

06 November 2023

## 5 TAKEAWAYS FOR STRENGTHENING MIGRATION GOVERNANCE FOR THE FUTURE

*Takeaways from Vienna Migration Conference 2023, ICMPD's annual flagship event, held 10-11 October 2023.*

Since last year's Vienna Migration Conference (VMC), multiple new conflicts, coups, and instances of civil unrest have erupted across the globe. This instability joins an already daunting list of challenges – climate change, the rising cost of living, widespread labour shortages, and economic hardship – impacting the movement of people within and across borders. The constantly evolving landscape emphatically underscores the need for [international discussions](#) that assess the current state of migration governance and critically scrutinise where we should go from here.

In this context, the eighth annual VMC took place 10-11 October 2023, gathering key stakeholders from the migration policy community. Discussions centred on pressing topics in migration governance, including how to facilitate safe and regular migration, protect the rights of people on the move at borders, promote labour mobility to address workplace shortages, and build a better future of work together. Throughout the two-day event, an eclectic mix of speakers took stock of the present landscape and shared successful initiatives and ideas for the road ahead. Below are 5 key takeaways from these discussions.

### **Concerted efforts must be made to promote safe migration.**

Facing various pressures, thousands of migrants and refugees risk their lives every year by taking dangerous land and sea migration routes, not least across the Sahara and the Mediterranean. Against this backdrop, border and immigration control agencies must prioritise the safety and security of both their own population *and* people on the move. A consensus indeed prevailed among VMC participants that desired policy solutions securing borders and respecting the human rights of people on the move do not contradict each other. Speakers underscored that effective border management – as with all law enforcement – depends on the trust of people, whether nationals whose borders are concerned or people who cross these borders. Border management that fails to comply with human rights standards is not only a violation of core obligations but could also prove counterproductive as it risks losing public support and confidence.

To safeguard human rights at Europe's international borders, speakers stressed the importance of building sufficient capacity for monitoring bodies to ensure that standard operating procedures are followed in compliance with human rights. When mistakes are made, they should be reported, investigated, and rectified – and above all not concealed.

Errors should also be incorporated into future training regimes to promote best practices and prevent repeated incidents. Ensuring transparency every step of the way, paired with comprehensive monitoring and oversight, is essential to keep mistakes from happening again.

Improving migration governance further requires maintaining dialogue with all countries and relevant stakeholders. More engagement, in fact, may be needed with those sharing different perspectives, even if only to ascertain the source of disagreements. Differences in opinion indeed may stem from a fundamental values divide – or because potential partners lack adequate capacities and resources to fully implement human rights-compliant procedures. The sequencing of activities in support of partners, moreover, is important: Before procuring certain equipment like boats and technology, there must be a commitment and capacity to uphold human rights. The provision of equipment must also be coupled with comprehensive training to ensure responsible and ethical usage. More broadly, a strong framework guiding procedures as well as their monitoring are also key to accountability.

**To build the workforce we need tomorrow, we must start today.**

Current labour shortages, as well as demographic pressures, mean that the need for workers in Europe is set to continue growing. To mitigate this, businesses need strategic and long-term workforce planning – and the same can be said when it comes to governments. Private sector representatives emphasised the need for policymakers to enable employers to hire the workers they need, including those who currently live in other countries.

There are several moving parts for an effective labour migration strategy. Initiatives to match talent with employers are crucial, yet developing the needed skills – and getting them recognised by EU labour markets – are prerequisites to ensuring a pool of talent from which to hire, and this can take time. Meanwhile, neither of these efforts will matter if workers cannot get a visa or work permit, or if procedures take months or even years. Scale is equally important to have a real impact on the job market. Speakers highlighted ways in which current labour migration policies are not always fit for purpose, compounding the challenges for Europe’s attraction and retention of global talent. In addition to long wait times, the conventional labour migration framework is built upon the concept of residence and physical migration for employment purposes and frequently lags behind current developments in the labour market, namely the emergence of non-standard employment arrangements (i.e., remote work, digital nomadism, and hybrid work).

With regard to skills, job seekers must have the skills that are in demand, now and in the future – and here there is more work to be done. Europe should invest in skills, and therefore invest in systems in partner countries, that respond to the needs of labour markets nationally and internationally. Amidst the green transition, newer skills are needed, and migration and mobility can provide opportunities for developing skills in this area. For instance, the circular mobility of people, people, as well as ideas, technologies, and investments, can support the development and application of technical skills in Europe and partner countries. At the same time, skilling should include language training and cultural orientation, enhancing ‘soft’ skills that are also important in the workplace.

## **The EU can help boost the attractiveness of Europe in the race for global talent.**

When it comes to the attraction and retention of international workers, Europe is punching below its weight. In the search for global talent, the EU can bring added value when it comes to the branding and marketing of the region, promoting peer learning, and perhaps even facilitating the intra-EU labour mobility of third-country workers. At the same time, Member States are very much [in the driver's seat](#) when it comes to labour migration pathways and building an enabling environment for international recruitment. Many international workers want access to Europe as a whole – this is a key element setting the region apart from other top economies, although it largely remains behind the frontrunners. To help employers in the EU recruit and retain needed workers, improvements might be made to enable labour migrants to easily move from one Member State to another, whether for in-person or remote work. For instance, the EU can play a role in simplifying the process of moving between countries, so if someone already has a Blue Card, for instance, they do not have to prove again that they are highly skilled.

Many businesses, especially SMEs, are aware of the need to recruit globally, but lack the knowledge and capacity to do so. Supporting them in navigating the migration system will be key, for example, in providing guidance and sharing best practises. This is another instance where the EU could play an important role.

## **There is considerable momentum behind the Pact, while knowing that it is not the end point.**

Much was said about the need for a European approach to migration, and many attendees expressed optimism regarding the recent political agreement on the Pact on Migration and Asylum. At the same time, there is a narrowing window of opportunity to agree to the Pact, given the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024 which will shape the makeup of the new European Commission and its priorities. Some speakers expressed a sense of urgency in light of this deadline, a last chance before reform attempts may otherwise need to start over.

If the Pact is agreed upon, implementation will be crucial. This will be difficult, especially given the complex legal system in which it is situated, necessitating monitoring of its implementation and troubleshooting of hiccups along the way. It will also take a while to see the first results, meaning that managing expectations will be important. Sufficient resources are also a must.

At the same time, it was noted that an agreement on the Pact would be a big step in the right direction, but not the final destination. Talent policy, for example, is an area that must be further explored.

## **We need to communicate (much) better.**

Managing political polarisation within European electorates concerning migration remains a significant challenge to effective migration governance. And speakers observed that the space for dialogue has been shrinking.

In this context, communication is essential, and this is one area in which improvement is sorely needed. As ICMPD's Director General noted, "Our ability to communicate strategically around migration has not seen enough progress. We still do not manage to really explain what we do – and why we do it – to the public, the media, our citizens, and voters. This makes us vulnerable to polarised debates. And it diminishes the space that we need for comprehensive and forward-looking migration policies." It is critical to understand that migration governance cannot advance without securing the approval and backing of our citizens. For instance, to gain public support to recruit more international workers, we must offer greater transparency about the implications of a lack of labour pathways for our economies and welfare systems.

Informing public debate should be high on the agenda – not only because it has a far-reaching impact on other policy areas but also because it is well within our purview to affect it. Insights from the field of psychology can make messaging more effective – underscoring again the need for a multidisciplinary approach to migration.

You can find the full VMC2023 programme [here](#) and watch all video recordings [here](#).

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