people, yet the permanence of information entered into form fields imbues an extreme pressure to enter information in the 'correct' manner, further allowing actors in the opportunistic economy to profit off the anxieties surrounding this digital migration management tool.

For people facing with months of waiting, with the duress of this stagnancy amplified by the costs of daily subsistence for the majority of people on the move in Mexico who are without accommodations provided by over-extended shelters, opportunistic economies in Mexico offer the tantalizing hope of being able to trade money for reduced waiting time. While officials from the U.S. Department of State confirmed that how an individual fills out the requisite forms in the CBP One™ app will not influence their likelihood of receiving an appointment, **an intense trepidation surrounding the 'correct' way to complete forms and potential negative repercussions for mistakes made filling out these forms pervades the communities of people navigating digital border bureaucracies**. As a result, actors operating in the illicit opportunistic economy profit off this anxiety and the complexity of digital migration management tools by peddling their services to complete the necessary steps. Whether these actors can provide any material benefit or even offer any meaningful expertise is beside the point – **paying for their services, for those who can afford to do it, provides a sense of confidence in the context of abundant insecurity.**

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Official information campaigns seek to address some of the questions and ambiguities that enable the emergence of opportunistic economies. A page of 'Frequently Asked Questions' available on the CBP website takes the productive step of addressing multiple of the questions outlined above, but it also leaves many more questions unanswered.[44] This information emphasizes that the app is free, and that no one should purchase an account, yet this leaves ambiguity related to service providers in the opportunistic economy who support individuals to create their own accounts. In an official livestream to answer questions about the CBP One™ app hosted at a shelter in Mexico City beneath a covering erected to provide shade for a projector made out of emergency blankets usually used by shelter guests to stay warm when sleeping outside, representatives from the Departments of State and Homeland Security reiterated their position that *"es mejor ser paciente"*, "it is better to be patient".

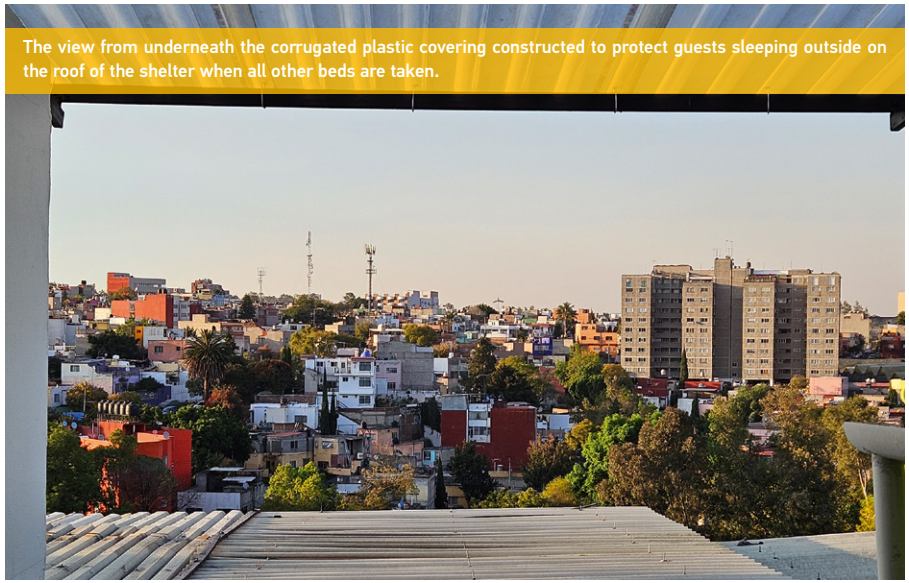
At numerous shelters, the use of the CBP One™ app is pushed on guests constantly and portrayed as the only viable option to enter the Unites States.[45] Following the information session, the app's users in the shelter expressed their frustration. They had forgone the wages from a day's work, and they had not received answers to their most pressing questions: How long must they wait? How is it possible to receive an appointment faster? How could they reduce the amount of time they needed to wait?

Through the CBP One™ digital migration management system, the area extending between Mexico City and the U.S. border is transformed into a waiting room. Past scholarship recognized of countries of asylum as 'waiting rooms' for eventual repatriation when access to permanent refugee solutions were lacking.[46] **In the case of CBP One™, the ability to offload state responsibility to provide for the needs of people seeking asylum was offloaded to the humanitarian sector, with the mantle taken up by already overextended shelters in Mexico**. Such a digital migration management system could not exist without the support shelters provide people on the move. This double-edged sword aligns with migration scholars Anne McNevin and Antje Missbach's description that "the humanitarianisation of waiting makes it harder to disentangle the managerial exercise of migrant care from the more pernicious practices of border security".[47] These shelters not only provide material support in terms of food and accommodation, but also provide services to assist individuals navigate complex border bureaucracies, with some people traveling over long distances and waiting for hours to receive support creating CBP One™ registrations from lawyers and university students volunteering at these shelters. While shelters provide a vital role in ameliorating the living conditions of people on the move, they also risk supporting systems of remote control by acting as a mouthpiece for official state information about the app. This official information may benefit people on the move by cautioning against the opportunistic economy, yet it also is complicit in robbing people's time by encouraging them to use a broken system. The protracted waiting periods enforced by the CBP One™ app resulted in shelters beginning to implement time limits on how long they will support their guests and allow them to remain, in order to make room for new arrivals. One member of the Department of State stated in conversation that "CBP One put Mexico City on the map for migrants", for people expecting long waiting periods could benefit from greater access to work and housing and more civil society organizations.

The protracted waiting periods enforced by the CBP OneTM app resulted in shelters beginning to implement time limits on how long they will support their guests and allow them to remain, in order to make room for new arrivals.

Waiting to see if they received an appointment each day and the daily disappointment of not receiving one reorients people's perception of time and heightens their awareness of time spent waiting. Akin to how research found that individuals in immigration detention sense of time became segmented into times when they were more or less likely to receive news about their status determinations, the repeated experience of not receiving an appointment exacerbates the duress of waiting.[48] This violent theft of time is made more difficult by individuals'

material circumstances, with many individuals sleeping on the street outside of full shelters in the hope that someone might depart and free up space in the shelter. **This painful waiting opens the door for malign actors to exploit these circumstances, with people explaining that sometimes at night people would come and talk to families sleeping outside of a shelter and offer them $20,000 pesos, or $1,176 USD, to buy their children for unknown purposes.**



The view from underneath the corrugated plastic covering constructed to protect guests sleeping outside on the roof of the shelter when all other beds are taken.

Mexican press refers to actors offering services in the opportunistic economy promising to help people on the move secure appointments more quickly as *polleros digitales*, digital smugglers.[49] Some of the actors advertising their services are physically already across the border in the United States, using their territorial presence to attest to their ability to deliver success, and such service providers are therefore only ever contacted through digital means. The going rate for such services promising to *'sacar una cita'* or 'get an appointment' more quickly is between $200 and $300 USD, with lower costs sometimes offered to the co-nationals of service providers, and with people on the move from other nations paying a premium. This premium increases significantly for extracontinental migrants from Asia or Africa, who are perceived to have greater funds due to the costs they have already endured associated with the length of their journeys. Sometimes debt is involved in the purchase of such services, with half of the cost paid up front, and the other half paid upon receipt of an appointment or entrance to the United States. Individuals' receipt of an appointment is likely entirely independent of whether they did or did not pay for support services when requesting an appointment, however the opaque selection mechanisms behind the algorithm that allots daily appointments enables the emergence and flouring of this opportunistic economy.

When people purchase services from actors in the opportunistic economy, they are sometimes sent a *borrador* or a draft form where they delete the example information populating the form and supply their own personal data to enable the creation of an account that corresponds with them. This enables the actor in the opportunistic economy to complete all the requisite forms on that person's behalf. **Despite the geo-blocking and biometric identity verification mechanisms in the app, numerous individuals in multiple shelters in Mexico received appointments with accounts created by actors in this opportunistic economy.** Once a new account is populated with the information they provide, the majority of people will first receive the log in details of their own account, and will then receive a specific time each day when they are recommended to request an appointment and a specific port of entry at which to request an appointment. Other service providers will take care of requesting the appointment each day, claiming that they are able to improve users' selection potential by requesting appointments for them from a computer rather than from a phone. Sufficient examples exist of individuals and groups of up to 30 members observed successfully receiving CBP One™ appointments with accounts created in this way to argue that this opportunistic economy is not purely a scam extracting funds from the misguided. **While it may not hold any power to influence individuals' likelihood of receiving an appointment, this opportunistic economy provides a service for its customers by navigating the bureaucratic forms in the app and registering their accounts.**

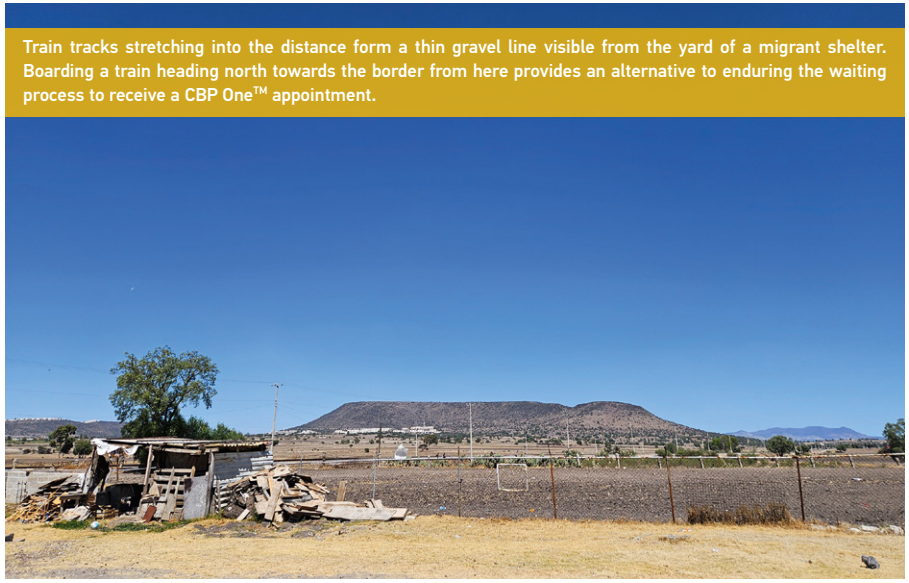
> *Sitting under a corrugated plastic roof at a picnic table perched above the central staircase of a migrant shelter in Mexico City, I spoke with two men who discussed whether or not they should pay for the services of an actor in the opportunistic economy who promised they would receive their appointment if they paid $200 USD each. They discussed how they had been waiting in Mexico for three months already. They understood that there was no guarantee that paying for services in this opportunistic economy would result in receiving an appointment, but,* ***after so much time wasted, the hope imbued in the prospect of paying for a possible advantage in this bureaucratic system could be worth its high cost.*** *Their decision involved not only weighing their time wasted waylaid in Mexico, but also the months of wages that they and their family members had worked to earn that they would invest in the fleeting hope of increasing their likelihood of receiving an appointment to cross the border more quickly. The same decision involves a different calculus for each individual person on the move, due to their unique circumstances.*

While it may not hold any power to influence individuals' likelihood of receiving an appointment, this opportunistic economy provides a service for its customers by navigating the bureaucratic forms in the app and registering their accounts.

The wide variation in the character and delivery of services observed during fieldwork in Mexico illustrates the scale at which border bureaucracies can foster the emergence of migration-related opportunistic economies.

At the since closed migrant bus terminal in Juchitán de Zaragoza on the southern coast of the isthmus of Tehuantepec in the state of Oaxaca, where people arrived after entering Mexico and crossing through the state of Chiapas, a woman sat at a folding table and would make registrations in the CBP One™ app for people as they disembarked for 100 pesos, or roughly $6 USD. People could not yet use these registrations to request an appointment while in Juchitán, due to the geo-block, but she earned a profit by preempting potential competition and due to both her relatively affordable price and her strategic location in the bus terminal. Another woman who had formerly been on the move herself resolved to forgo her journey onward and remain in Mexico City, because her business in this opportunistic economy provided her with enough to live comfortably on and she had branched out to also print people's identity documents and boarding passes. Hovering around the monolithic Instituto Nacional de Migración (National Migration Institute) in the wealthy alcaldía (municipality) of Polanco, migration experts dressed in blazers and pantsuits and armed with clipboards dart through the amassed crowd to locate their clients and whisk them through the doors of the building, profiting in a fully legal manner off both their experience with the complicated apparatus contained within and their personal relationships with the migration bureaucrats inside, often bypassing lines and enjoying a level of benevolently lenient treatment not permitted to others.

These are all examples of opportunistic economies, both licit and illicit, that emerge due to the challenges individuals face navigating the byzantine maze of offices and forms involved in border bureaucracies.



Train tracks stretching into the distance form a thin gravel line visible from the yard of a migrant shelter. Boarding a train heading north towards the border from here provides an alternative to enduring the waiting process to receive a CBP One™ appointment.

4. The Technological Failures of Digital Migration Systems

Digital migration systems fraught with errors and technical glitches invariably extend the amount of time that people on the move spend in transit. The time that people must dedicated to resolving these errors holds their life projects in abeyance, constituting another form of a temporal border.[50] Errors further invalidate and therefore rob the time that people already invested in navigating these bureaucratic forms. Justification for the invasions of personal and biometric data requisite for digital migration management systems to function derive from the logical order and objective decision making that these systems promise to deliver. However, the impact that these errors exert on the lives of people on the move is neither logical nor objective.[51]

Errors consistently confound uses of the CBP One™ app, described by opaque codes such as Error Code 401, 403, 404, 500, and 505. While some of these error codes offer a few words of description, such as 'fraud detected', there is no official guidance on how to resolve these errors, and they are not discussed in the Frequently Asked Questions. If targeted action is not taken to resolve these errors, it could fit what scholars describe as 'governing through disorientation and un-legibility', wherein the constantly changing parameters for using digital migration management systems and the difficulties experience adhering to these systems criteria are intentional methods of containment to restrict people's mobility.[52] Its frequent updates and the propensity for errors to prevent its use makes the experience of people using CBP One™ a cautionary parable for all government actors seeking to implement their own digital migration tools.

Among the many errors in the CBP One™ app, several representative examples demonstrate the disruptive impact of these technical failures. In the absence of official guidance on how to resolve these errors, people who are unable to resolve them independently are forced to seek the services of *polleros digitales* profiting off these errors in the opportunistic economy.

When people create a registration, those who have a valid travel document often use the artificial intelligence camera tool built into the app to scan their document and automatically populate some of their personal information in the form fields. However, upon completing a registration and proceeding to request an appointment, Error Code 500 was observed to appear daily for some people using the app in shelters in Mexico City. The error arose specifically when individuals who had not yet submitted their registration, which would lock in the personal details of all individuals included in the registration, edited the details of a person's registration. This error offered no description of its cause or possible resolution, yet months of observation revealed that the

In the absence of official guidance on how to resolve these errors, people who are unable to resolve them independently are forced to seek the services of polleros digitales profiting off these errors in the opportunistic economy.

scanning tool would complete the "document type" field in the form in a way that was incongruent with the preset options for document types in the app, causing the error when people edited their details before submitting a registration. This discrepancy in the way that the app's artificial intelligence tool populated the form was not immediately visible to the app's users, as it did not leave the form field blank, it instead filled in a document type that initially appeared correct. However, when a registration was edited, this form field's data would revert to a document type that did not match the form's preset options. Were they to know the source of this error, users could easily resolve this error by clicking the form field for "document type" and selecting one of the available options, yet no official guidance on how to resolve this error exists.

Even without error codes, other technical glitches impair some people's ability to equitably access the CBP One™ app. *A man aged roughly 60 years old explained that when he tried to take his photo as is required for the app's biometric identity verification, he was presented with just a camera screen frustratingly reflecting his own image back at him.* Through extended observation, a pattern emerged wherein this glitch was only experienced by people who were nearsighted and therefore used magnified phone screens. The CBP One™ app does not scale its display based on the magnification as other apps do, meaning that the button that users must click to capture an image for biometric identity verification in the app is pushed entirely off the screen when magnified, rendering it impossible to proceed. Given that age is a factor that frequently reduces digital literacy, this glitch perniciously impacts people of advanced age who are more likely to need to magnify their phone screen to see and use their phones, and less likely to know how to troubleshoot digital systems.

The two-factor authentication required to create the login.gov account needed to access the CBP One™ app provides further challenges for people on the move. Although pre-paid SIM cards make it easier for people on the move to gain access to local communication networks when entering a new country, the need to regularly pay to 'top-up' these SIM cards with new funds to continue to maintain access to the app when their phone number is associated with their account and frequency at which phones are targeted in robberies instils an elevated precarity to often already outdated or faulty pieces of technology. As London College of Communications scholar Sara Marino describes when discussing the importance of phones for people on the move, "the reliance on these fragile pieces of engineering adds further vulnerability that in conditions of forced displacement (and particularly during the journey) can be fatal".[53] **Something as small as changing one's phone number can result in losing access to one's CBP One™ registration.** Theft now similarly presents a dual danger, for it not only robs the money invested in a phone and necessitates further funds required to purchase a new phone, but it also robs people's access to request legal entrance to the United States. Given how older accounts are more likely to receive appointments, the theft of a phone also steals the benefit of all the time invested in requesting an appointment with a previous account linked to that SIM card. Importantly, when creating people's registrations can involve significant investment of time and resources, the loss of a registration created with the help of a support source perceived as reliable such as lawyers and volunteers in shelters can create an opening that actors offering digital migration services in the opportunistic economy seek to fill.

Accessing communications infrastructure presents a further obstacle for people on the move. *One family's elation at receiving an appointment to enter the United States quickly turned into panic when they could not use the biometric identity verification in the app to confirm their appointment and worried their allotted 24 hours to confirm it would expire. Only upon being allowed entry to the shelter management's private office and standing next to the WiFi router were they able to confirm their appointment.* Paul Schmitt, Daniel Iland, Elizabeth Belding, and Mariya Zheleva denote that "cellular communication services and infrastructure can be nonexistent in areas where displaced people settle, and where they do exist, they often provide poor service".[54] In shelters in Mexico City, upwards of 130 people may rely on a single WiFi router for digital connectivity. In other shelters, individuals are asked to pay a nominal fee to access the WiFi, while in other shelters the use of mobile phones is not allowed. **The potential for changed phone numbers, stolen phones, and poor communications infrastructure to impair people's ability to access digital migration management tools also strengthens the appeal of services advertised by actors in the opportunistic economy.**

An update to the app in March 2024 added a new restriction that the number of people allowed to request an appointment together in the same group could not exceed 10, and removed all existing groups larger than 10 members. Multiple observed groups of familial units spanning across three generations traveling together lost their registrations and the benefit that their months spent waiting using the same registration that day. While this limit may have been intended to prevent actors in the opportunistic economy from selling membership in large groups, the implementation of this change failed to consider how it would impact people on the move in larger groups using legitimate registrations dating back months. **Fraud prevention efforts in digital migration management should set a goal of ensuring that digital systems already attune to the vulnerabilities people may face function in an equitable way, rather than erecting new barriers to the use of such systems.** If fraud prevention mechanisms result in more errors and the overreaching deletion users accounts, they risk exacerbating the challenges people on the move face by driving people to rely more heavily on unreliable sources of information.

5. Rising Reliance on Unreliable Sources of Information

People on the move can experience difficulties sorting through the abundant rumors and official information campaigns related to the CBP One™ app. Officially, the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) asserts that "each day, CBP One allocates the majority of appointments randomly; the remainder are allocated to the requestors who have been waiting the longest for an appointment".[55] People's experiences,

however, sometimes offer evidence to the contrary, although this is likely coloured by confirmation bias. Some people in shelters who deleted their registrations and created new ones received appointments in a matter of days, leading others to do the same, negating any benefit they may have received from requesting an appointment with older registrations. Describing the entire system, anthropologist Lupe A. Flores writes that "automated inspections and asylum automation represent a digital seismic shift in migration management and border control, where asylum processing is desired to be made efficient in the face of backlogs prompted by failed state policies…".[56] This interest in promoting an efficient system for processing the arrival of people on the move to the United States illustrates the prioritization of whose time is important and valued: the state's efficiently and timely processing of individuals is only made possible by sacrificing the time of those waiting for months to receive an appointment.

The lack of transparency involved in the selection mechanisms behind digital migration management tools such as CBP One™ and the errors and glitches users experience allow for alternative 'authorities' to emerge. These authorities arise from the paucity of reliable sources and the complicated information environment that people on the move traverse, with people often experiencing acute information precarity.[57] This information precarity fosters an environment where rumors abound and the dearth of official information often makes the verification of such rumors impossible. Many of these alternative authorities are not malicious actors, and are instead fellow people on the move who are sharing the limited information they have with the intent that others may benefit from any advantage it provides, without themselves knowing that they are unintentionally spreading misinformation.

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Each CBP One™ registration is assigned a unique numerical identifier, seemingly sequentially assigned, which people have begun to use as a way to compare when they created their registrations relative to one another. Facebook groups exist where people share these numbers and search for the solace found in solidarity with other people who created registrations during the same approximate timeframe and have similarly not yet received an appointment, assuaging fears that some incorrect completion of forms or technical glitch is specifically precluding them from receiving an appointment. TikTok and Instagram videos similarly provide platforms for people to share their experiences and advice with others regarding how to expedite processing times when using the CBP One™. The online communities that emerge around topics such as strategies for reducing wait times using digital migration management systems also provide spaces where actors in opportunistic economies can identify possible clients and advertise their services. **These actors provide information that responds to specific questions and anxieties with an air of authority that people experiencing information precarity crave**, capitalizing on the failure of state actors to provide clear guidance that responds to the demonstrated needs of people on the move, thereby fostering the emergence of opportunistic economies.

6. Criteria to Counteract the Emergence of Opportunistic Economies

Delivering the intended benefits of digital migration management systems necessitates addressing the unintended consequences that arise from the realities of their implementation. Such a productive approach to digital migration governance begins with adopting a self-reflexive stance that does not prioritize its techno-optimistic intentions. Instead, government actors must take a user-centric approach and interrogate how the data they collect impacts people on the move, and if such data collection is even required. Likewise, government actors would be wise to evaluate if their digital migration management tools may increase the time that people on the move spend waiting in transit, and the sociolegal reactions that such enforced waiting may encourage people to take. Decreasing the potential for human-error and subjective decision making cannot come at the price of expanding the power of opportunistic economies. For digital migration management tools to serve as a functional step towards ordering and simplifying complex border bureaucracies, their design should devote attention to incentivize their widespread uptake among the populations they aim to serve.

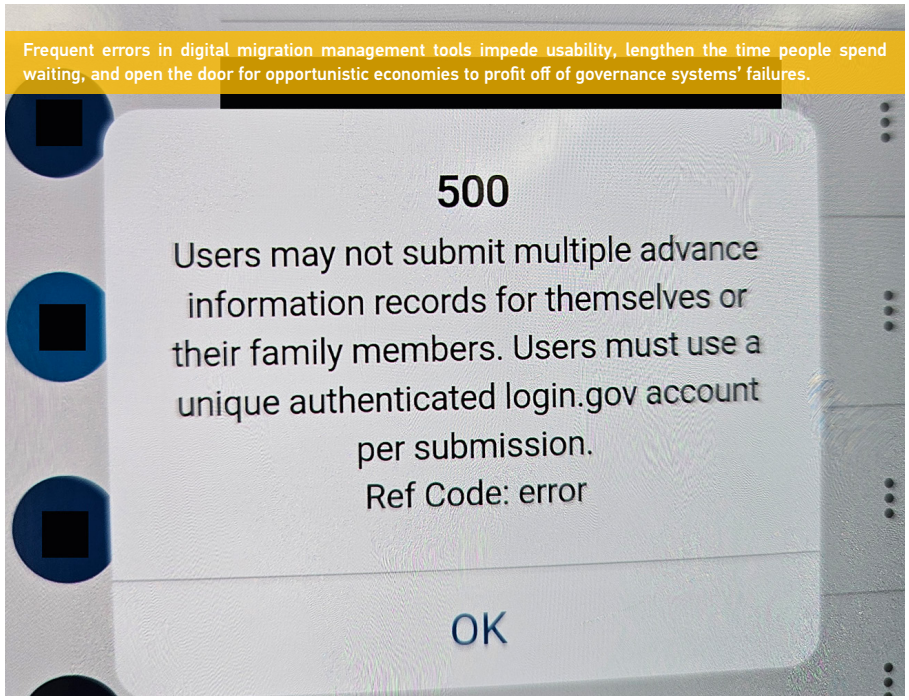
While digital technologies are praised as providing enhanced protection for people on the move through a unique digital identity and reducing the bureaucratic burdens on aid workers and state institutions, they also risk transforming people on the move into a problem to tackle, a mass to control.[58] To avoid this pitfall, state actors must reject the assumed neutrality of technology, given the significant potential for both the structure of digital migration management tools and the algorithms that run them to unintentionally exhibit bias against some people on the move and favoritism towards others.[59] Technologies' subjectivities therefore stem from deficiencies in their design processes, with their political motivations and biases shrouded behind algorithms constructed as 'objective'. Rather than assuming that technological solutions to migration are equitable due to the lack of flesh and blood subjective decision makers, understanding how these digital tools intersect with dynamics such as the timing of migration journeys is vital to their successful design and implementation.

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For digital migration policy tools to successfully deliver on their promised potential, policymakers must remain attentive to the socio-legal impacts they enact on the people on the move navigating these complex digital policy landscapes. Conceptualizing nascent digital migration management tools as part of a burgeoning Digital Public Infrastructure highlights the necessity of investing in the creation of a strong foundation today, a foundation that future digital migration tools can build on to

sidestep potential challenges by functioning equitably and expediently. These modular technological tools should not be seen as self-contained solutions to governance challenges such as migration; instead, digital migration management tools must be accompanied by efforts to deliver unencumbered accessibility, rapid error remedies, and reliable instructions for their use. The designers of digital migration management systems must address the inbuilt inefficiencies that provide ample breeding ground for actors in the opportunistic economy to exploit. By addressing the unsustainable waiting times and bureaucratic hurdles that exist in early manifestations of digital migration management systems, government actors will benefit by developing modular pieces of Digital Public Infrastructure for implementation in a wide range of contexts as the digitalization of governance continues that are insulated against the opportunistic economies.

To prevent the emergence of opportunistic economies, digital migration governance should incentivize uptake by working expediently and equitably, allow for more efficient interactions with government services, and offer inclusive redressal systems.



Frequent errors in digital migration management tools impede usability, lengthen the time people spend waiting, and open the door for opportunistic economies to profit off of governance systems' failures.

In the interest of achieving these goals, the following ten criteria outline considerations recommended for government actors to evaluate digital migration management systems they hope to implement:

1. **The selection mechanisms that underpin digital migration management systems must be transparent and easily viewable to a non-expert audience.** This includes ensuring that the algorithms that process the data from digital migration management systems' users can be accessed by the general public. This obligation is elevated for systems that purport random selection, such as visa lotteries or the allocation of border crossing appointments.

2. **Digital migration management systems must be robustly tested prior to public implementation to detect and remove potential errors and glitches.** This testing must be attuned to the wide range of potential uses and misuses arising from the different contexts of these systems' users for it to be sufficiently comprehensive. The testing of digital migration management systems and artificial intelligence models involved in these systems should neither occur via experts in a controlled environment, nor should this testing be contracted to third parties. Testing must involve the direct participation of a diverse and representative sample of the population that new digital migration management tools seek to serve, for this inclusive testing is requisite for tools equitable implementation. Transparency in the design of testing processes will allow academic and civil society oversight without engendering the market distortions that could arise from third-party testing.

3. **Digital migration management systems must be accessible to all potential users and remove barriers to access.** This would include acuity to how documentation requirements would impede the access of people who lack official identification or people with expired documentation. Resolution mechanisms must also be included for populations who cannot access digital migration management tools due to a lack of wireless communication infrastructure or insufficient funds for personal cellular devices. Special consideration must be made to ensuring the accessibility of populations that may face reduced digital literacy or access, including unaccompanied minors and elderly populations. Such considerations must include providing non-digital alternative methods of accessing the same migration policy tools that are widely accessible and provide equal selection potential to digital tools.

4. **Responsive and rapid means of answering questions, receiving technical support, reporting errors, and resolving glitches must be built-in to any digital migration management system.** This must extend beyond informational pamphlets, videos, and websites such as Frequently Asked Question pages to also encompass redress mechanisms that respond directly to the unique challenges that users experience. Redress mechanisms must provide all users with the ability to appeal decisions that they believe digital systems incorrectly adjudicated.

5. **Only data that is necessary for the specific purpose of digital migration management systems should be collected.** This includes interrogating the extent to which biometric data collection is necessary. High levels of data protection must be guaranteed for any data to be collected and processed to guard

against potential unauthorized access and hacking. For the collection of data that is deemed requisite, consent forms and data ownership cannot serve as a rubberstamp for users' meaningful control and autonomy over collected data.

6. **Data collected for digital migration management systems must include concrete safeguards that prevent its interoperability and function creep, such as firewalls and proactive deletion policies.** These safeguards are necessary to ensuring that the masses of data collected are not used for purposes to which the original users that submitted them did not consent.

7. **Novel and untested technologies must not be tested on populations that have no alternative but to accept their use.** This includes using newly developed digital tools to analyze the biometric data submitted by the users of digital migration management systems.

8. **Fraud prevention cannot come at the price of reducing access to humanitarian protection.** Any time that fraud prevention systems are implemented in a context where users are refugees or may seek asylum, there must be a higher bar for the deletion and blocking of users' profiles. Any action that restricts users access to humanitarian protection cannot be automated and must involve expert human review.

9. **Data collected from digital migration management systems cannot be used to train Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning models for the purposes of predicting migratory movements or adjudicating status determinations.** In this epoch of expanding computational power, this concrete commitment against training AI and ML models with the data of people on the move takes an important step towards preventing algorithmic violence. No data from migrant children should be used for the training of AI and ML models, regardless of the models' intended purposes.

10. **All data from individuals using digital migration management systems must be deleted within a reasonable timeframe after their participation in the system has ended.** This requires that once individuals' applications are processed and requests are completed through digital migration systems, personal data will not indefinitely remain banked in databases for potential future access and use. Mechanisms must exist that enable individuals to request information regarding what personal information of theirs was collected, how it was stored, the duration for which it was stored, and who had access to it while it was stored.

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AI and the Future of Legal Labour Migration Pathways

Policy Brief

Glen Hodgson

October 2026

Executive summary

Europe's ageing population, skills shortages and economic restructuring are increasing demand for legal labour migration, while migration administrations face pressure to process applications efficiently and fairly. Artificial intelligence (AI) can help streamline visa processing, improve skills matching, detect fraud and strengthen labour market forecasting, making migration pathways faster and more responsive to economic needs.

AI should, however, support rather than replace human decision-making in labour migration management. Its use must address risks around bias, transparency, accountability, data protection and fundamental rights. Effective adoption therefore requires robust human oversight and governance, ensuring that innovation strengthens economic opportunity, social inclusion and public trust.

Digitalising Labour Migration Governance

Legal labour migration has become an increasingly important policy instrument for addressing Europe's demographic decline and economic challenges[I]. Shrinking working-age populations, rising dependency ratios and persistent labour shortages in both high-skilled and lower-skilled occupations are placing sustained pressure on labour markets[II]. Sectors such as healthcare, construction, manufacturing, agriculture, and information technology increasingly depend on international recruitment. Many labour migration systems, however, continue to rely on administrative processes that struggle to keep pace with rising application volumes and increasingly complex migration patterns. Employers frequently encounter lengthy work permit procedures that delay recruitment and increase operation costs[III]. Prospective migrants face extended visa processing times, fragmented administrative requirements and inconsistent recognition of foreign qualifications, while public administrations must manage growing caseloads with finite financial and human resources. These challenges create bottlenecks that reduce administrative efficiency while diminishing the attractiveness and predictability of legal migration pathways.

In response, governments are accelerating the digital transformation of migration administration[IV]. Online application portals, interoperable databases, electronic identity systems and digital case management platforms are increasingly replacing paper-based administrative processes. These technologies improve accessibility and service delivery by enabling applicants to submit documentation electronically, reducing duplication of administrative tasks and facilitating information sharing across government agencies.

Artificial intelligence represents the next stage of this transformation. Unlike earlier waves of digitalisation, which primarily focused on converting analogue procedures into digital workflows, AI introduces analytical capabilities that can actively support administrative decision-making. AI-enabled systems can identify incomplete applications, verify documentation, flag inconsistencies for review and match applicants' skills with labour market needs and employer requirements[V]. Machine learning[1] can also assist in detecting document fraud, suspicious employment histories, fraudulent job offers and potential abuse of sponsorship schemes, while digital identity management and biometric verification enhance both security and identity assurance. Machine learning, natural language processing, and predictive analytics also enable migration authorities to process large volumes of information more efficiently[VI], identify patterns that would otherwise remain undetected and allocate administrative resources according to operational priorities. Used appropriately, these technologies can reduce administrative burdens, enable caseworkers to focus on more complex cases and help make legal migration systems more responsive, secure and accessible. The central policy question is no longer whether AI will be used, but how governments can integrate it in ways that improve administrative performance while safeguarding transparency, accountability and fundamental rights.

Unlike earlier waves of digitalisation, which primarily focused on converting analogue procedures into digital workflows, AI introduces analytical capabilities that can actively support administrative decision-making.

Core Applications of AI in Labour Migration Governance

AI is already being applied across several stages of labour migration administration. Its principal value lies in supporting public authorities with high-volume, data-intensive and repetitive tasks while allowing officials to concentrate on cases requiring legal interpretation, contextual assessment and professional judgement. The main applications can be grouped into four areas: application processing and case triage; document verification, fraud detection and compliance monitoring; consistency in routine administration; and labour market matching and strategic workforce planning.

Application Processing and Case Triage

One of the most established uses of AI involves the screening, categorisation and verification of visa and work permit applications[VII]. Automated systems can verify

1 Machine learning is a branch inside AI focused on building algorithms that study past data to make predictions on new data.

whether applications are complete, identify missing information, perform basic eligibility checks and assign files to appropriate processing streams. Risk-based triage allows straightforward applications to proceed more rapidly while referring complex or potentially problematic cases for enhanced human review. This helps migration authorities move away from uniform, first-come, first-served processing towards a more differentiated model in which administrative resources are allocated according to the complexity and risk profile of each case.

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Canada provides one of the most advanced examples. As part of its 2026 AI Strategy, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC)[VIII] uses machine learning to triage incoming work permits, automate high-volume client inquiries (handling over 4 million emails annually), and run the Integrity Trends Analysis Tool to identify low-risk, highly compliant work permit applicants suitable for expedited processing. Crucially, Canada's official IRCC AI Strategy prohibits AI systems from issuing rejections or denying entry. Where anomalies or uncertainties are identified, cases are automatically routed to a human caseworker for independent review. As a result, administrative tasks like generating an Acknowledgement of Receipt (AOR) have dropped from weeks to under 48 hours. Furthermore, by bulk-sorting routine, low-risk corporate tech talent into fast-tracks lines, human officers cleared years-old application backlogs. By restricting AI to positive actions (approving/triaging) while reserving negative actions (refusals) exclusively for humans, the threat of algorithms denying justice without human oversight is effectively eliminated.

Germany has adopted a similar decision-support model. Following reforms associated with the Skilled Immigration Act[IX] and the introduction of the Federal Foreign Office's Consular Services Portal, which allows applicants for work, study, training and family reunification visas worldwide to submit applications online, Germany has begun integrating AI into migration administration as a decision-support tool to assist caseworkers with pre-screening for visa applications, fraud detection and security screening. Importantly, the related policy, approved in November 2025[X], explicitly frames AI as a mechanism supporting – not replacing – administrative judgement, illustrating a model that combines technological innovation with meaningful human oversight.

Immigration New Zealand has similarly used automated business rules and risk-profiling systems to separate low-risk applications from those requiring more detailed scrutiny[XI]. The straightforward applications are processed via an automated stream that verifies identity and basic thresholds against domestic systems. As a result, border and immigration staff are freed from manual data entry and basic rule validation, allowing them to shift operational focus toward active workplace exploitation investigations and complex cases.

Document Verification, Fraud Detection and Compliance Monitoring

Migration authorities process large volumes of unstructured documentation, including employment contracts, financial records, identity documents and educational qualifications. Reviewing this material manually is time-consuming and can create significant administrative bottlenecks.

Intelligent Document Processing (IDP) AI combines Optical Character Recognition (OCR) with Natural Language Processing (NLP) to extract relevant information and automatically populate government database. Machine learning can also support forgery detection. Such systems analyse uploaded PDFs and images at the pixel level and instantly detect digital manipulation such as altered text or photos, identify mismatched metadata, and cross-reference digital signatures against known registries of trusted issuers and cross-check information against multiple government and international databases.

Several countries are already applying AI in this area. The Netherlands employs specialised machine learning to detect identity and supporting document fraud, scanning for altered text, manipulated digital seals, and mismatched optical patterns[XII]. Germany's digital residence permit system similarly combines biometric identity management with secure digital identity functions that reduce repetitive document verification and improve access to public services[XIII].

AI is increasingly supporting employer compliance and labour inspection as well. The UK Home Office – through the Skilled Worker Compliance & Border System – deploys advanced automated matching and computer vision systems to detect employer compliance fraud and validate applicant claims[XIV]. For Skilled Worker visas, the AI constantly analyses tax records, educational certifications, and business payroll histories to identify mismatches, such as inflated salaries used to circumvent immigration rules. Rather than replacing Home Office investigators, AI flags high-risk cases for human review, enabling compliance officers to target likely violations instead of conducting random, time-consuming corporate audits. By integrating cross-agency data from Immigration, Tax and Corporate Registries, the system strengthens fraud detection, protects local wages, and enables legitimate businesses to onboard international talent quickly.

Similarly, Albania's Matrix of Intelligence and Risk Assessment, developed with support from the International Labour Organization[XV], uses data mining and machine learning to identify companies employing foreign workers that may be violating labour standards or wage regulations.

Consistency in Routine Administrative Processing

AI can enhance consistency by applying the same pre-defined criteria across large numbers of cases. Routine checks carried out manually may vary because of workload, fatigue or differences in interpretation between officials, while AI operates with

identical cognitive capacity regardless of time, volume, or stress. This way AI decision-support systems help reduce variations arising from individual interpretation or administrative discretion.

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Australia provides a recent example. In March 2026, the Department of Home Affairs launched an upgraded visa processing system across core categories, including skilled worker visas[XVI]. The platform utilises AI-based document scanning and automated financial verification to strip away human discretion from basic threshold processing. Applications are passed through uniform digital screening layers. If an application matches every parameter of a strict "decision-ready" checklist, it bypasses human-induced bottlenecks. This ensures identical compliance metrics are applied to every skilled applicant, removing the risk that a human officer might misinterpret complex international financial declarations.

Such systems are most appropriate where administrative requirements are objective and clearly defined. They should standardise routine procedural checks rather than replace professional judgement in cases requiring legal interpretation or consideration of exceptional circumstances.

Labour Market Matching and Strategic Workforce Planning

One of the most significant opportunities presented by AI lies in strengthening the relationship between migration policy and labour market demand. Traditional labour migration systems often rely on shortage occupation lists and labour market assessments that are updated periodically (every 12 to 24 months), meaning that policy decisions and immigration quotas may lag behind rapidly changing economic conditions. By integrating migration data with labour market information, employment trends, demographic projections and online recruitment data, AI can provide governments with a more dynamic understanding of workforce needs.

AI can also improve the matching of migrant skills with employer demand. Rather than relying solely on occupational titles or formal qualifications, machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) can analyse underlying skills, competencies and work experience to identify suitable candidates. AI models continuously scrape data from millions of sources, including online job boards, corporate hiring portals, and professional networks, and analyses the text to understand the exact technologies, certifications, and experience levels employers are actively searching for. This enables governments and employers to recruit more efficiently while overcoming differences in occupational terminology and qualification systems across countries.

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Estonia illustrates how AI can support labour market management more broadly. Machine learning algorithms are used to profile employment candidates, predict declining job sectors, and successfully match foreign workers and job seekers with employers based on their work history and skills[XVII]. The AI-powered OTT system analyses real-time client histories, education, professional skills, and historical labour data to identify individuals – including legally residing foreigners – at risk of prolonged unemployment and recommend targeted reskilling[XVIII]. Rather than forcing administrative counsellors to manually sift through thousands of resumes to assess market viability, OTT instantly identifies high-risk candidates. This allows the government to proactively target resources where they prevent employment deficits, saving millions of Euros by shortening average unemployment cycles. Furthermore, Estonia uses Bürokratt[XIX] – an interoperable network of AI virtual assistants connected directly to Estonia's secure state databases via Large Language Models and Retrieval-Augmented Generation[2] – to provide information to migrants or local employers about highly technical migration thresholds, salary requirements, or permit statuses. Bürokratt pulls accurate, real-time answers directly from the appropriate agency's database without requiring manual human data searches. The system addresses up to 80% of routine public inquiries, freeing up human civil servants to act as high-level experts on complex edge-cases and investigative immigration files.

The UAE Federal Authority for Identity, Citizenship, Customs and Port Security, alongside the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, launched a comprehensive AI and robotics-based work permit screening system[XX]. The platform is directly integrated with live labour market data. When an employer files a request for an international hire, the AI instantly evaluates the candidate's professional skills, educational level, and localised experience against immediate shortages in the UAE economy. The benefit is that applicants are matched with active industry requirements in real-time, reducing processing times while filtering out applications that do not align with current strategic economic goals.

Similarly, Finland's Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment has built an AI-driven, algorithmic national data platform – "Job Market Finland" (Työmarkkinatori) Ecosystem[XXI] – designed to bridge domestic labour shortfalls with external talent pools. The platform uses advanced NLP to break down resumes and job vacancies into "skills vectors" rather than job titles. If an engineering firm in one city posts a job specifying obscure software competencies, the AI scans international applicant databases to find individuals with those exact skills, regardless of whether their formal foreign job title matches. The benefit is that this AI system eliminates the "translation barrier" of foreign diplomas and titles, mapping skills directly to open, real-time geographic deficits in the Finnish economy.

2 Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) is a method where AI searches for relevant information before answering a question. It helps the AI give more accurate and up-to-date answers by using information from documents, databases, or other sources.

Beyond individual recruitment decisions, AI can support more strategic workforce planning by forecasting future labour demand across sectors and regions, identifying emerging occupational shortages, informing admission planning and quota allocation, and monitoring labour market outcomes. Together, these capabilities could facilitate a shift from reactive migration management toward more proactive and coordinated labour market planning. Predictive models should nevertheless inform rather than determine policy, since labour markets are shaped by complex social and economic factors that may not be fully captured by available data.

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Governing the Risks of AI in Labour Migration

The growing use of AI in labour migration administration offers significant opportunities to improve efficiency, strengthen labour market matching and enhance the integrity of legal migration systems. However, these benefits are not without risk. Because migration decisions directly affect individuals' access to employment, residence and economic opportunity, AI must be deployed within governance frameworks that ensure fairness, accountability, transparency and respect for fundamental rights. The challenge is not simply technological, but institutional: ensuring that AI strengthens legal labour migration without weakening procedural safeguards, public trust or the underlying objectives of migration policy.

Fairness, Bias and Equal Treatment

AI systems are only as reliable as the data, assumptions and processes used to develop them. If historical patterns of discrimination or unequal access are embedded within training data, automated systems may reproduce or even amplify these biases[XXII]. In labour migration contexts, this could result in certain groups being disadvantaged based on factors such as nationality, educational background, employment history, language ability or other characteristics that may indirectly correlate with protected attributes. Automated filtering systems could make decisions that appear neutral while reinforcing existing inequalities.

These risks are particularly significant in migration administration because automated classifications can shape individuals' migration pathways and determine their eligibility for specific procedures, permits or labour market opportunities. Bias may also be difficult to detect where it emerges cumulatively across large numbers of apparently routine decisions or through variables that indirectly act as proxies for protected characteristics.

Transparency, Rights and Trust

AI can make migration administration less transparent where systems operate through complex or opaque models whose outputs are difficult for applicants, officials or oversight bodies to understand. This creates particular concerns where automated recommendations influence decisions affecting legal status, employment or access to rights. Applicants may struggle to understand why they were flagged or treated differently, while officials themselves may be unable to explain the basis of an automated recommendation.

Such opacity can weaken procedural fairness and public trust. The legitimacy of legal migration systems depends not only on the accuracy of outcomes, but also on whether administrative decisions can be understood, challenged and defended. The use of AI therefore raises important questions about explainability, access to review and the ability of public authorities to remain accountable for decisions supported by increasingly complex technologies.

Human Oversight and Accountability

Human oversight represents one of the most important safeguards in AI-enabled labour migration systems. Three broad models of human involvement can be identified:

- **Human-in-the-loop** systems require human officials to make final decisions while AI provides recommendations or analytical support.
- **Human-on-the-loop** systems allow automated processes to operate while human supervisors monitor outcomes and intervene when necessary.
- **Human-out-of-the-loop** systems involve fully automated decision-making with minimal or no human involvement.

For labour migration governance, fully automated decision-making is particularly problematic where decisions involve refusals, eligibility assessments, appeals or exceptional circumstances. Such cases may require consideration of incomplete information, individual circumstances and contextual factors that cannot easily be reduced to predefined data points. There is also a risk of automation bias, whereby officials place excessive confidence in algorithmic recommendations because they appear objective or technically authoritative.

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Most current applications therefore operate through hybrid models in which AI organises information, identifies patterns, assesses risk or prioritises cases while officials retain responsibility for consequential decisions. The central governance challenge is to ensure that the introduction of AI does not gradually weaken human judgement or blur responsibility for administrative decisions.

Preserving the Purpose of Legal Labour Migration

AI also raises broader policy questions concerning the purpose of labour migration governance. More efficient legal migration pathways can strengthen the attractiveness of regular migration channels by reducing delays, simplifying procedures and improving predictability for both employers and migrants. Better functioning legal pathways may therefore reduce incentives to seek irregular alternatives while improving protection against exploitation through the identification of fraudulent recruitment practices, sponsorship abuse and other forms of labour market misconduct.

At the same time, governments should avoid allowing technologies developed to facilitate legal labour migration to evolve into broader surveillance or migration enforcement tools. Systems originally designed to support labour market matching, document verification or employer compliance may gradually be repurposed for wider migration-control objectives. Excessive emphasis on risk detection and enforcement could blur the distinction between facilitating lawful labour mobility and controlling irregular migration, potentially undermining the economic and developmental objectives of labour migration policy. Maintaining clear governance boundaries will therefore be essential. Labour migration policies should remain focused on facilitating lawful mobility and addressing labour market needs rather than becoming primarily enforcement-oriented.

Policy Priorities for Responsible AI Adoption

Realising the benefits of AI while managing its risks requires a proportionate approach that links the level of safeguards and oversight to the potential impact of each application. For European countries, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)[XXIII] and the EU Artificial Intelligence Act[XXIV] provide an important regulatory foundation for responsible AI deployment, including requirements relating to personal data, risk management, documentation, transparency and human oversight. Regulatory compliance alone, however, cannot guarantee responsible AI. Effective implementation requires strong institutions and operational safeguards tailored to the specific characteristics of labour migration administration.

Five priorities are particularly important: proportionate deployment; human accountability; transparency and independent oversight; high-quality data and interoperable digital infrastructure; and institutional capacity and cooperation.

1. Apply AI Proportionately to Risk

AI deployment should follow a gradual, risk-based approach. Governments can begin with administrative functions where AI can generate substantial efficiency gains without directly determining individual rights, such as document processing, application completeness checks, appointment scheduling, information provision and labour market analysis. More complex decision-support functions should be introduced progressively and only where their benefits, risks and institutional requirements have been adequately assessed. Functions affecting migration eligibility, legal status, fraud determinations or access to rights require substantially stronger safeguards. Formally, all AI software utilised in border control, visa triaging, risk-profiling, and workplace recruitment should be classified as 'High-Risk' systems. Governments should therefore establish clear risk classifications for AI used in migration administration, consistent with applicable regulatory frameworks such as the EU Artificial Intelligence Act. The greater the potential impact on individuals, the stronger the requirements for human review, documentation, testing and oversight.

Governments should therefore establish clear risk classifications for AI used in migration administration, consistent with applicable regulatory frameworks such as the EU Artificial Intelligence Act.

2. Preserve Human Responsibility for Consequential Decisions

AI should support rather than replace human judgement in decisions with significant consequences for individuals or employers. Visa refusals, findings of fraud, permit revocations and employer sanctions should require determination by qualified officials who have genuine authority to question and override automated recommendations. Clear lines of responsibility should ensure that accountability for public decisions always remains with competent public authority.

Meaningful oversight also requires institutional capacity. Migration officials should receive training in AI literacy, algorithmic bias and automation bias so that they can critically evaluate automated outputs rather than treating them as inherently authoritative.

3. Require Transparency, Auditability and Independent Oversight

AI systems used in migration administration should be sufficiently transparent to permit meaningful scrutiny, particularly where their outputs may affect individual rights. Authorities should avoid systems whose outputs cannot be adequately explained, particularly in high-impact applications. Uninterpretable 'black-box' deep learning models have no place in public law, where transparency and the right to appeal are fundamental. Any AI decision-support system used by immigration authorities must generate a clear, natural-language log detailing exactly which variables led to a specific risk tiering or flag.

Operational safeguards should include impact assessments before deployment, regular audits of accuracy and bias, and continuous monitoring for unintended consequences. Governments should monitor indicators such as error rates, human override rates and system performance over time. Independent evaluation can help identify emerging problems while strengthening institutional accountability and public confidence.

Transparency requirements should also extend to technology providers. Public authorities should require sufficient access to information about system design, data use and performance to fulfil their own legal and administrative responsibilities and ensure that innovation strengthens rather than undermines equal access to legal migration pathways.

4. Invest in High-Quality Data and Interoperable Digital Infrastructure

AI systems depend fundamentally on the quality, accessibility and reliability of the data supporting them. Governments should invest in accurate, representative and regularly updated datasets, supported by robust privacy, security and data-governance standards. Representative data are particularly important to reducing the risk that AI systems reproduce existing inequalities or systematically disadvantage particular groups.

Greater interoperability between migration authorities, labour market institutions and other relevant public administrations can reduce duplication and enable more efficient verification. Secure connections between immigration systems, tax administrations, employer registries and qualification databases can, for example, allow authorities to verify salary thresholds, employment relationships and employer status without repeatedly requiring applicants to provide information already held by government.

At the same time, governments should modernise the data infrastructure used to identify labour market needs. Policies should shift from traditional migration systems that rely on slow, bureaucratic updates toward dynamic data infrastructure. National employment and migration platforms should therefore move progressively beyond rigid occupational classifications and keyword-based matching towards skills-based and semantic matching, enabling systems to identify international talent according to underlying competencies and transferable skills rather than formal job titles alone.

Together, interoperable administrative systems and more dynamic labour market data can help create legal migration systems that are faster, more predictable and more responsive to economic needs, while maintaining appropriate data-protection and security safeguards.

5. Build Institutional Capacity and Cooperation

Responsible AI adoption is an institutional rather than purely technological challenge. Governments need officials capable of procuring, evaluating and overseeing AI systems, supported by governance structures that clearly assign responsibility throughout their lifecycle.

Responsible AI adoption is an institutional rather than purely technological challenge.

Not every government needs to develop sophisticated or bespoke AI systems independently. Countries with limited financial or technical capacity can adopt tested solutions progressively, supported by regional cooperation, shared digital infrastructure and technical assistance from international organisations. Cooperation between migration authorities, labour market institutions, employers, technology providers and civil society can further facilitate common standards, access to expertise and the exchange of good practices.

Ultimately, responsible AI adoption should be judged not by the sophistication or extent of automation, but by whether it improves the performance of legal migration systems while preserving fairness, accountability and equal access.

Conclusions

AI is beginning to change the way legal labour migration systems operate. Its most immediate value lies in strengthening administrative capacity: processing routine information more efficiently, identifying cases requiring closer scrutiny, supporting document verification and compliance monitoring, and enabling more dynamic matching between migrant skills and labour market demand. Experience across different countries suggests that these technologies can help reduce administrative bottlenecks and allow officials to concentrate their expertise on complex cases requiring contextual assessment and professional judgement.

The longer-term significance of AI, however, extends beyond administrative efficiency. Better integration of migration and labour market data could enable governments to move from migration systems that respond retrospectively to labour shortages towards systems that anticipate changing workforce needs and connect international talent with demand more dynamically. This potential is particularly important as demographic pressures intensify and competition for workers increases. AI should nevertheless inform rather than determine migration and labour market policy: economic conditions are complex, data are imperfect, and individual skills and circumstances cannot always be captured adequately through automated models.

The benefits of AI will therefore depend on how it is governed. Systems affecting migration status, access to employment or allegations of fraud require particularly strong safeguards. Human officials should remain responsible for consequential decisions and must have the authority and capacity to challenge automated recommendations. Transparency, accessible review mechanisms, impact assessments, independent audits and continuous monitoring are necessary to protect against bias and maintain public trust. Equally important is maintaining a clear boundary between the use of AI to facilitate legal labour migration and its use for broader migration surveillance or enforcement.

Successful adoption will also depend on institutional and digital foundations. Governments need high-quality data, interoperable administrative systems and officials capable of procuring, evaluating and overseeing AI technologies. Countries with more limited technical or financial resources need not replicate sophisticated

systems developed elsewhere; tested solutions, regional cooperation, shared infrastructure and international technical assistance can support gradual adoption. European regulatory frameworks, notably the GDPR and EU Artificial Intelligence Act, provide an important foundation, but regulation must be translated into effective administrative practice.

Ultimately, AI should be treated as an instrument of administrative modernisation rather than an objective in itself. Its success should not be measured by the number of decisions automated or the sophistication of the technology deployed, but by whether it makes legal migration more efficient, responsive, accessible and trustworthy. The policy objective should be a system in which technology strengthens administrative capacity and labour market responsiveness while human institutions retain responsibility for judgement, accountability and the protection of rights.

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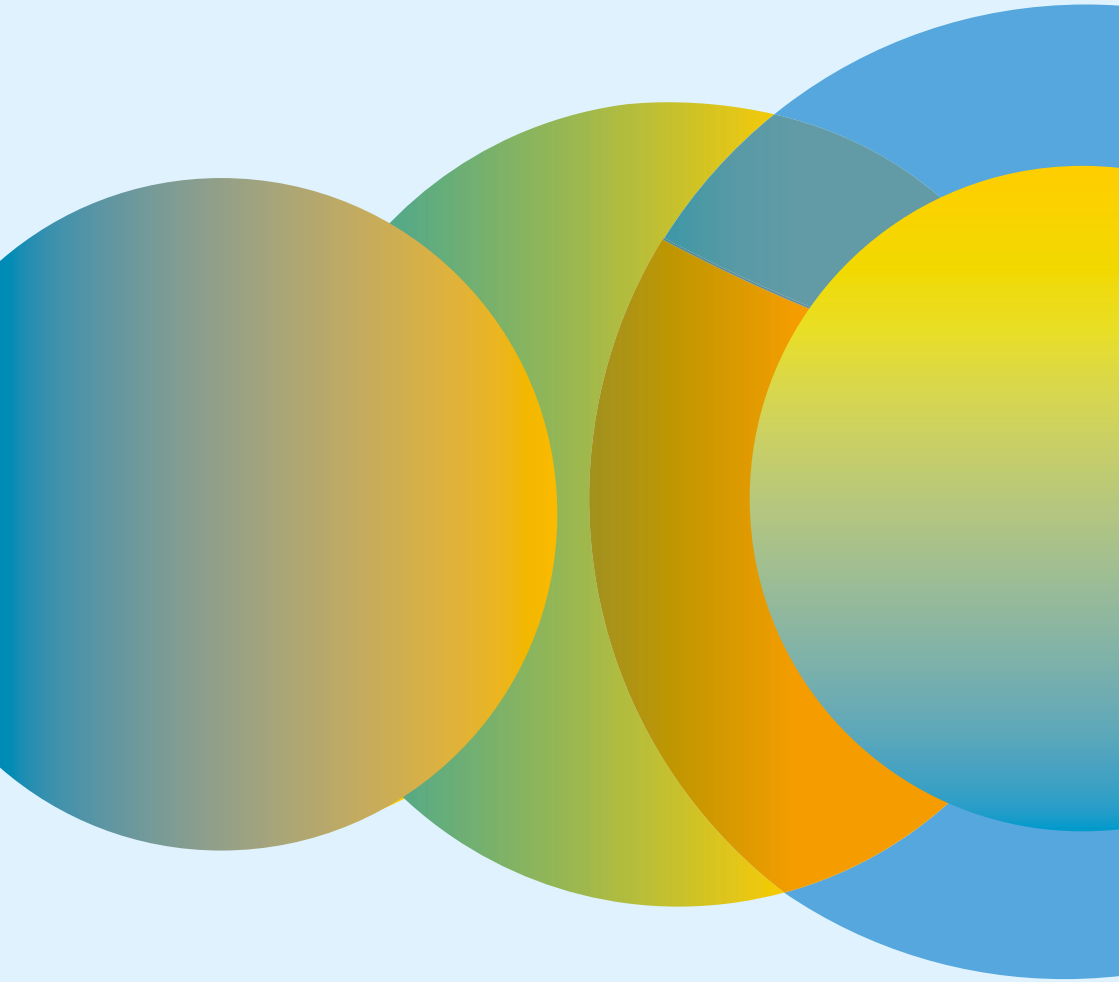
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