



POLICY BRIEF

AI and the Future of Legal Labour Migration Pathways

Glen Hodgson

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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 challengesⁱ. 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 marketsⁱⁱ. 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 costsⁱⁱⁱ. 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 learning¹ 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.

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

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

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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 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.

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

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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.

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.

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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.

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^{xx} – an interoperable network of AI virtual assistants connected directly to Estonia's secure state databases via Large Language Models and Retrieval-Augmented Generation² – 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 Emiratization, 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} –

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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.

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.

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.

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^{xvii}. 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.

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.

There is also a risk of automation bias, whereby officials place excessive confidence in algorithmic recommendations because they appear objective or technically authoritative.



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.

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.

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.

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.

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



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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Contact Information

Prague Process Secretariat
International Centre for Migration
Policy Development (ICMPD)
Rothschildplatz 4,
A-1020 Vienna
Austria
www.pragueprocess.eu



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