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## 7 TAKEAWAYS FOR MIGRATION GOVERNANCE IN TURBULENT TIMES

*Takeaways from Vienna Migration Conference 2022, ICMPD's annual flagship event, held 11-12 October 2022.*

2022 has proven to be a turbulent year for Europe and the world alike: new and persisting conflicts, large-scale displacement, natural disasters linked to climate change, rising living costs, acute labour shortages, and an economic slowdown, all amid continued consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February has underscored our global interconnectedness, with the repercussions of events in Eastern Europe felt in parts of the world far removed from the battlespace. Russia's military aggression has not only caused the displacement of millions of people – the fastest and largest displacement in Europe since World War II – but it has also had global political and economic consequences. These dynamics will no doubt influence migration flows in the days, weeks, and months ahead.

Much has been said about the numerous and complex challenges we find ourselves faced with, but perhaps less attention has been paid to the bright spots in this difficult year. In Europe, these include EU cooperation to put a halt to Belarus' engineering of migration for geopolitical aims, as well as the first-ever activation of the Temporary Protection Directive, which has provided millions of people fleeing Ukraine with immediate access to protection, key integration-related services, and employment eligibility. Against this backdrop, negotiations on the New Pact should reflect and take into account the lessons learned from the Ukraine response.

ICMPD's Vienna Migration Conference 2022 (VMC2022) featured two days of intensive and wide-ranging discussions exploring new and old factors shaping the movement of people and how policymakers and other actors could respond. Below are 7 takeaways from the discussions that we found particularly insightful.

### **Rapid responses and holistic approaches reduce risks for vulnerable groups.**

While the world may face shared and interconnected challenges, their severity and impact can differ significantly. In the context of climate change, regions and countries that have contributed relatively little to carbon emissions find themselves bearing a disproportionate

brunt of the consequences. At a more granular level, vulnerable groups have become even more at risk in the context of climate change and other challenges including COVID-19, inflation, and conflict.

The displacement of people heightens the risks of human trafficking and exploitation to which vulnerable people are exposed. Yet human trafficking is typically not granted the attention it deserves and should be prioritised more highly by governments. However, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, effective and holistic approaches to fight human trafficking have emerged. For instance, Moldova initiated a three-pillar approach to reduce the risk of human trafficking among displaced persons: prevention mechanisms, effective and accessible reporting instruments, and events that foster dialogue, trust, and engagement among local communities. This prompt and resolute approach, prioritising the fight against human trafficking, has been essential in mitigating risks in Europe – as seen by the relatively low number of trafficking victims. In the long term, education, labour market opportunities, healthcare, and long-term counselling should be put front and centre in efforts to support vulnerable individuals.

The conflict in Ukraine stands out as a unique situation – not only with regard to the human trafficking response, but also the willingness of countries and publics to receive Ukrainians and provide immediate access to work and services for those fleeing the war. Remarkably, nine months into the conflict, public acceptance remains relatively high. Temporary protection provisions, in providing legal status, access to the formal labour market, and mobility rights, make this group less vulnerable to human trafficking and other abuses compared to other displaced populations. This should provide food for thought when responding to other emergencies.

### **Balancing competing priorities remains difficult but essential.**

Large-scale displacement from Ukraine changed the starting point for dialogue on migration in the EU, as Member States in Central and Eastern Europe play a more important role than ever. Recognising the valuable role of EU membership in both symbolic and practical ways, Ukraine and Moldova were [granted candidate status](#) in June, four months into the conflict. While much attention has understandably been paid to the accession of these countries, it is important not to neglect the prospects of Western Balkan countries, who have long waited to join the bloc. In fact, the EU stands to gain more influence in the Western Balkans if it focuses more determinedly on the integration of countries in the region.

At the same time, Pakistan, Türkiye, and other countries that have long hosted sizable refugee populations shared serious concerns that the situation of displaced persons in their countries is untenable, meaning that cooperation and support are critical for meeting immediate needs and improving the situation. Europe would thus be prudent to continue engaging beyond its direct neighbourhood. It is to our collective detriment to only focus on one issue or situation and neglect others; there will always be competing priorities, meaning that balance is key. [Partnerships](#) are the channel through which we can hear others' priorities and address them.

**Global partnership is vital but regional solutions are paramount.**

Ongoing and emerging challenges often extend beyond borders, including (among others) climate change, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling – pointing to the need for continued and strengthened cooperation. Given the severe and interconnected challenges that the world is facing, participants emphasised the importance of international – and particularly regional – cooperation as part of a comprehensive approach. A relevant example is the EU's swift activation of the Temporary Protection Directive as a regional response to large-scale displacement from Ukraine. The United States is also thinking regionally when it comes to migration management, where it is working with other countries in the Americas to respond in a comprehensive manner, including strengthening asylum systems to provide protection along migration routes and promoting circular migration schemes within the region. Meanwhile, Australia is working to provide migration options for those in the region affected by climate change as part of its response to the challenge. And the African Union Commissioner [echoed her predecessor](#), stressing the importance of finding African solutions to African problems, including when it comes to assisting displaced persons on the continent.

Successful policies will always require good regional cooperation and in many cases also good global cooperation.

**Migration policy is not only about responding to crises – it should also be forward looking.**

This year is not the only year in which crises have taken centre stage in conversations on migration – indeed, we often seem to jump from crisis to crisis. In the case of instrumentalisation, it is important to remember that such strategies are not new and we can look to the past to inform effective responses. But this does not mean that migration policy is only reactive; forward-looking approaches are essential. Here, partnerships and dialogue can be helpful in preventing heavy-handed tactics. As stressed already in [VMC2021](#), migration cooperation should be a priority in both times of crisis and stability.

Unfortunately, proactive approaches are often overshadowed by crises (in terms of both time and attention), meaning Europe cannot always stay ahead of the game – as we can see, for instance, with regard to climate change. With the increased intensity and frequency of weather-related disasters as well as slow-onset impacts such as drought, options for adapting are shrinking in many parts of the world, forcing many to instead move out of harm's way. Disasters are already displacing more people within countries than conflicts do. As our knowledge about the connections between climate change and migration advances, so too must our interventions. Efforts are required to scale up adaptation measures and resilience building. In addition, relocation, traditionally and understandably seen as a last resort, might become the only feasible option for a larger group of people.

### **Stepping out of silos is essential.**

The types of multi-faceted challenges and cross-cutting crises the world now faces demand that policymakers adjust their strategies and tools. Migration officials, for one, need to be trained to respond and adapt to rapidly changing events. It is no longer sufficient for interior ministries to operate solely within their traditional remit in a world beset by hybrid conflicts, human trafficking, and climate change. The Ukraine war has compelled Moldovan migration officers, for example, to coordinate more closely with local government officials to develop necessary transportation, medical, and housing infrastructure for refugees. The climate crisis, meanwhile, necessitates increased cooperation between migration and environmental stakeholders focused on anticipating migratory flows – and indeed a whole-of-society approach – bolstering the resilience of vulnerable communities to environmental threats and implementing plans to mitigate displacement and facilitate integration when and where migration and displacement occurs.

From cybersecurity to the instrumentalisation of migrants, there is a growing need for new cross-border and inter-agency arrangements to develop effective responses and strategies.

### **Labour mobility opportunities should be expanded and mutually beneficial.**

Another increasingly visible item on the agenda is the 'global race for talent', particularly in light of acute labour shortages. A [growing number of countries](#) and regions are seeking to attract international workers, and this is expected to intensify in the future. Although the EU and its Member States have initiated various measures and bilateral agreements to attract (highly) skilled workers, to be a successful competitor, it is clear that Europe will have to step up its game. The VMC2022 audience heard from Australia, a country that already ranks highly with regard to talent attraction and is ramping up efforts to attract needed workers.

Interestingly, this frontrunner is not only working to increase permanent migration, where it is prioritising skilled migration in the health and education sectors – but it has also commissioned a review of its migration system and is leveraging innovative approaches such as [refugee labour mobility](#) (otherwise known as ‘complementary pathways’) to expand its pool of talent. Legal pathways are crucial not only for filling vacancies but also for strengthening migration partnerships. For these to be effective, they need to be scaled up to better meet local and global needs and be more beneficial to all parties.

Refugee labour mobility is a perfect example of a pathway that can provide a triple win: Displaced persons earn a living and build a sustainable future; employers and receiving countries benefit from their skills; and host countries reduce the pressure on their systems. There is a need to adapt existing labour migration channels or launch tailored programs that take into account the needs of displaced persons in order to better take advantage of the potential of such pathways. This way, people do not have to choose between talent and vulnerability when looking for a migration pathway.

Another promising approach can be found in Pakistan, where an [Austrian-Pakistani partnership](#) works to strengthen technical education infrastructure so that students graduate with skills that align with labour market needs in the country or elsewhere. A similar strategy could be applied to the healthcare sector, where nursing schools could provide training aimed at preparing people for overseas jobs. Such initiatives would cultivate a pool of skilled labour well suited to labour market demands in Europe and globally, while creating more livelihood opportunities for individuals. Circular migration schemes could enrich the labour force in both origin and destination countries.

### **Communicating honestly with the public is difficult but necessary.**

While migration policy is technical, it is also very political – and this shapes the way it is formed. An underlying theme throughout the VMC2022 discussions was the role that narratives play in shaping public opinion and political room for manoeuvre. Some European governments remain reluctant to engage in a robust debate on migration, largely due to the difficulty of the task and the inevitable pressure from populist parties.

Public support is essential for an effective and sustainable migration policy and should be taken into account when communicating about the issue. However, a secure and robust migration management system can help to win public confidence and create political space for the government to be open regarding, for instance, labour migration.

*You can find the full VMC2022 programme [here](#) and watch all video recordings [here](#).*

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