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5 takeaways on migration governance in a shifting geopolitical landscape

Takeaways from Vienna Migration Conference 2024, ICMPD's annual flagship event, held 22-23 October 2024.

Against the backdrop of a blockbuster election year - [more than 3 billion voters](#) worldwide headed to the polls in 2024 - migration policy has consistently emerged as a top campaign priority, not least in Europe. Escalating geopolitical turmoil in the neighbourhood has particularly heightened concerns about the ripple effects, including increased migratory flows, into Europe. The displacement of over four million refugees to the EU as a consequence of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the instrumentalisation of migrants at Europe's eastern border are two examples of where this has already occurred. Coupled with growing apprehension about rising living costs, inadequate public services, and socio-economic inequality, migration has become a politically charged and polarising issue. In this context, Europe finds itself navigating a delicate balancing act: imposing more stringent migration restrictions versus embracing greater openness to attract and retain talent in the face of Europe's labour shortages.

The ninth Vienna Migration Conference (VMC2024) provided an opportunity for key experts, decision-makers, and practitioners from the migration policy community to convene for two days of thought-provoking discussions. Conversations addressed the current state of play in migration governance debates and sustainable ways forward on key issues, including access to labour and protection pathways, the management of irregular arrivals, public attitudes towards migration, and the work ahead on implementing the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. Below are 5 key takeaways from these discussions.

Effective migration governance starts along migratory routes

Protracted conflicts and emerging crises worldwide have pushed forced displacement to [record levels](#), with most either internally displaced or seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. Addressing these challenges requires both meeting the protection and livelihood needs of people in countries of origin and first asylum by providing viable alternatives to onward movement, while also facilitating access to safe and regular migration pathways.

Indeed, a ‘route-based-approach’ to migration management calls for a comprehensive framework that invests upstream – along migration routes – in peace and development, protection capacities, and socio-economic conditions of countries of origin, transit, and first asylum. Such an approach can strengthen regional protection and other opportunities for refugees and migrants, as well as host communities alike, while also generating shared responsibility over common migration goals.

In pursuing this approach, multi-purpose hubs that provide various kinds of support and outreach along migration routes have the potential to play a pivotal role. Models such as [Safe Mobility Offices](#), [Centres for Migration and Development](#), and [Migrant Resource Centres](#) in various geographic locations already provide a range of services such as information on access to safe and regular pathways, tailored services to improve preparedness for migration opportunities, and, in some cases, improved reintegration services upon return. Learning from and scaling up existing centres in other regions or routes, or exploring the potential of the Safe Mobility Office model to facilitate access to regular pathways in the European context, would also demonstrate a credible commitment to addressing migration en route.

Migration diplomacy has become more comprehensive, while silos among key actors remain

The challenges both contributing to and arising from migration and displacement are situated within broader geopolitical shifts and tensions, with far-reaching impacts on entire regions rather than individual countries in isolation. Consequently, migration diplomacy has evolved into an integral component of international partnerships, increasingly extending beyond narrow migration objectives to encompass more holistic cooperation aimed at addressing root causes and interconnected issues such as security, peace, development, economy and trade.

At the same time, persistent silos across policy areas – both between and within states – continue to hinder progress to jointly address the challenges and opportunities of migration. Notably, relevant bodies at the national and supranational level are not always present around the negotiating table when establishing these partnerships. For instance, the recently adopted Pact on Migration and Asylum would benefit from an integrated approach that better links the external and internal dimensions of migration policy to one another and to the EU’s broader foreign policy objectives. A whole-of-government approach that involves a variety of state stakeholders is thus critical for fostering constructive and concerted engagement, as well as more effective and sustainable migration governance. The active engagement of non-state actors with the relevant expertise and experience also remains essential.

Labour migration begins in the country of origin

As Europe contends with acute skills shortages in critical industries, the bloc must better compete in the global talent race to meet labour market demands. Cooperation with key source countries for migrant workers to the EU, like Pakistan and Bangladesh, will continue to be instrumental to facilitating labour migration. These countries already invest in equipping their citizens with the necessary resources and skills, aligning education curricula and vocational skills training for recognition, offering pre-departure training, and support services during overseas stays. Such measures are often paired with reintegration services to help workers apply acquired skills in the labour market upon return. These initiatives shed light on the increasingly important and active role that countries of origin play in facilitating labour migration.

Destination countries should also step up their efforts to enable labour mobility. Strengthening support measures for the private sector, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), represents a key opportunity yet to be fully seized, with 75% of SMEs reporting that it is currently [moderately to very difficult](#) to recruit and retain workers. Barriers include insufficient labour pathways, especially for low- and medium-skilled workers, lengthy qualification recognition, and the absence of fast-track visa options for essential roles, exacerbated by complex immigration rules that are hard to understand and navigate. Simplifying and streamlining processes, as well as increasing capacities of SMEs to recruit and integrate migrant workers, would make the EU more attractive to international talent while providing a stronger foundation for scaling up partnerships with countries of origin.

Making the Pact work will require sustained unity across EU institutions and Member States

As the Pact inches closer to becoming an operational reality, implementation is bringing new challenges to the fore. The distinct constitutional, legislative, and parliamentary systems of Member States mean that adopting reforms is far from a straightforward task. Recognising the interdependence of the Pact's core components, achieving a coherent and effective system demands timely and concerted action by all Member States and EU institutions, including EU agencies. This is particularly critical given a resurgence of scepticism among some Member States regarding the viability of the adopted reforms. The ongoing two-year transition period until its application thus offers a decisive window of opportunity to realise and enforce the EU's vision in migration policy.

At the same time, the Pact is *a* solution but not *the* solution. Moving forward, Europe will also continue to look at where migration policy gaps remain and how sustainable responses can be developed via a common approach. One promising avenue is the increasing role of emerging technologies, including AI and big data, in migration governance. While the Pact itself paves the way for more robust and interoperable digital systems, such as Eurodac, to streamline border management, asylum, and return processes, cutting-edge tools offer the potential to go further. Predictive models can help anticipate future migratory movements and crises, enabling countries to better prepare and act. Moreover, algorithmic matching can, among other things, connect jobseekers with employers, facilitate labour mobility, and optimise refugee integration outcomes. While these innovations could enhance the efficiency, accuracy, and fairness of migration policies, their risks and limitations also underscore the continued value of qualitative insights and human decision-making in such processes.

External processing remains on the political agenda despite legal and practical challenges

In recent months, a number of Member States have initiated and urged the EU to continue to explore external processing models, from the ‘safe third country’ approach (reflected in the UK-Rwanda asylum partnership) to extraterritorial asylum processing (as exemplified by the Italy-Albania Memorandum of Understanding) to return hubs. The different models have raised various concerns, including diplomatic, legal, procedural, and practical challenges, and associated costs. At the same time, there is still an overarching consensus on the shortcomings of the EU’s current protection framework and the domestic perceptions it creates – chiefly a loss of a sense of control. There is a pressing need for Member States to find common ground on alternative responses compliant with international and EU law and developed in close cooperation with non-EU partner countries, that builds and invests in capacities along migratory routes and prioritises responsibility-sharing between regions.

The full [VMC2024 programme](#) and all [video recordings](#) are available online.

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