

REPORT

VMC2024

Europe's leading forum on migration

1

Migration governance
in volatile times

2

Operationalisation of the
migration reform agenda

3

Investing in partnerships and
pathways along migration routes



Vienna Migration Conference 2024

Day 1

Tuesday, 22 October 2024

09.30 – 09.50 **Conference opening**

09.50 – 10.30 **Keynote conversation**
The EU's reckoning?
Making sense of times of change and crisis

11.00 – 11.45 **High-level panel**
Ambitious but realistic:
Prospects for taking
migration cooperation
to the next level

11.45 – 12.15 **High-level dialogue**
Towards a route-based
approach to address mixed
movements of refugees
and migrants

12.45 – 13.45 **Side event**
On the brink of a new era:
Navigating the future of tech
in migration

14.00 – 15.10 **Armchair conversation**
In conversation on migration
diplomacy and priorities on
both sides of the Mediterranean

15.30 – 16.30

Panel discussion
The promises of external
processing: Between
assumptions, possibilities,
and practicalities

17.00 – 18.00

Panel discussion
People on the move:
Measures to improve
outreach and support

18.00 – 18.30

Armchair conversation
EU migration policy from
2025: The view from Warsaw

19.15 – 20.45

Side event
Film screening | Town
of Strangers

Day 2

Wednesday, 23 October 2024

09.00 – 09.40

Armchair conversation
Labour migration pathways:
Moving from paper to practice

09.40 – 10.40

Panel discussion
A reality check on labour migration:
Perspectives from the private sector

11.10 – 11.50

Armchair conversation
Ten building blocks for the Pact:
Are we on track for a resourceful
and flexible European migration
system?

11.50 – 12.50

Panel discussion
From policy to practice: Strategic
views on the operationalisation of
the migration reform agenda

12.50 – 13.30

Closing discussion
The next five years: Dealing with
black swans and staying the course

The Vienna Migration Conference is ICMPD's annual flagship event, and its organisation is the sum of efforts by the organisation's best and brightest across teams and locations.

The organisation of the Vienna Migration Conference 2024 was made possible by the support of

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Vienna Migration Conference 2024



Vienna Migration Conference—Europe's leading forum on migration

Once a year, the Vienna Migration Conference provides an indispensable opportunity for thought leaders, decision-makers and frontrunners in the migration sphere to **convene**, **connect** and **engage** in high-level discussions on migration in Europe and beyond.



Welcome

Vienna Migration Conference 2024 (VMC2024) brought together international decision-makers, experts, and practitioners at the Palais Niederösterreich on 22-23 October 2024 against the backdrop of a high-stakes election year, protracted conflicts in the neighbourhood, and heightened geopolitical and socio-economic uncertainty.



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has displaced over four million refugees to the EU, while escalating turmoil in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, along with the instrumentalisation of migrants at Europe's eastern borders, has further intensified concerns over rising displacement. These "black swan" events have reshaped the world, while economic pressures, demographic shifts, and labour shortages have reinforced the need for Europe to strike a balance between migration restrictions and policies that attract and retain global talent.

Migration remains a highly contested policy area, requiring ongoing, structured dialogue to foster progress and build consensus. Every year, VMC serves this purpose as a trusted forum for open and frank exchanges—both on stage and through a dynamic programme of side meetings—where stakeholders engage in critical discussions on migration policy challenges, opportunities, and solutions across countries of origin, transit, and destination along the many routes to Europe.

Now in its ninth edition, ICMPD's flagship event explored how governments can navigate competing

priorities—curbing irregular movements while expanding legal pathways and upholding fundamental human rights. Participants reaffirmed the importance of cross-border partnerships and whole-of-society cooperation in addressing irregular migration at its source, promoting safer alternatives to dangerous journeys, and enhancing integration outcomes for migrants and host communities.

A key theme was the need for early interventions along migratory routes, particularly through route-based approaches that strengthen protection capacities and create economic opportunities in countries of origin, transit, and destination. Labour migration was another focal topic, with experts stressing the need for stronger cooperation between Europe and key origin countries to promote talent partnerships and circular mobility programmes.

The conference also examined the potential role of emerging technologies in enhancing migration management, from AI-driven predictive models to algorithmic job matching, while underscoring the importance of integrating fundamental rights and protection safeguards.



As the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum moves toward implementation, VMC2024 attendees acknowledged both its promise and limitations, calling for greater investment in the EU's return framework, labour mobility partnerships, digital infrastructure, and capacity-building at the national level. Meanwhile, discussions on different external processing models revealed differing perspectives—some viewed these policies as a necessary response to calls for stricter migration controls, while others highlighted the legal, ethical, and practical challenges they pose.

Over two days, VMC2024 featured 32 distinguished speakers across 15 sessions, including high-level panels, expert dialogues, and side events. With more than 300 in-person participants and over 1,500 virtual attendees, the hybrid format facilitated interactive discussions through Slido polls and Q&A sessions. A keynote conversation with Ivan Krastev, permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, set the stage by examining the EU's political dilemmas in an increasingly unstable world, where concerns about security, identity, and governance continue to fuel acrimonious societal debates.

This conference report synthesises the key insights, debates, and good practices from VMC2024, providing a comprehensive overview of the evolving migration governance landscape. The 15 session summaries cover a range of critical topics, from advancing the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum to strengthening labour mobility frameworks and migration diplomacy. Additionally, a key takeaways commentary distils five central themes of the discussions: optimising route-based migration approaches, enhancing the external dimension of migration policy, strengthening labour mobility partnerships, ensuring the EU Pact remains fit for purpose, and addressing public demands for stricter policies while maintaining protection frameworks.

Director General of ICMPD

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Migration Futures Dinner 2024

21 October 2024

Since 2021, the Migration Futures Dinner (MFD), has provided a unique space for high-level stakeholders and decision-makers to engage in candid discussions on migration governance. Held on the eve of the Vienna Migration Conference, this intimate, forward-looking exchange of perspectives contributes to strengthening public policy on migration by identifying recurring and novel challenges, as well as opportunities for cooperative, innovative, and durable solutions.

The fourth edition of MFD addressed how best to navigate a myriad of dilemmas as the EU faces pronounced public pressure to accelerate its implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum. Framing the evening's discussion, Raphaela Schweiger, Director of Migration, Immigration Society, and Global Issues at the Robert Bosch Stiftung, which once again partnered in organising this year's edition, outlined key strategic and policy tensions: What is the appropriate dividing line between migration restrictions and legal pathways? How should policy-makers balance demands for stricter border controls with calls for greater openness toward refugees legitimately fleeing hardship? And what are the most effective policies and timeframes for responding to these challenges?

To explore these pressing questions, the dinner featured an armchair conversation between Ivan Vejvoda, Permanent Fellow and Head of Europe's Futures programme at the Institute for Human Sciences, and Nicole de Moor, Belgian State Secretary for Asylum and Migration. De Moor applauded the EU's collective achievement in securing an agreement on the Pact during the Belgian Council presidency but cautioned that the real test lies ahead in



implementation—where significant hurdles remain. Amid violent conflicts and turmoil in the EU's neighbourhood, climate change, and global socio-economic pressures driving mixed migratory flows, de Moor urged Europe to come to terms with several "inconvenient truths" that have unsettled stakeholders across the political spectrum. For sceptics, this means acknowledging the benefits of migration and recognising that millions of individuals are compelled to seek protection abroad every year due to threats at home. Upholding international legal frameworks that ensure rights-based procedures for returns is also paramount. At the same time, de Moor argued, those who advocate for more open migration policies must also acknowledge the real challenges posed by irregular migration, particularly in light of Europe's persistent shortcomings in effectively managing arrivals. The State Secretary warned that misuse of the asylum system by individuals without legitimate claims risks undermining public support for both migrant workers and refugees.

This friction is especially apparent in the growing strain on European social services—such as reception centres, education, healthcare, and housing—as migration movements continue. While de Moor asserted that Europe's migration system can handle intermittent surges, like the 2015-2016 spike that soon after subsided, she observed that the new normal is one of sustained high arrivals, stretching resources to the limit. Though these challenges are not insurmountable, she emphasised the need to shift migration governance away from an emergency crisis response model to a more adaptive system responsive to ongoing and long-term trends as well as short-term developments.

While the EU has forged substantial progress on bolstering its migration management framework, de Moor stressed that more needs to be done to

ensure the internal and external dimensions of migration policy act in tandem towards the same goals. Emphasising that “migration management starts where migration starts”, she urged the EU to overcome its reluctance toward prioritising migration in its foreign policy. Stronger international partnerships with origin and transit countries could address the root causes of irregular flows and combat smuggling networks that exploit vulnerable persons. However, for these collaborations to be effective, they must be built on mutual trust, shared interests, and common benefits. Additionally, policymakers must break out of their ministerial silos—cooperation between migration agencies and departments of commerce, foreign affairs, and development is a prerequisite to crafting more holistic policies.

Circular migration and other forms of labour mobility are often promoted as mutually beneficial, but de Moor cautioned that societies must also engage in contingency planning as unintended consequences may occur. For instance, she pointed out that many post-war temporary guest workers, recruited to help rebuild Europe, became permanent residents. This dynamic remains unchanged today—employers often prefer to

retain qualified migrant workers, while migrants are keen to stay in places where they have put down new roots. If circular migration programmes are designed without foresight, therefore, governments may underinvest in inclusion and integration policies, such as language and cultural orientation programmes, which are integral to ensuring that migrants settle and thrive in their new communities.

According to de Moor, public communication is also a frequently overlooked component of migration governance. While governments may design effective policies on paper, these measures risk rejection at the ballot box if policymakers fail to secure public support. Similarly, migrants may miss out on valuable integration services if they are unaware of their availability or benefits. Beyond conventional townhalls and televised addresses premised on top-down communication, de Moor suggested fostering dialogue through small, community-based meetings, particularly in areas where scepticism toward migration is high. She stressed that policymakers should also not shy away from difficult conversations—informing the public and addressing misconceptions is key to fostering a more evidence-based and constructive debate.



"Migration does not end at the border—successful integration is the true measure of a well-managed system. If we want migration to be an opportunity rather than a challenge, we must invest in policies that help newcomers contribute and belong"

Nicole de Moor
State Secretary for Asylum and Migration,
added to the Minister of Home Affairs,
Institutional Reform



❶ **Raphaela Schweiger**, Director of Migration, Immigration Society, and Global Issues at the Robert Bosch Stiftung, introducing the 2024 edition of the Migration Futures Dinner



② Hugo Brady, Senior Strategic Advisor, ICMPD, raises a question during the session, seated next to Mari Juritsch, Return Coordinator, DG HOME, and other guests

③ Wael Badawi, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Migration, Refugees, and Combating Human Trafficking of Egypt, Ruven Menikdiwela, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNHCR, and Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos, Minister at Greece's Ministry of Migration and Asylum, in conversation with ICMPD Director General Michael Spindelegger

④ Henrik Ankerstjerne, Deputy Permanent Secretary at Denmark's Ministry for Immigration and Integration, in conversation with ICMPD Deputy Director General Lukas Gehrke



⑤ Eduard Gnesa, Chair of ICMPD's Advisory Board and partner of the Migration Experts Group, in conversation with Michele Amedeo, Deputy Head of the Migration Unit at the European Commission's DG NEAR, and other guests

❶ Emmanouil Logothetis, Secretary General of Migration Policy at Greece's Ministry of Migration and Asylum, speaking with Sedef Dearing, ICMPD Director for Migration Dialogues and Cooperation, and other guests during the dinner



❷ Malcolm Cutajar, Ambassador for Migration at Malta's Ministry for Home Affairs and National Security, in conversation with Franziska Kandolf, Deputy Director-General for Migration and International Affairs at Austria's Federal Ministry of the Interior



❸ Cecilia Lundström Carniel, ICMPD Head of External and Member States Relations, in conversation with Annelie Stiglund, Deputy Director for International Migration at Sweden's Ministry of Justice and Chris Upchurch, Director of the Office of International Migration at the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, U.S. Department of State



❹ Nina Gregori, EUAA Executive Director, speaking with Peter Schuurman, Special Envoy for Migration at the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs



❺ Colleen Thouez, Co-Founder of Europe Prykhystok, in conversation with Raphaela Schweiger, Director of Migration, Immigration Society, and Global Issues at the Robert Bosch Stiftung



11 Gregory Maniatis, Director for Refugees and Migration at Open Society Foundations, talking to Craig Damian Smith, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Pairity

12 Jennifer Tangney, Senior Project Manager, Migration Partnership Facility, ICMPD Brussels Mission, in conversation with Georgios Iliopoulos, Ambassador of Greece to Austria and Permanent Representative to the International Organisations in Vienna



22 – 23 October 2024
Palais Niederösterreich
Herrengasse 13
Vienna's historic city centre

The 9th edition of the Vienna Migration Conference took place at Palais Niederösterreich, a historic residence in the heart of Vienna, on 22 – 23 October 2024.





❶ Michael Schnitzler, Managing Director of Immigration Europe, with Lutz Hahn, Head of Communications, Public Affairs and Marketing, and Wilhelm Brunner, Operations and Business Development Director; all of ORS Group AG

❷ Omar Al-Rawi, Member of the City Council and Provincial Parliament of Vienna, opening the reception hosted by the City of Vienna on Day 1 of VMC2024

❸ Pedro Gaspar, President of Portugal's Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum, in conversation with Wael Badawi, Egypt's Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Migration, Refugees, and Combating Human Trafficking



❹ Haykanush Chobanyan, Deputy Head of the International Cooperation Department at Armenia's Ministry of Internal Affairs, speaking with Sedef Dearing, ICMPD Director for Migration Dialogues and Cooperation

❺ Craig Damian Smith, Co-Founder, Executive Director and Principal Investigator of Pairity, with Jassin Irscheid, Project Manager Migration at Robert Bosch Stiftung, Radboud Reijn, Director Europe at Pairity and Eleanor Kennedy, Special Advisor, Refugees and Migration at the Open Society Foundations





❶ Doncha O'Sullivan, Deputy Secretary General for Civil Justice, speaking with Andrew Munro, Assistant Secretary for Civil Justice, Policy and Legislation, both of Ireland's Department of Justice

❷ Paul Clewett, Managing Director, and Shonna Warren, Operations Director, both of Seefar Foundation, with Hanne Beirens, Director of Migration Policy Institute Europe, and Jeroen Vandekerckhove, Head of International Relations at Belgium's Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers



❸ Maria Pilar Méndez Jiménez, Ambassador-at-Large for Migratory Affairs at Spain's Ministry for Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, speaking with Sedef Dearing, ICMPD Director for Migration Dialogues and Cooperation, and Julien Simon, ICMPD Head of Region for the Mediterranean

❹ Mari Juritsch, Return Coordinator, EC DG Home, European Commission, speaking with Anita Strockmeijer, Senior Advisor on Migration and Labour Market at the Advisory Council on Migration

❺ Hanne Beirens, Director of Migration Policy Institute Europe, speaking with Victoria Rietig, Head of the Migration Program at the German Council on Foreign Relations



11 Jaana Vuorio, Director of Management Support at the Finnish Immigration Service, speaking with Henrik Ankerstjerne, Deputy Permanent Secretary at Denmark's Ministry for Immigration and Integration, and other guests

12 Hugo Brady, Senior Strategic Advisor at ICMPD, with Andrew Munro, Assistant Secretary for Civil Justice, Policy and Legislation at Ireland's Department of Justice, and Ivan Krastev, Permanent Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences



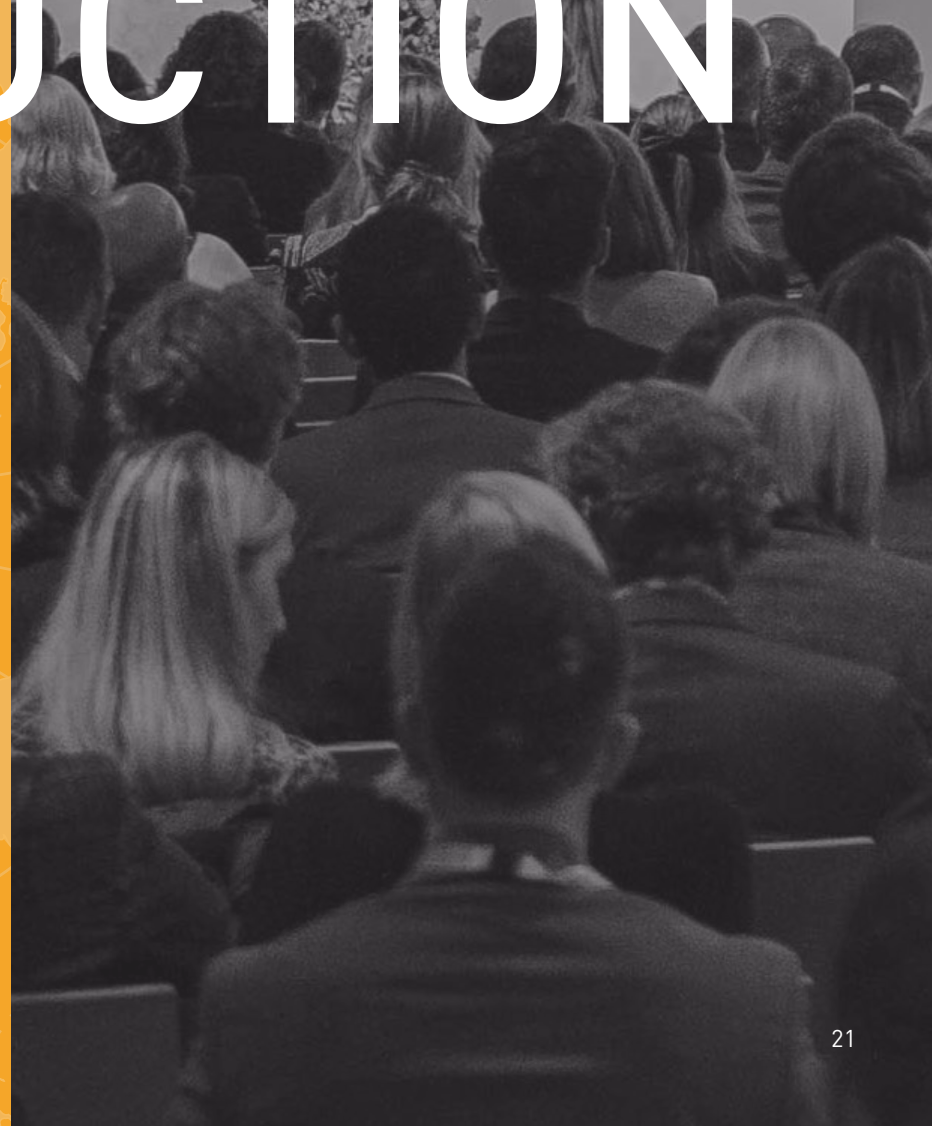
VMC venues

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 2016 | Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs and Hofburg Palace, Vienna. |
| 2017 | Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna. |
| 2018-2019 | Aula of Sciences, Vienna. |
| 2020 | Online, broadcasted from BrainTrust studios, Vienna. |
| 2021-2024 | Palais Niederösterreich and online, livestreamed from Vienna. |

1

INTRO- DUCTION

Conferen
2024



Opening remarks

Opening the ninth Vienna Migration Conference, ICMPD Director General Michael Spindelegger addressed a full audience at Palais Niederösterreich, with more than 1,500 participants joining online.



“Many of our citizens are not satisfied with the current state of migration, and with the results that migration policies have achieved up to this point. Regardless of whether we agree with this assessment or not, the task before us is evident.”

Michael Spindelegger
Director General, ICMPD

He highlighted the rising levels of global displacement, driven by protracted conflicts, instability, and economic hardship, which have forced over 120 million people from their homes. The urgency to find sustainable solutions has never been greater, particularly amid ongoing turmoil in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

In this challenging context, Spindelegger underscored the emergence of new migration agreements and partnerships aimed at reducing irregular movements and expanding legal pathways. The EU’s Pact on Migration and Asylum, in particular, reflects the Union’s commitment to decisive and comprehensive action in response to evolving migration dynamics and European citizens’ dissatisfaction with existing policies. Migration frameworks, he noted, are also continuously evolving, with various external asylum processing models moving from exploration to either implementation or rejection.

However, political shifts across Europe and beyond continue to shape migration policy discussions, as seen in the contentious debates of 2024’s high-stakes elections worldwide. Citizens expect governments to simultaneously enforce stricter migration controls, ensure respect for international protection and human rights, and develop more effective responses to labour shortages and security concerns. As Spindelegger observed, balancing these competing demands remains a complex political and technical challenge.

As European governments navigate these tensions, Malin Frankenhaeuser, ICMPD Head of Policy and VMC Lead, emphasised the importance of maintaining space for dialogue and developing innovative approaches for more effective migration cooperation amid growing polarisation. In this spirit, she stressed that the Vienna Migration Conference remains committed to fostering open expert discussions on migration governance, shifting geopolitical dynamics, labour mobility best practices, and international protection frameworks.

In this context, Frankenhaeuser invited the audience to participate in an interactive poll to share their views on migration agenda priorities. She pointed to the broad alignment of the survey results with the VMC2024 agenda in regard to key themes,



including: labour mobility and legal pathways, route-based approaches to protection, external processing, temporary protection of Ukrainians, and migration diplomacy.

As governments work to balance security concerns with humanitarian responsibilities in an ever-changing migration landscape, she highlighted the conference's diverse array of sessions. These ranged from a high-level panel on what lies ahead for the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum to a side event offering a 360-degree perspective on the role of technology and the latest tools in migration management. The conference's keynote conversation, she said, would set the stage for one and a half days of rich and multi-angled discussions, offering a resilience check on the EU's ability to address the numerous challenges it faces in managing migration and asylum.

“With all the black swan events and volatility of the last couple of years affecting the world of migration, we're proud to have VMC consistently bringing us together for the past nine years.”

Malin Frankenhaeuser
Head of Policy and VMC Lead, ICMPD



→ Watch the full conference opening



②

THE DISCUSSIONS

Vienna
Migration
Conference
2024



Keynote conversation

The EU's reckoning? Making sense of times of change and crisis

ON STAGE

Ivan Krastev, Permanent Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences
Malin Frankenhaeuser, Head of Policy and VMC Lead, ICMPD



In a tumultuous year marked by sky-high geopolitical tensions, Ivan Krastev's keynote conversation offered a sharp analysis of the challenges and opportunities confronting the European Union. One of the most clear-eyed and astute observers of European and transatlantic affairs, Krastev—FT contributing editor, permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, and chair of the Sofia-based Centre for Liberal Strategies—explained how recent challenges, including war in Ukraine, migration pressures, and internal EU divisions, are reshaping Europe's trajectory.

Moderated by Malin Frankenhaeuser, ICMPD Head of Policy and VMC Lead, the discussion highlighted the need for the EU to adapt to an increasingly unstable world while addressing mounting public anxiety about European security, identity, and governance.

Krastev argued that the EU has been navigating a historic poly-crisis in recent years—one encompassing the pandemic, the climate crisis, economic turmoil, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and war in the Middle East. These challenges have upended long-standing EU assumptions, spurring a fundamental transformation of both European and global institutions. For instance, the EU's long-held belief in economic interdependence as a safeguard for security has been shattered by Russia's weaponisation of energy and food supplies, while it wages war in Ukraine. Similarly, while Europe once considered military power obsolete in a world where soft power prevailed, it now finds itself lacking in both. Meanwhile, escalating conflicts in the Middle East raise the prospect of two major wars involving nuclear powers on Europe's doorstep, potentially displacing millions more people.

At the same time, internal EU divisions appear to be widening. While migration could help address Europe's labour shortages and bolster social welfare systems amid demographic decline, far-right political forces have stoked public fears, pushing for stricter restrictions on inward mobility. Many affluent countries face demographic anxieties as their populations shrink while migration increases cultural diversity. Krastev described this tension as a "schizophrenic situation" where many Europeans simultaneously fear "too many people and too few at the same time"—concerned about both cultural change and depopulation. This dynamic is particularly acute in countries undergoing significant demographic shifts, such as Krastev's native Bulgaria.

According to Krastev, societal debates are now more focused on perceived risks than on opportunities, with these perceptions—often untethered from reality—driving political narratives and voter behaviour. For example, far-right political parties have spread unfounded claims that governments are granting citizenship to migrants to gain votes, despite data showing no link between



naturalisation and political party preference. And despite their strident anti-immigrant rhetoric, populist parties often adjust their stances once in power, acknowledging economic realities and becoming more accommodating to migrants. In this regard, Krastev framed migration politics rather as part of a broader crisis of confidence, arguing that policymakers must project a stronger sense of control over borders and migration flows.

Looking ahead, Krastev anticipates that most European societies will remain open-minded to migration but will demand stricter control over admissions. Meanwhile, autocratic governments will generally avoid politically sensitive debates on issues such as providing pathways to citizenship. While Krastev said the Gulf states can politically sustain a system in which significant foreign-born populations remain permanent non-citizens,

Europe will need to prioritise successful integration—not only to foster dialogue between migrants and host communities but also to alleviate public fears about losing cultural identity and a sense of belonging.

In the near-term, Krastev noted that President Donald Trump's proposed mass deportation plan could send political shockwaves through Europe. If implemented, it might prompt public pressure on European governments to adopt similarly stringent measures or, conversely, provoke backlash if enforcement efforts are seen as excessive. These debates, Krastev argued, will continue to be shaped by Europe's east-west divide, where historical and cultural differences inform national attitudes towards migration.

Longer-term, he highlighted the need for policymakers to prepare for an



“Time pressure is the biggest problem facing Europe as it grapples with issues arising from its history and geography. What Europe needs is time, and what Europe lacks is time.”

Ivan Krastev
Permanent Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences

unpredictable and uncertain future. While the global population is expected to peak around the turn of the century, most of this growth will be concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, offsetting population declines elsewhere, including in China and India. These demographic shifts will have profound implications for economies and migration patterns, though their precise impact remains uncertain. Similarly, climate change could alter migration in unexpected ways, with some regions benefiting from new economic opportunities while others face displacement as people are uprooted from their homes.

Beyond migration, changing demographics and economic realignments are poised to reshape foreign policy priorities and the global order. Krastev predicted that the US will further pivot away from Europe-centric foreign policy, focusing instead on other regions. Meanwhile, middle powers such as India, Brazil, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel are increasingly asserting themselves on the global stage, seeking influence even if their actions sometimes appear clumsy or naïve. In this shifting landscape, Europe faces an uphill struggle to preserve the postwar international order.

Despite the significant risks posed by this upheaval, Krastev closed on a cautiously optimistic note, recognising the substantial political, security, and economic progress Europe has achieved over the past half-century. Yet, he warned that the EU's future prosperity will depend on its ability to adeptly navigate ongoing geopolitical transformations.



→ Watch the full session





High-level panel

Ambitious but realistic: Prospects for taking migration cooperation to the next level

ON STAGE

Gerhard Karner, Federal Minister of the Interior, Austria

Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos, Minister of Migration and Asylum, Greece

Nicole de Moor, State Secretary for Asylum and Migration, added to the Minister of Home Affairs, Institutional Reform and Democratic Renewal, Belgium

MODERATION

Michael Spindelegger, Director General, ICMPD

As the EU enters a new legislative cycle following election results that have elevated voices calling for more restrictive migration policies, Member States are looking to juggle implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum alongside their own national migration challenges. With internal and external developments ensuring migration stays high on the political agenda, in this year's high-level panel, officials from Austria, Belgium, and Greece shared their unique perspectives and pinpointed areas for continued intra-EU and international cooperation over the coming months and years.

The session, moderated by Michael Spindelegger, ICMPD Director General, featured Gerhard Karner, Austrian Federal Minister of the Interior; Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos, Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum; and Nicole de Moor, Belgian State Secretary for Asylum and Migration.

The panellists agreed the Pact marks a profound shift in the migration discourse, reflecting a more pragmatic attitude and a newfound unity of purpose among EU Member States. This pivot comes against a divisive migration policy backdrop, as the rising salience of immigration in national and EU-level politics attests. While Karner highlighted the sharp decline in irregular arrivals to Austria as evidence that existing measures are proving effective, he noted that the reintroduction of internal border checks within the EU underscores the increased urgency for collective EU action to better manage the bloc's external borders. Panagiotopoulos echoed this concern, pointing to the resurgence of populist parties as a reminder that the EU must continue addressing irregular migration and related insecurities. De Moor added that migration has been a major sticking point in Belgium's 2024 government coalition negotiations, reflecting intensified public pressure for decisive action.



“Cooperation does not stop once an agreement is signed. It is an ongoing process that requires long-term commitment and resources.”

Gerhard Karner
Federal Minister of the Interior, Austria

Looking ahead to the Pact's implementation phase, the panellists emphasised cooperation with third countries on migratory routes as being essential to building on the Pact, particularly in strengthening the EU's return framework. Karner cited the Joint Coordination Platform's successful partnership with Western Balkan partners as a testament to the approach's promise. He called for innovative solutions such as enhancing Frontex's return capabilities and developing practical solutions for the safe third country concept. Meanwhile, Panagiotopoulos stressed the need to prioritise combating human trafficking, smuggling, and criminal networks to restore public confidence and facilitate societal support for labour migration, enabling governments to better align legal migration and leverage global talent with the EU's workforce demands.



However, the effectiveness of migration diplomacy will be dependent on the willingness of Member States to adopt collective and whole-of-government approaches across the EU-27 and engage partners in mutually beneficial cooperation. Both Panagiotopoulos and de Moor underscored that unilateral national measures, such as minor adjustments to social benefits for refugees or family reunification policies, will prove insufficient in stemming arrivals. This does not preclude unilateral action or bilateral deals entirely. Greece, for example, has addressed critical labour shortages—an estimated 200,000 jobs in the agriculture and tourism sectors—through agreements with Bangladesh, Egypt, and other countries. Similarly, de Moor highlighted ICMPD-implemented and EU-funded initiatives between Belgium and Georgia that promote business ties and facilitate the mobility of small enterprises and startup entrepreneurs as successful pilot projects. Finally, Karner extolled Austria's bilateral migration and mobility partnership agreements with India and Morocco, which have contributed to reducing irregular migration and improving return protocols respectively.

“Migration diplomacy requires a whole-of-government approach. Migration is not just a matter for migration ministers; we need colleagues across the trade, economy, development, humanitarian aid, and foreign affairs portfolios to work together with us.”

Nicole de Moor

State Secretary for Asylum and Migration, added to the Minister of Home Affairs, Institutional Reform and Democratic Renewal, Belgium



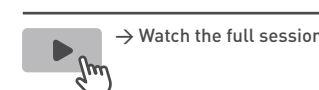
“The Pact provides a mechanism for European solutions to a European problem. Although it is not perfect, we must focus on implementing it effectively.”

Nikolaos Panagiotopoulos

Minister of Migration and Asylum, Greece

Even so, de Moor argued that the EU-27, especially when it speaks with one voice, is better positioned to engage and accommodate origin and transit countries on critical issues such as remittances and labour mobility, paving the way for mutually beneficial agreements. Panagiotopoulos added that the EU's capacity to offer significant incentives to partner countries could encourage cooperation on returns and other processes. Member States, he said, could also better address their economic and workforce needs through EU-wide Talent Partnership programmes. Such initiatives, by foregrounding legal pathways, would allow governments to wrestle back full control of their labour markets from criminal organisations that sow fear and insecurity to the populace.

Regardless of whether deals on talent partnerships and other arrangements are bilateral or multilateral, de Moor urged enhanced cross-agency cooperation—encompassing migration, commerce, development, and foreign affairs portfolios—to streamline processes, expedite visa issuance, and identify employment opportunities for migrants. The panellists further stressed that the Pact's successful implementation will ultimately hinge on the coordination of efforts, long-term cooperation, and adequate budgetary resources to help Member States adapt their tools and capacities, as well as innovate. De Moor highlighted the importance of digital investments, particularly in upgrading systems like Eurodac which assists in identifying asylum seekers and irregular border-crossers. Panagiotopoulos stressed the need for a comprehensive returns policy for rejected asylum seekers. While Karner expressed optimism on accelerating the implementation process, he also called on Member States to better enforce existing asylum rules and adjust national laws where necessary in the interim.



→ Watch the full session



High-level dialogue

Towards a route-based approach to address mixed movements of refugees and migrants

ON STAGE

Ruven Menikdiwela, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Sedef Dearing, Director, Migration Dialogues and Cooperation, ICMPD



An increasingly volatile world has led to record levels of forced displacement, placing immense pressure on already-strained global protection frameworks. With a focus on advancing global responsibility sharing through stronger international cooperation, this high-level dialogue with Ruven Menikdiwela, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, spotlighted new, politically viable solutions for countries as well as migrants and refugees along mixed-movement routes, in adherence with international law and humanitarian principles.

As such, Menikdiwela reflected on the challenges in dealing with mixed movements of people and offered a fresh perspective by exploring the opportunities of UNHCR's 'routes-based approach'. The session was moderated by Sedef Dearing, ICMPD Director of Migration Dialogues and Cooperation.

As the international community continues to build on the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) six years after its adoption, the Assistant High Commissioner highlighted the enduring significance of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Credited with saving millions of lives, these frameworks remain the foundation of international refugee protection. In this context, Menikdiwela described the Compact as a targeted update, designed to address unforeseen developments in forced displacement and migration patterns. For example, she pointed out that 75 percent of the world's 43 million refugees currently reside in low- and middle-income countries that are the least equipped to shoulder the financial and social burdens of displacement. While the 1951 convention was drafted to address the problems facing refugees in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, protracted conflicts, instability, and climate change have further reshaped

the dynamics of global flows, with many refugees facing cycles of displacement lasting decades.

The Compact especially focuses on promoting international responsibility-sharing, fostering refugee self-reliance, addressing the root causes of forced displacement, facilitating safe and dignified repatriation, and expanding complementary pathways, such as labour mobility programmes, to alleviate pressure on host countries. A key element to its success, Menikdiwela said, has been its whole-of-society approach, which integrates collaboration between concerned actors including governments, international financial institutions, regional development banks, the private sector, academic institutions, faith-based organisations, diaspora groups, refugees, and host communities.

The development of concrete action plans and oversight are integral components to this multi-stakeholder model. Menikdiwela especially highlighted the importance of accountability, pointing to multi-stakeholder pledges at the Global Refugee Forums in 2019 and 2023 on providing financial, technical, material, and policy support. Progress on these commitments is set to be reviewed at the High-Level Officials Meeting (HLOM) in 2025 and

through the third GCR Indicator Report, which will facilitate the stocktaking process and inform discussions during the HLOM. She noted that these mechanisms are already producing tangible results, including financial contributions, employment opportunities, and legal services commitments by public and private actors, tailored to assist refugees.

Central to the discussion was UNHCR's route-based approach, which reflects a strategic shift towards developing a more humane response to people on the move and affected communities, while combating the exploitation of refugees and migrants by traffickers and criminal networks. Accordingly, aligned programmes are geared towards providing swift protection and assistance to refugees and access to legal pathways to migrants. Unlike prior frameworks, the route-based approach features a more holistic, whole-of-route and whole-of-society strategy aimed

at countries of origin, countries of first asylum, transit countries, and destination countries.

The root causes of displacement and migration are a paramount concern, with resources dedicated to improving the socio-economic conditions in source countries to reduce displacement pressures and facilitate voluntary returns. Countries of first asylum are a second primary emphasis, with protracted conflicts putting a strain on the resources of host countries and international donors. Faced with declines in accessibility to services and rising socio-economic vulnerability, refugees could be compelled to move onward. UNHCR, therefore, has sought to mobilise additional resources through partnerships with global financial institutions, such as the World Bank, and global development bodies to support access to healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities for refugees and host communities.



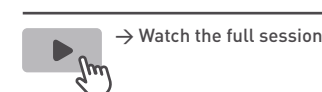
“The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol are the foundation of the international refugee protection framework. They have saved millions of lives in the past and will continue to save millions of lives in the future. These texts are as valid today as they were almost 75 years ago when they were drafted.”

Ruven Menikdiwela
Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, United Nations
High Commissioner for Refugees

Every year, thousands of lives are lost during dangerous journeys across the Mediterranean and other locations. For this reason, transit countries, particularly across North Africa, were identified as another priority. Menikdiwela stressed the importance of encouraging governments in transit countries to establish multi-purpose, one-stop shops where people on the move could receive legal advice, information, and counselling to access protection, legal pathways, and essential services.

Returns are a difficult issue, especially concerning rejected asylum-seekers. Menikdiwela said the best antidote is to ensure fair, fast, and efficient asylum processing, enabling protection when deemed necessary and the early return of rejected asylum-seekers in cooperation with countries of origin. Finally, she underscored the need to work with destination countries to invest in communities across migratory routes to reduce migratory pressures as well as develop labour mobility schemes.

To this end, the Assistant High Commissioner commended the United States for resettling over 100,000 refugees in US fiscal year 2024, marking the largest resettlement effort in three decades. For its part, the EU's investments have focused on humanitarian assistance and aid to non-EU countries hosting millions of refugees. She further pointed to promising labour mobility initiatives, such as Italy's pilot projects in Jordan, Egypt, and Uganda, which train refugees in industrial, service, or digital skills, enabling Italian enterprises to recruit skilled workers while addressing labour shortages. She noted similar schemes could help countries address a dearth of workers in other industries, such as healthcare, providing a foundation for improving livelihood outcomes for refugees, source countries, and host communities alike.



→ Watch the full session





Side event

On the brink of a new era: Navigating the future of tech in migration

ON STAGE

Craig Damian Smith, Co-Founder, Executive Director and Principal Investigator, Pairity

Marc Geer, Senior Global Operations Director, Fragomen

Lorenzo Rinaldi, Head, Business and Stakeholder Relations Unit, European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice

Tuba Bircan, Associate Professor, Vrije Universiteit Brussels

Ashraf Abushady, Senior Advisor on Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence, United Nations Industrial Development Organization

MODERATION

Maegan Hendow, Senior Researcher, ICMPD

New technological tools have burst onto the scene in recent years and are considered full of potential in terms of how they can contribute to migration governance, whether for border management, integration, or asylum purposes. At the same time, these tools have raised concerns about their operational, ethical, and fundamental rights implications. This side event provided a comprehensive, 360-degree review of where migration technologies could lead us and key considerations going forward, particularly in the context of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum.

Moderated by Maegan Hendow, ICMPD Senior Researcher, the panel featured diverse voices from a range of disciplines and stakeholder groups. Speakers included Craig Damian Smith, Co-Founder, Executive Director, and Principal Investigator at Pairity; Marc Geer, Senior Global Operations Director at Fragomen; Lorenzo Rinaldi, Head of Business and Stakeholder Relations Unit at the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice; Tuba Bircan, Associate Professor at Vrije Universiteit Brussels; and Ashraf Abushady, Senior Advisor on Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence at the United Nations Industrial Development Organization.

The event opened with an animated video from the UN Human Rights Office “Digital Technologies and Migration” that set the stage for the discussion by highlighting the opportunities and risks of engaging digital technologies in migration management. Such tools can improve migration processes through increased efficiency, transparency, and accountability, while also enabling migrants to reconnect with family or report abuses. However, without robust human



“Predictive models can help us prepare for migration flows, but they are only as good as the data they are trained on.”

Tuba Bircan
Associate Professor, Vrije Universiteit Brussels

rights safeguards, the use of biometric databases, automated visa processing, algorithmic threat detection, and emotion detection systems can pose significant risks to migrants who may have limited options for recourse.

The discussion subsequently explored numerous potential use cases for artificial intelligence, big data, and novel technologies in migration management across different routes, levels, and processes. Bircan emphasised that new technologies may help in better understanding the complex dynamics of migration, through the use of big data and AI methodologies in improving indicators, statistics, and models. This is particularly relevant in the area of forecasting, where machine learning and new data sources such as mobile phone data, satellite data, and social media data could be used to improve these models.

Meanwhile, Smith highlighted how large datasets—including information on labour markets, housing stocks, and educational or training opportunities, as well as information on the preferences, skills, capacities, and needs of migrants and receiving communities—can optimise the matching of migrants and refugees to sponsors, services, housing, and work opportunities. Preference-matching algorithms, he noted, can also account for the needs of entire households, such as spouses and children, improving integration outcomes and ensuring dignity for migrants. In so doing, he said the programmes also maximise resource efficiency, enhance communities' readiness for reception, reduce strain on overburdened destinations, boost retention rates, and provide baseline metrics for outcome evaluations.

The speakers also further elaborated on the role of multimodal data, such as mobile phones, social media, and satellite imagery, in enhancing decision-making processes. Abushady noted that AI, for example, can be used to enhance airport security, detect human trafficking, and reduce biases in



“The days of using Excel spreadsheets to navigate labour migration complexities are long gone. Generative AI now allows us to plan for projects involving thousands of workers from diverse countries, adapting to intricate regulations in real-time.”

Marc Geer
Senior Global Operations Director, Fragomen



“Eurodac will be a completely new system. It will no longer be only a system supporting asylum but also resettlement, relocation, and irregular migration monitoring within the EU. It will help foster a balance between responsibility and solidarity among Member States.”

Lorenzo Rinaldi
Head, Business and Stakeholder Relations Unit, European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice

migration-related surveillance. He pointed to a pilot project in Abu Dhabi where AI was used at the airport to assess passenger behaviour—from body temperature to walking patterns—and provide officers with automated green, yellow, or red alerts. Generative AI is also playing an integral role in helping businesses navigate complex regulatory frameworks, particularly in an era of remote and flexible work. Geer explained how Fragomen leverages AI to help clients comply with diverse rules on posted workers and social security, including for complex projects involving employees from EU and non-EU countries who fall under different regulatory regimes. Coupled with verifiable digital credential systems, these technologies streamline workforce planning and recruitment, including for migrant labour.

The EU Pact, for its part, provides a platform for deploying novel technologies to enhance migration management. Rinaldi emphasised the importance of Eurodac's new features for wider operational goals such as facilitating more efficient processing of asylum claims, supporting resettlement and relocation, as well as monitoring irregular migration trends within the EU (in terms of secondary movements and overstaying in particular). Interoperability across various databases and the use of biometrics is critical in this regard, through which silos are broken down and data can be cross-checked.

Meanwhile, Smith suggested that preference-matching systems can also be considered to support the Pact implementation. He contends they can work across a range of policy pillars—whether for solidarity mechanisms within the EU, complementary pathways like labour and educational migration, or even mobility hubs aimed at reducing irregular migration trends. Echoing these views, Bircan argued that use of big data, alternative data sources, and AI can enable Member States to fulfil their goals under the Pact for recruitment of skilled labour. Using novel approaches

such as these can facilitate the identification of needed skills, including among irregular migrant and asylum seeker communities, to address workforce gaps, while empowering migrants to leverage their own expertise.

Despite the prospects new technologies offer, panellists cautioned that emerging technologies are not a panacea for migration management, where legal, technical, and operational limitations are equally important considerations. Rinaldi noted that the success of the EU's new migration management systems will depend on Member States' ability to build capacity and develop efficient workflows for data collection and sharing. This will be no easy feat, requiring the training of cultural mediators to support the data collection process, acquiring appropriate tools for document verification, recruiting specialised personnel for



“It is crucial that matching data is legible and understandable for civil society organisations and government partners. Co-designing usable dashboards and portals helps ensure transparency, improves trust, and allows better preparation for receiving communities.”

Craig Damian Smith
Co-Founder, Executive Director and Principal Investigator,
Pairity



“The pace of technological adoption is accelerating – Facebook took three and a half years to reach one million users, ChatGPT took five days, and Threads reached the same milestone in just one hour.”

Ashraf Abushady
Senior Advisor on Digital Transformation and Artificial
Intelligence, United Nations Industrial Development
Organization

collecting biometric data from children, and establishing adequate data storage capacity for preserving information, among other measures. Additionally, he highlighted data quality as an essential consideration across all systems, where discrepancies in biometric data where they emerge will require robust tools and expertise to resolve.

The panel underscored the importance of ensuring compliance with fundamental rights and prioritising ethical considerations in the use of these new tools, particularly given that the Digital Services Act and AI Act consider their application for migration management as high risk. Bircan stressed the need to safeguard migrants' right to informed consent in data collection of biometrics in particular, also given Eurodac's expanded role. She also highlighted principal concerns about the framing of migration as a security threat, which heightens risk to fundamental rights, including data protection and privacy. In this regard, Rinaldi emphasised the checks on the new interoperability ecosystem, with data accessible to Member States only on a need-to-know basis under strict data protection and security protocols. Privacy and ethical considerations are also relevant in terms of what type of data may be considered in migration modelling, such as use of social media data. This highlights the careful approach states must take as they leverage technology to improve migration management systems, ensuring full alignment with fundamental rights and existing legal frameworks—a challenge that will persist in the years ahead.



→ Watch the full session



Armchair conversation

In conversation on migration diplomacy and priorities on both sides of the Mediterranean

ON STAGE

Simon Mordue, Deputy Secretary General for Economic and Global Issues, European External Action Service

Wael Badawi, Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Migration, Refugees and Combating Human Trafficking, Egypt

Sedef Dearing, Director, Migration Dialogues and Cooperation

Julien Simon, Head of Region, Mediterranean, ICMPD



In March 2024, the EU and Egypt signed a Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership, an initiative designed to “unleash the full potential” of their cooperation against a backdrop of regional instability and persistent migratory movements across the Mediterranean. This Partnership, structured around multiple pillars emphasising security and economic growth, adopts a holistic approach to migration and mobility, seeking to address irregular migration, promote labour mobility, and protect the rights of migrants and refugees.

Moderated by Sedef Dearing, ICMPD Director of Migration Dialogues and Cooperation, and Julien Simon, ICMPD Head of Region for the Mediterranean, this session brought together Simon Mordue, Deputy Secretary General for Economic and Global Issues of the European External Action Service (EEAS), and Ambassador Wael Badawi, Egyptian Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Migration, Refugees, and Combating Human Trafficking, to explore challenges and opportunities arising from this ambitious partnership.

Egypt is currently under significant pressure as it provides essential services to millions of migrants and refugees. Badawi warned that without external support and concerted efforts to tackle root causes and underdevelopment, the challenges Egypt faces could spill over into other countries through primary and secondary migratory movements. He stressed the importance of burden-sharing and responsibility-sharing, principles enshrined in both the Global Compact on Migration and the Global Compact for Refugees, as fundamental to achieving fair and sustainable outcomes for migrants as well as for host and transit countries alike. For these reasons, comprehensive migration governance features as an integral element in the new EU-Egypt Partnership framework.



“The policy objective should never be to stop migration. Migration is a natural phenomenon that’s been with us since the beginning of our existence.”

Simon Mordue

Deputy Secretary General for Economic and Global Issues, European External Action Service

Notably, this cooperation moves beyond framing migration solely as a problem to recognising mobility as a critical part of the solution to regional and global challenges. Mordue highlighted the Partnership's dual focus on dismantling smuggling networks while fostering legal migration pathways, underscoring migration's historical role in driving global prosperity. He argued that this approach benefits both individuals and the countries of origin and destination. Within this context, EU-Egypt cooperation is designed to support mobility schemes, tackle the root causes of irregular migration, combat smuggling and trafficking, enhance border management, and ensure dignified and sustainable return and reintegration processes—all in line with broader international frameworks.

Labour mobility is a cornerstone of this expanded partnership. Badawi referenced initiatives such as the Rabat Process, EUROMED Migration, and the Khartoum Process, which was chaired by Egypt in 2024, as models for supporting skills development, mobility programmes, and talent partnerships. Scaling up these efforts, he argued, could help meet Europe's demand for skilled workers while supporting the livelihoods of migrants. Mordue echoed this, emphasising how talent partnerships could specifically connect Egyptian youth with high-demand job opportunities in Europe, while the incorporation of circular mobility ensures that these programmes act as investments in Egypt's economy rather than exacerbating brain drain. Effective coordination among interior and employment ministries, as well as engagement with employer organisations, is crucial for streamlining these efforts. In this regard, Mordue hailed the efforts made by the Egyptian authorities to facilitate such coordination and linkages involving key stakeholders.

Another vital component of the framework is ensuring Egypt has access to financing at fair market rates to support its mobility and



“A security-alone approach to migration management is not the answer. We must focus on migration and diplomacy in a holistic manner to address the root causes and forge partnerships.”

Wael Badawi

Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs for Migration, Refugees and Combating Human Trafficking, Egypt

refugee programmes. Mordue explained that the EU's AAA credit rating has already been leveraged to facilitate affordable lending to Egypt, with the bloc also encouraging investments from Member States, international financial institutions, and the private sector. Cairo is currently in the process of assuming responsibilities for asylum processes previously managed by UNHCR, including the registration of a growing number of Sudanese refugees. These financial resources, therefore, can be directed toward supporting Egypt in expanding its capacities and capabilities in this sphere.

Ultimately, the success of this model, according to Mordue, will depend on using an evidence-based approach to identifying best practices. Badawi reinforced this point, noting Egypt's ongoing efforts to study asylum systems in Kenya and Turkey as it works to develop its own rights-compliant framework.

Peace, prosperity, and security? Migration and the EU's foreign and security policy

In an increasingly unstable international landscape, the EU faces critical decisions on how to assert its influence amid escalating tensions in the Middle East, Russia's ongoing assault on Ukraine, and an international rules-based order under growing strain from geopolitical competition. Against this backdrop, an extended conversation with Simon Mordue examined the EU's positioning in the world, its foreign and security policy priorities, and its diplomatic imperatives, including the ways in which these intersect with migration.

Mordue underscored the mounting pressure on the multilateral system, exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has severely undermined the UN Charter and key international norms. He pointed to additional global concerns, including rising tensions between the United States and China and disputes in the South China

Sea, arguing that the EU must increase defence investments and work toward achieving “strategic autonomy.” In navigating this volatile environment, he highlighted the significance of the EU's proposed boost to defence spending and the development of hard power instruments. He also advocated for a renewed focus on enlargement as a key foreign policy tool, noting that past expansions have been among the EU's most effective means of exerting influence.

Additionally, Mordue underlined the EU's strength when unity is achieved, citing the bloc's ability to reach consensus on 14 sanctions packages against Russia as an example of its effectiveness when acting together. At the same time, he noted cases where unanimity posed challenges and slowed down decision-making. A case in point was the European Peace Facility, which was used to deliver billions in military aid to Ukraine. But given the neutrality of Austria, Ireland, and Malta, finding a compromise—by extending humanitarian support in lieu of military aid from these countries—required careful diplomatic negotiation.

Further reflecting on the EU's response to crises, Mordue observed that adversity has frequently driven the bloc to create impactful new tools. Aside from the European Peace Facility, he cited the adoption of the euro as a single currency as an example of the EU's ability to adapt to evolving challenges. In the realm of migration, he saw the Pact on Migration and Asylum as another demonstration of the EU's resilience, providing mechanisms to balance responsibility and solidarity between EU Member States, while addressing migration movements and asylum claims. A proposed increase to Frontex's standing corps to up to 30,000 border guards, he added, illustrates the EU's resolve to improve its responsiveness to crises, such as Belarus's instrumentalisation of migration.

Looking ahead, Mordue anticipated greater reliance on operational tools like staff

support from the EUAA and Frontex's expanded capabilities for managing migration more effectively. He asserted that the EU's updated migration toolkit would better enable Member States to determine legitimate protection claims. However, he emphasised that these measures will only succeed if paired with robust external partnerships that facilitate legal migration pathways, enhance economic cooperation, deter irregular movements, and establish dignified return and reintegration mechanisms.

Egypt's outlook: The role of partnership in holistic migration system-building

Tensions in Egypt's neighbourhood have escalated in the past year, from ongoing civil war in Sudan to renewed regional conflict and an ongoing humanitarian and security crisis in the Middle East. Such a deteriorating context, not least in terms of forced displacement in the region, challenges Egypt's efforts to develop a holistic migration governance system. This final segment of the session, with Wael Badawi, explored Egypt's evolving concerns, topmost priorities, migration governance capacities, and the role of partnerships and migration diplomacy, from ensuring security and development to providing international protection.

Egypt's budget is under severe strain, exacerbated by a cost-of-living crisis and the need to provide essential services to a population of 110 million, including 1.2 million recent arrivals from Sudan. Against this backdrop, Badawi underscored the critical role of partnerships, highlighting an unprecedented collaboration among UN agencies—including the IOM, UNHCR, WHO, and UNICEF—to deliver comprehensive health and education aid to migrants and refugees in Egypt. To promote social cohesion, he emphasised the importance of ensuring that host communities are not overlooked in migrant and refugee assistance programmes, particularly given the strain on public



services. Egypt's out-of-camp policies aim to integrate refugees into society, requiring a whole-of-government approach that involves multiple ministries, the private sector, NGOs, and international partners to mobilise and coordinate resources. Additionally, resettlement, complementary pathways, and labour migration programmes serve as crucial solidarity measures to ease the strain on host communities.

Ensuring compliance with human rights standards remains central to Egypt's efforts to develop a national migration and asylum system. Badawi highlighted that Egypt offers protection space to migrants in need; and in cooperation with the EUAA, has introduced a preliminary referral mechanism to categorise asylum seekers based on their needs and vulnerabilities. The discussion also explored the distinctive structure of Egypt's migration management system, particularly the placement of migration governance within the purview of the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than the Ministry of Interior, as is common in most EU countries. Badawi explained that Egypt views migration as a regional and global issue, necessitating specialised cross-border cooperation. This migration diplomacy also entails engaging with the Egyptian diaspora—10 million strong—to maintain close ties, including with those participating in talent partnerships, as well as working with international and local partners to enhance service provision and protection capacities.

A growing priority for Egypt is the effective pre-departure preparation of migrants participating in labour mobility schemes, with a view towards their integration in their host countries as a determinant of programme success. Badawi highlighted targeted efforts to design talent partnerships with EU countries in key sectors, such as metallurgy with Austria and tourism with Germany. Training centres play a crucial role in ensuring that participants



meet certification and skills requirements, while circular migration and reintegration programmes are designed to prevent brain drain and enhance livelihood opportunities. Egypt is making investments to deal with two groups of returning migrants: irregular migrants, who may be compelled to migrate again if they lack access to economic opportunities back home, and regular migrants, whose newly acquired skills and expertise can contribute to the country's economic development through entrepreneurship and other initiatives. If well-designed, the programmes promise to stem irregular movements and prevent brain drain while stimulating the economies of Egypt and partner countries, as well as uplifting the livelihoods of the migrants themselves.

→ Watch the full session





Panel discussion

The promises of external processing: Between assumptions, possibilities, and practicalities

ON STAGE

Henrik Ankerstjerne, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry for Immigration and Integration, Denmark
 Daniel Thym, Chair of Public, European and International Law, Department of Law, University of Konstanz
 Catherine Woollard, Director, European Council on Refugees and Exiles

MODERATION

Martin Wagner, Senior Policy Advisor, ICMPD

Hardly any other debate on migration is as controversial as external processing. Proponents argue that it can deter and reduce irregular arrivals, while opponents point to strong legal, practical, and moral reasons against it. This panel examined external processing from technical, political, and legal perspectives, exploring commonalities and defining red lines.

The session was moderated by Martin Wagner, ICMPD Senior Policy Advisor. Panellists included Henrik Ankerstjerne, Deputy Permanent Secretary at the Danish Ministry for Immigration and Integration; Daniel Thym, Chair of Public, European, and International Law at the Department of Law of the University of Konstanz; and Catherine Woollard, Director of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, ECRE.

The discussion unfolded against a backdrop of rapidly evolving external processing policies. While the concept is not new, it gained broader attention during the 2015-2016 surge in migratory arrivals in Europe and has ultimately been put more prominently on the agenda the past few years. Bilateral agreements between the UK and Rwanda, Denmark and Rwanda, as well as between Italy and Albania have especially advanced this debate. In May 2024, 15 Member States urged in a letter to the European Commission the bloc to adopt innovative solutions for curbing irregular migration, including outsourcing migration and asylum procedures to countries outside the EU. Reflecting this sentiment, Ankerstjerne argued that EU Member States are entitled to use all lawful means to reduce irregular arrivals, including onward movements from countries of first asylum and individuals who do not qualify for protection.

In this context, Thym distinguished and examined operational and legal nuances of three types of external processing currently



“Why did we stop work on our proposed external processing framework? Demonstrating that there is an alternative way forward on reducing irregular migration was an important first step. As the EU now seeks to get together around some promising new ideas and possibilities, we are in a better place.”

Henrik Ankerstjerne
 Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry for Immigration and Integration, Denmark

considered and/or tested by countries. The “safe third country” approach (Denmark-Rwanda) involves transferring asylum seekers from the EU to a non-EU state (i.e. Rwanda), which then takes over responsibility and applies its own asylum procedure. Under this model, individuals granted protection are permitted to reside in the non-EU country that assumed responsibility but are not eligible for settlement in the EU Member State. The “extraterritorial asylum” model (Italy-Albania), by contrast, entails EU Member States conducting asylum procedures in a non-EU country (i.e. Albania) in accordance with European and national laws. Individuals granted protection through this process are transferred and may reside in the EU Member State. A third model, known as the “return hubs” approach, retains standard EU asylum procedures but sends individuals denied protection to hubs located in countries deemed safe outside the EU.

Despite political momentum, numerous challenges hinder the implementation of external processing regimes. One major obstacle is the difficulty of identifying countries outside the EU with robust asylum systems that are safe and willing to partner with the EU. Current EU legal frameworks further prohibit UK-Rwanda like processes by requiring a connection between asylum applicants and the safe non-EU country. Additionally, admissibility procedures often take weeks or even months to complete. Woollard highlighted the likelihood that many external processing schemes would violate international, national, or EU law. She emphasised that external processing centres frequently fail to meet legal standards regarding procedural guarantees, such as access to legal assistance, effective remedies, or the prohibition of arbitrary detention. Legal challenges have already arisen in some cases, as illustrated by the British Supreme Court rejecting the UK’s external processing plan over concerns about the credibility of Rwanda’s asylum system. Similarly, Italy has faced judicial hurdles in advancing its initiative.



“The political rationale of the safe third country model is not that you transfer tens of thousands of people, but that it is enough to transfer a few hundred or a few thousand, and that doing so will have a deterrent effect with fewer people arriving.”

Daniel Thym
Chair of Public, European and International Law, Department of Law, University of Konstanz

As a remedy, Ankerstjerne suggested that binding bilateral treaties, rather than non-binding memorandums of understanding, are necessary to ensure that agreements on external processing are legally enforceable and effectively implemented. He argued that these arrangements should also clearly delineate the scope of the schemes, with exemptions for vulnerable individuals, and include investments in external oversight and capacity building in partner countries. However, even with such measures, the legal and logistical barriers remain formidable.

Additional concerns associated with external processing, Thym and Woollard warned, include the fact that such policies might fail to achieve their intended goal of deterring dangerous migration journeys to Europe. Instead, they risk pushing migrants into the hands of smugglers and traffickers





“The rule of law precludes us from implementing various external processing schemes. While all countries should develop their asylum and protection systems as the basis of the 1951 Refugee Convention and international refugee law, Europe’s outsourcing of its responsibilities does not encourage other countries to build up their own protection systems.”

Catherine Woollard
Director, European Council on Refugees and Exiles

operating in participating third countries. Woollard added that these programmes are not only expensive but are often influenced by Europe’s perceived political desperation, which enables partner countries to demand exorbitant financial compensation.

Despite these challenges, the panellists sought to carve out space for common ground and identify pragmatic steps forward. Thym pointed out that the external processing schemes are far from ideal for both proponents and opponents. The panellists argued that rather than focusing exclusively on external processing, the EU should adopt broader measures to sustainably address irregular migration. For example, providing greater financial support to improve reception capacities in first-asylum countries could ensure that refugees have access to a decent standard of living. Expanding safe and legal migration pathways for refugees and migrant workers could also play a critical role in reducing irregular movements.

Woollard suggested that EU Member States could conduct preliminary assessments of protection needs in third countries, as is currently done in the cases of emergency evacuations, provided that safeguards are in place to prevent such measures from being misused to deny access to protection. Nonetheless, Thym noted that safe third country arrangements, if carefully designed, could contribute to broader consensus and help governments demonstrate to their populations that migration is being managed responsibly. Ultimately, these contrasting perspectives highlight the complex balancing act the EU must navigate—managing heightened public pressure to curb irregular arrivals while upholding its international legal obligations.



→ Watch the full session



Panel discussion

People on the move: Measures to improve outreach and support

ON STAGE

Daniel Delgado, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Border and Immigration Policy, Office of Strategy, Policy and Plans, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, United States (online)
Carsten Schmitz-Hoffmann, Director General for Europe, Mediterranean and Central Asia, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
Bram Frouws, Director, Mixed Migration Centre

MODERATION

Marija Raus, Head of Region, Silk Routes, ICMPD

Over the past decade, more than 63,000 people have died or gone missing while migrating, prompting growing calls for safe and legal pathways for migrants and those in need of international protection, both globally and in Europe. But what options are on the table, and to what degree could various migrant resource centre models serve as a blueprint for Europe? The session examined existing initiatives aimed at assisting migrants worldwide, exploring possibilities for replicating, adjusting, and scaling such examples to address the risks of dangerous journeys and facilitate access to safe and legal pathways.

Moderated by Marija Raus, ICMPD Head of Region for Silk Routes, panellists included Daniel Delgado, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Border and Immigration Policy at the Office of Strategy, Policy and Plans of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security; Carsten Schmitz-Hoffmann, Director General for Europe, Mediterranean and Central Asia at the German International Cooperation Society (GIZ) GmbH; and Bram Frouws, Director of the Mixed Migration Centre.

The discussion introduced various possible formats for migration resource centres—one-stop-shops designed to provide migrants with access to critical services, including information about safe and legal pathways, counselling, skills development, and reintegration support. ICMPD's flagship initiative, Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs), provided an entry point into this exploration, with a video presentation showcasing how ICMPD's centres support potential, intending, outgoing, and returning migrants through tailored assistance. MRCs employ a three-pronged approach that includes outreach, individual support, and partnerships. Their activities range from pre- and post-departure counselling to reintegration referrals for returnees and mass media campaigns reaching tens of millions. For example, in Afghanistan,



“Implementing the Safe Mobility Offices model in Europe would show migrants as well as transit and origin countries that Europe is serious about providing regular and safe migration pathways, both for protection as well as for labour purposes.”

Bram Frouws
Director, Mixed Migration Centre

MRCs have partnered with civil society organisations to connect women with international opportunities, while in Iraq, they provide career consultations for returnees.

Similarly, the GIZ's Centres for Migration and Development in Africa and Asia, funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, provide holistic support across the migration cycle. These centres assist both prospective and returning migrants, as well as their communities, providing vocational training, education, and reintegration resources. Partnerships with local governments, NGOs, and international organisations ensure that outgoing migrants receive

essential resources and guidance, including language training through institutions like the Goethe-Institut. Schmitz-Hoffmann also stressed their focus on facilitating informed migration decisions, noting that GIZ's Centres held over 5,500 individual consultation sessions throughout the prior year. Meanwhile, a strong gender focus ensures accessibility, with women making up half of the programmes' participants.

Collaboration with public, private, and civil society actors in both origin and destination countries are further critical for facilitating initiatives such as circular mobility schemes. These programmes help migrants acquire skills abroad that they can reinvest



in their home economies upon their return. Indeed, Schmitz-Hoffmann cautioned that while addressing workforce shortages in destination countries, these efforts must avoid exacerbating brain drain in countries of origin. The impact of the programmes is reflected in individual success stories, such as an Iraqi returnee who reintegrated through vocational training and entrepreneurship and a Ghanaian SAP consultant who migrated to Germany for employment and now plans to establish a consultancy in Ghana.

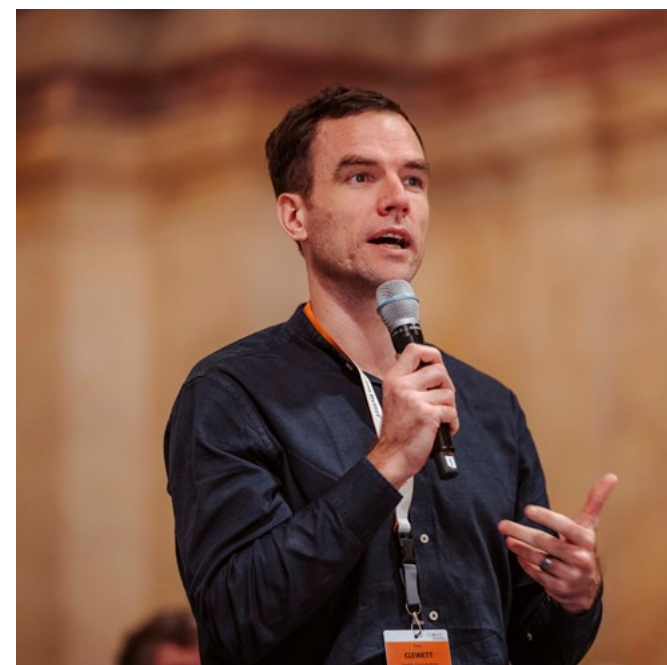
The panel also examined the US Safe Mobility Initiative, launched in 2023 across Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, and Ecuador. According to Delgado, this initiative, organised by the Department of Homeland Security in coordination with the Department of State, IOM, UNHCR, and host-country stakeholders, aims to address the sharp rise in mixed migratory movements in response to increased violence, food insecurity, severe poverty, political instability, climate change, and the pandemic. To do so, the framework provides for the creation of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs), which offer an avenue for “safe, orderly, and humane” migration. Delgado explained that these offices serve as hubs for credible information about US immigration processes and as safeguards against mis and disinformation propagated by smugglers. They also offer screenings conducted by UNHCR and IOM, enabling eligible individuals to apply for protection under the US Refugee Admissions Program or to be resettled in partner countries. Those who do not qualify for international protection receive counselling on alternative options.

SMOs already present promising results, as highlighted in a recent report by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC). Frouws described the initiative as bold and designed to promote regional solidarity while contributing towards the reduction of irregular migration. Delgado also underlined successes, including the submission of over 256,000



“What the Safe Mobility Offices do, among other things, is really establish a central voice and an established bank of information for individuals to trust and to follow through with that process.”

Daniel Delgado (online)
Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Border and Immigration Policy, Office of Strategy, Policy and Plans, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, United States



online applications by interested candidates, and the resettlement of more than 22,000 refugees to the US. Additionally, many individuals have chosen to rebuild their lives in their new host communities, contributing to local development. Key factors contributing to the model’s success include its expedited evaluation process, which reduces waiting times from years to mere months, and its information-sharing role that helps steer migrants away from dangerous journeys and smugglers.

However, the MMC report noted that the initiative also faces shortcomings. While it facilitates refugee resettlement, it does little to enable access to labour migration pathways. Furthermore, the stringent selection criteria exclude many nationalities from being eligible for SMOs services. The US continues to see millions of attempted irregular crossings a year, underscoring the programme’s limited reach. Cooperation with local actors and civil society also stands to be improved. Nonetheless, Delgado pointed to partnerships with Spain, Canada, and New Zealand as potential avenues for scaling



“The idea of the Centres for Migration and Development is to empower people to make informed decisions regarding migration. Our experience demonstrates that we can leverage the potential of migration in a way that benefits both prospective and returning migrants, as well as countries of origin and destination.”

Carsten Schmitz-Hoffmann
Director General for Central Europe, Mediterranean and Central Asia, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH



up the SMO model. For example, Spain has begun accepting referrals from SMOs for both resettlement and employment opportunities, while Canada has used the framework to communicate information about its resettlement and labour programmes. Though currently limited, he argued that this cooperation is essential towards crafting a broader regional framework that ultimately addresses the root causes of migration. Delgado also underscored the importance of programme evaluations, such as surveys that gather data on applicants' demographics and professional backgrounds, as critical for informing future policy development and inter-agency as well as multilateral collaboration.

Implementing the SMO model in Europe could enhance access to legal pathways, demonstrate regional solidarity, and foster improved, less transactional, relations with origin and transit countries. Nevertheless, Frouws expressed scepticism about its political feasibility in Europe, even if resources are available. As an interim measure, strengthening existing migration

centres in origin and transit countries could yield results. Schmitz-Hoffmann highlighted Germany's experiences in Serbia and Türkiye, where programmes supporting community-building and promoting social cohesion, education, and mental health services have helped build local capacity, empower women, and foster trust between destination countries, migrants, and local communities. Adaptability and ingenuity are key to the success of such programmes; for instance, Schmitz-Hoffmann noted that sports programmes, despite being soft measures, had an unexpectedly high impact. European migration centres could also heed lessons from the SMOs in communicating with migrants, such as leveraging social media platforms like WhatsApp and TikTok to counter disinformation from smugglers and provide reliable information on migration prospects.



→ Watch the full session



Armchair conversation

EU migration policy from 2025: The view from Warsaw

ON STAGE

Maciej Duszczek, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of the Interior and Administration, Poland
Radim Žák, Head of Region, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, ICMPD

Rapidly growing labour migration, tensions on the Polish-Belarusian border, and an influx of one million refugees from Ukraine have transformed Poland into an immigration country almost overnight. In this armchair conversation, Maciej Duszczek, Polish Undersecretary of State for the Ministry of the Interior and Administration, discussed current migration priorities, the future of Ukrainian refugees under temporary protection, and the country's plans for its upcoming EU Council Presidency. The session was moderated by Radim Žák, ICMPD Head of Region for Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Just a week after Prime Minister Donald Tusk unveiled Poland's new migration strategy, titled "Regain control, ensure security", Duszczek outlined how the government plans to achieve these objectives through eight strategic pillars focused on areas such as the labour market, education, and relations with the Polish diaspora. He framed the strategy as a direct response to the unprecedented number of arrivals to Poland since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He noted that Poland's foreign population has soared from 100,000 a decade ago to 2.5 million today, encompassing both labour migrants and refugees.

One of the most contentious elements of the new strategy is a provision allowing for the temporary, territorial suspension of asylum access in Poland. Duszczek defended this measure as a vital security tool designed to counter the hybrid war tactics employed by Russia and Belarus, including the instrumentalisation of migration at Poland's and Lithuania's borders. He explained that the regulation would be triggered by unusual activity, such as a sudden surge of planes potentially transporting migrants to Belarus and Russia.

Looking ahead to its incoming EU presidency, Duszczek said Poland intends to



"If we have European challenges, we have to find European solutions."

Maciej Duszczek

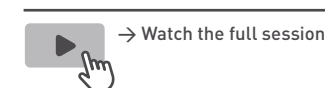
Undersecretary of State, Ministry of the Interior and Administration, Poland



prioritise collaborative, European-wide solutions, describing the country's approach as one of "listening more than talking." While expressing reservations about the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum, Duszczek assured that Poland would work towards implementing it, alongside other EU-wide priorities. These include advancing the return policy directive, the visa suspension mechanism, the EU talent pool, and enhanced border protection measures. Legal migration, Duszczek added, is essential for addressing Europe's labour shortages and aging population in the context of a global competition for talent. Additionally, Poland aims to expand measures that sanction and blacklist entities involved in smuggling or trafficking, drawing from the EU's experience targeting airlines that enabled the transport of migrants to Belarus during the recent border crisis.

As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine approaches its third year, the future of Ukrainian refugees in the EU is becoming a focal point of discussion, especially as Member States begin to diverge in their approaches to refugee assistance. Duszczek emphasised that Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic have received 60 percent of Ukrainians under temporary protection.

In this context, a more uniform EU-wide approach is needed to prevent secondary movements of refugees to countries offering more favourable conditions. Facilitating the integration of these individuals into European societies while maintaining their ties to Ukraine is also a key objective. For example, integration is critical to addressing Poland's labour market shortages, but fostering connections with Ukraine is equally important to ensure that refugees can return post-war to contribute to the country's reconstruction, democracy, and EU aspirations. To build consensus on this complex issue, Poland plans to publish a non-paper containing key questions for Member States to address the future of the Temporary Protection Directive and potential long-term solutions for Ukrainians. Given the scale of the challenge, Duszczek acknowledged that the initiative will likely extend beyond Poland's presidency and be taken up by Denmark and Cyprus during their Council presidencies.





Armchair conversation

Labour migration pathways: Moving from paper to practice

ON STAGE

Chaudhry Salik Hussain, Federal Minister for Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, Pakistan
Md. Ruhul Amin, Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Bangladesh
Oleg Chirita, Head of Global Initiatives, ICMPD

Recent initiatives addressing labour and skills shortages underscore the need for intricate collaboration to manage labour migration effectively. This discussion explored measures from policy to practice, sharing government perspectives from South Asia on fostering effective partnerships, overcoming challenges like skills development, qualification recognition, and protecting workers' rights.

The session opened with an address by Chaudhry Salik Hussain, Federal Minister for Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development. The speech was followed by an armchair conversation on strategies for strengthening cooperation on labour migration between Oleg Chirita, ICMPD Head of Global Initiatives, and Md. Ruhul Amin, Bangladeshi Secretary of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment.

Both speakers highlighted the pivotal role of international collaboration in fostering structured, transparent, and sustainable migration pathways that put the welfare of individuals front and centre. Salik Hussain outlined Pakistan's migration and mobility dialogue with the European Union, launched in 2023, which focuses on talent partnerships, legal migration routes, and circular mobility. He emphasised how EU technical assistance has strengthened Pakistan's capacity to ensure safe migration, protect workers' rights, and advance skills development. Amin similarly noted that cooperation with the EU has enabled Bangladesh to better align national training programmes and curricula with global demands, creating safer and more diversified migration opportunities.

Collaboration across sectors and agencies also emerged as a central theme, with a shared emphasis on diversifying labour



“Our goal is to ensure that our citizens working abroad are not only contributing to the host economies but also realising their full potential while having their rights safeguarded.”

Chaudhry Salik Hussain
Federal Minister for Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, Pakistan

markets and preparing workers for high-demand sectors like IT, healthcare, and vocational trades. Salik Hussain and Amin underscored the need for closer coordination among government bodies, educational institutions, and training facilities. For instance, Amin elaborated on Bangladesh's comprehensive integration of migration policies with national skills development strategies, which include free technical training, language instruction, and certifications to boost global employability. Meanwhile, Salik Hussain stressed the critical need to better facilitate the mutual recognition of qualifications and professional experience between the EU and Pakistan to enable smoother transitions for Pakistani workers into European labour markets, especially in technical and high-demand fields.

By addressing the entire migration cycle, from recruitment to reintegration, Pakistan and Bangladesh are setting benchmarks for how holistic approaches can drive sustainable labour migration systems. A particular emphasis was placed on enhancing support for pre-departure orientation and post-arrival assistance through migrant resource centres. Amin highlighted the importance of cultural awareness training in achieving successful integration, noting Bangladesh's inclusion of topics such as cultural norms, food habits, and the regulations of destination countries. Meanwhile, both countries are also implementing support measures like low-interest loans and digital certification processes to ease the transitions of workers as they depart and return home. In doing so, the governments are striving to ensure that workers contribute meaningfully to both host and home economies while safeguarding their welfare and rights.

The discussion, finally, emphasised replicating successful cooperative models on labour mobility, with both speakers referencing bilateral partnerships with South Korea. Salik Hussain lauded Seoul's Employment Permit System, which has facilitated access for over 12,000 skilled and semi-skilled Pakistani workers to secure well-paying



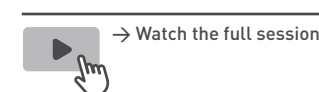
“The Talent Partnerships and labour migration frameworks represent win-win cooperation that are mutually beneficial for both sending and receiving countries...together we can forge safer, regular migration.”

Md. Ruhul Amin

Secretary, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Bangladesh



jobs in the country under fair labour conditions. This achievement was facilitated by the oversight provided by Pakistan's Overseas Employment Corporation, underscoring the need for both inter-agency and cross-country cooperation to unlock labour migration pathways and protect the dignity of migrants. Similarly, Amin highlighted Bangladesh's collaboration with South Korea as a prime example of aligning workforce capabilities with the needs of international labour markets, creating well-structured migration channels. Both agreed that the model is already inspiring partnerships with other countries and regions. Indeed, Amin argued the EU Talent Partnerships could be a further breakthrough for Bangladesh, creating safer, regular pathways and enabling individuals to gain access to improved livelihood opportunities.



Panel discussion

A reality check on labour migration: Perspectives from the private sector

ON STAGE

Lucja Kalkstein, Co-Founder and Group Vice-President, Eryk

Jo Antoons, Partner, Fragomen

Bianka Debussche Valkovicova, Policy Coordinator – Legal migration, Labour Mobility, Public Employment Services, ELA, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission

MODERATION

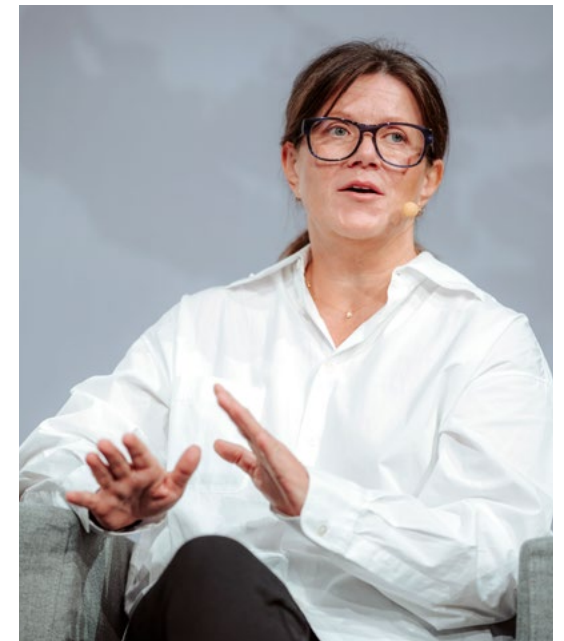
Jennifer Tangney, Senior Project Manager, Migration Partnership Facility, ICMPD



Europe is facing significant labour shortages, especially prominent in the health and ICT sectors, which has prompted employers to increasingly explore global hiring strategies to maintain a competitive edge. However, these efforts are frequently hampered by insufficient legal pathways, bureaucratic inefficiencies, lengthy migration processes, and inadequate investment in integration. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in particular, struggle to recruit and retain the international talent they require.

This panel, moderated by Jennifer Tangney, Senior Project Manager at ICMPD's Migration Partnership Facility, brought together Lucja Kalkstein, Co-Founder and Group Vice-President of Eryk, an international technical service provider; Jo Antoons, Partner at Fragomen; and Bianka Debussche Valkovicova, Policy Coordinator for legal migration at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. Together, they discussed strategies from both the public and private sector to address these critical issues.

Europe's labour market needs are acute. The health sector is grappling with a shortage of two million healthcare professionals, while the ICT sector will require an additional 20 million professionals by 2030. These shortages are particularly challenging for SMEs, with over 75 percent reporting difficulties in finding suitable talent. According to Debussche Valkovicova, hiring talent from outside the EU remains especially difficult, with more than half of companies encountering significant obstacles in the process. She referenced Mario Draghi's report on European competitiveness, which underscored the link between the scarcity of skilled labour and the inability of businesses to scale up and contribute to the EU's ambitious green and digital transition goals.



“What we found in Nigeria was a vast pool of talent—a young and growing population with a relatively good level of education. For us, it became clear that the time for Africa is now.”

Lucja Kalkstein
Co-Founder and Group Vice-President, Eryk

While internal solutions, such as upskilling vulnerable groups—young parents, persons with disabilities, migrants already in the EU, and youth not in employment, education, or training (NEETs)—can partially alleviate workforce shortages, the speakers agreed that legal migration pathways are an indispensable part of the solution. Kalkstein pointed to emerging economies such as Nigeria and Ghana as untapped reservoirs of talent that could strengthen European businesses and stabilise labour markets. Despite the EU's high standard of living, Debussche Valkovicova observed that its Member States lag behind other OECD countries—like the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia—on key attractiveness indicators. This comparative disadvantage hinders Europe-based companies in meeting their recruitment and retention objectives.

Although the EU has legal migration frameworks, such as the Blue Card scheme and various national initiatives, accessing these pathways is often fraught with difficulty, particularly for less-skilled workers. Antoons outlined the myriad hurdles businesses face, including prolonged job vacancy posting requirements and the necessity of justifying foreign hires with labour market tests. She further noted that foreign credentials frequently require recognition before obtaining employment or work permits and that this step is, for many, insurmountable. Debussche Valkovicova elaborated on other challenges, such as the bureaucratic, time-intensive, and costly processes for recognising third-country qualifications. Delays in securing consular appointments, high processing fees, steep salary thresholds for migrant workers, and the absence of fast-track options further compound the difficulties.

Kalkstein added that although businesses can mitigate some obstacles through diligent preparation, the unpredictability of bureaucratic processes continues to be a formidable challenge. A promising development, however, is the European Commission's recently adopted Skills and Talent Mobility Package, which seeks to streamline administrative procedures, such as labour market tests, particularly in sectors facing critical shortages.

While the EU has taken some steps to facilitate labour migration pathways, they are not always accessible to small and medium sized enterprises. For example, formalised public-private partnerships between migration and labour ministries and employers can streamline hiring processes for businesses with strong compliance records. However, Antoons pointed out that such frameworks often remain out of reach for SMEs due to their high costs, leaving multinational corporations to benefit disproportionately thanks to their economies of scale, workforce planning tools, and access to global legal expertise.

Debussche Valkovicova spotlighted the EU's proposed Talent Pool platform, which aims to address key labour shortages by making recruitment faster and easier, matching job seekers from outside the EU with high-demand roles and supporting them throughout the employment lifecycle. Yet, Antoons critiqued its outdated approach, which plans to focus on listing legal pathways and documentation requirements rather than providing actionable support. She proposed a dedicated AI-driven helpdesk to better assist SMEs, saving time and reducing dependency on costly legal advice. Accompanying measures were confirmed by all panellists as essential for SMEs to engage with a proposed Talent Pool.

Collaboration with civil servants, immigration officials, and international organisations can also help level the playing field for SMEs in identifying, recruiting, and relocating talent, particularly as part



“To be successful, we must reexamine our immigration systems and ensure they serve their purpose. This involves bringing together the private sector, civil servants, and immigration professionals to create practical and accessible solutions for SMEs.”

Jo Antoons
Partner, Fragomen



of existing legal pathways, according to Antoons. Kalkstein cited a successful example from Eryk's collaboration with the Danish trade mission in Lagos, which connected the company to relevant local stakeholders. Similarly, the ICMPD-supported TechPro4Europe pilot project in Nigeria, which is funded by the Migration Partnership Facility, played a pivotal role in facilitating background checks for job applicants at Eryk, reducing costs while also enhancing the company's credibility within the community. Meanwhile, Debussche Valkovicova identified skill assessment as an even greater challenge than qualification recognition for employers. She pointed to the EU's Union of Skills initiative, which envisions a standardised system for evaluating skills, as a promising solution.

Retention challenges compound recruitment difficulties and underscore the need for governments and employers to prioritise the personal and professional development of migrant employees. Recognising this, Debussche Valkovicova pointed out that the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) has allocated €1.4 billion to support the socio-economic and labour market integration of non-EU nationals over the coming years. Platforms like the European Partnership on Integration foster essential cooperation among employers, migration authorities, and other stakeholders. Kalkstein emphasised the importance of aligning migrant workers' roles with their qualifications and aspirations to mitigate discontent. She also stressed that family considerations, such as facilitating family reunification and work permits for spouses, are essential to improving integration outcomes and retention rates.

Drawing from Eryk's experience, Kalkstein argued that employer-led onboarding programmes should incorporate comprehensive support, including cultural awareness training and housing assistance to ease migrants' transition into their new environments. Promoting collegiality through effective communication between existing



“There is no one tool, one fund, or one country that can tackle the challenge of integration alone. We need a multi-stakeholder approach with cooperation at all levels—local authorities, employers, and social partners.”

Bianka Debussche Valkovicova

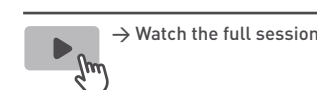
Policy Coordinator – Legal migration, Labour Mobility, Public Employment Services, ELA, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission



staff and new hires is also crucial for fostering a cohesive work atmosphere. She added that introducing changes, especially hiring from new regions like Africa, inevitably meets resistance—not just internally within the organisation, but also from customers. Businesses, therefore, need to insist on and explain their policies to gain acceptance. Finally, equal access to career advancement opportunities for migrant workers can cultivate a sense of belonging, ultimately boosting long-term retention.

Immigrants already living in the EU, in fact, represent an underutilised pool of workers. Debussche Valkovicova highlighted data showing that 40 percent of these individuals employed in the EU are overqualified for their current roles, underscoring the urgent need to expand language training, mentorship programmes, and collaboration between public employment services, migrants, and employers. Simplifying labour market access for refugees and other protected groups is also a critical yet often overlooked priority. Debussche Valkovicova

pointed to the value of initiatives such as Displaced Talent for Europe, which helps companies recruit refugees from non-EU countries, but stressed the importance of significantly scaling up these programmes. Here too, Europe can better foster skills development, leverage expertise, and establish itself as a more attractive destination for international talent, effectively tackling labour shortages while promoting economic growth and social cohesion.



→ Watch the full session





Armchair conversation

Ten building blocks for the Pact: Are we on track for a resourceful and flexible European migration system?

ON STAGE

Johannes Luchner, Deputy Director-General, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission
Ralph Genetzke, Director, Brussels Mission, ICMPD

With the gridlock over EU asylum rules broken, the EU and its Member States are pursuing an ambitious agenda to implement these new commitments by June 2026. This discussion explored what has changed since the Pact's adoption, where current priorities lie, and what it will take going forward to ensure a functioning, resourceful, and flexible European migration system. Johannes Luchner, the European Commission's Deputy Director-General of the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, shared insights during an armchair conversation moderated by Ralph Genetzke, ICMPD Brussels Mission Director.

Luchner highlighted the European Council's October 2024 meeting, which discussed the issue of instrumentalisation on the Polish border, as a testament to the EU's renewed unity and resolve on migration issues. He emphasised the growing focus among policymakers on delivering tangible results to reassure citizens, pointing to declining irregular arrivals as evidence that current measures are working. However, he cautioned that it is unlikely the entire Pact will be implemented early. Describing the Pact as a "Gesamtkunstwerk," a cohesive system of interconnected components such as Eurodac, screening procedures, and border enforcement support, the Deputy Director-General explained that executing this intricate framework requires significant time to develop budgets, build infrastructure, and craft national implementation plans. Additionally, Member States must conduct needs assessments, identify challenges, and enact legal reforms to align national laws with the Pact's requirements.

Several Member States face specific challenges, such as constitutional obstacles in federal systems and resource constraints. To address these disparities, the Commission plans to release a report in October 2025 detailing Member States' needs, ranging from in-kind support to solidarity on



"Cooperation between Member States and EU agencies is getting much stronger. In the past, Member States didn't regard it as a badge of honour if they had to work with an agency. Now, the doors are wide open, and our challenges are rather the contrary: how do we cope with all these demands?"

Johannes Luchner

Deputy Director-General, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, European Commission

relocations. These efforts are expected to align with President Ursula von der Leyen's focus on a results-driven approach to the multiannual financial framework. Importantly, Luchner noted that Member States can voluntarily begin implementation of the Pact now, where compliant with the bloc's existing legal framework.

Indeed, migration policy continues to evolve alongside Pact implementation, as the growing urgency for joint action on returns attests. Advocating for a stronger external dimension of migration governance, Luchner called for integrating migration into the EU's broader foreign policy, reaching beyond migration and interior ministers to include leadership all the way up to the prime ministerial level. While acknowledging that the current EU return rate of 27 percent is inadequate, he cited legal and logistical challenges as significant obstacles.

Proposals from von der Leyen, such as linking visa policies or trade measures to third-country cooperation on returns, offer potential paths forward. Return hubs also remain a viable option, pending political agreement. He highlighted the EU's action against airlines during the Belarus border crisis as a successful example of using technical regulations to curb irregular migration, suggesting this approach could be expanded to pressure other commercial enterprises to cooperate on migration governance.

Apart from return-related measures, Luchner highlighted the potential for increased investment in preventative actions in origin and transit countries. He elaborated on enhancing maritime policing fleets, deploying drones, and promoting advanced radar and aerial surveillance as cost-effective alternatives to returns. Strengthening local capacities could help reduce irregular migration at its source, a goal shared by both origin and destination countries.

Looking ahead, Luchner predicted increased collaboration between Member States and EU agencies to meet the growing demand for specialised expertise. For instance, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) provides guidance on integrating fundamental rights into migration policies. The Deputy Director-General suggested the EU consider expanding its legal competencies and capabilities to strengthen third-country cooperation and address emerging challenges, such as the weaponisation of migration by countries like Russia and Belarus. As the EU works to overcome different obstacles, Luchner stressed that successful implementation of the Pact will require meticulous coordination, resource alignment, and sustained commitment from all stakeholders.



→ Watch the full session



Panel discussion

From policy to practice: Strategic views on the operationalisation of the migration reform agenda

ON STAGE

Nina Gregori, Executive Director, European Union Asylum Agency

Sirpa Rautio, Director, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Stefano Failla, Director, EIBM Intelligence Division, European Border and Coast Guard Agency

MODERATION

Ralph Genetzke, Director, Brussels Mission, ICMPD



EU agencies have become indispensable sources of expertise in tackling emerging challenges and providing operational support to Member States in implementing comprehensive justice and home affairs reforms. This session reviewed the tasks ahead facing EU agencies during the current five-year legislative term in translating the new migration and asylum rules into practice and beyond.

The discussion, moderated by Ralph Genetzke, ICMPD Brussels Mission Director, featured panellists Nina Gregori, Executive Director of the European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA); Sirpa Rautio, Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA); and Stefano Failla, Director of the EIBM Intelligence Division at the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).

The Pact on Migration and Asylum is the latest step toward creating a common European asylum system, a process that began with the European Council Conclusions in Tampere in 1999. In this context, the panellists characterised the Pact as a complex framework with numerous interdependent components, echoing a resounding sentiment voiced throughout VMC2024. For instance, Gregori argued the further development of Eurodac is essential to ensuring the interoperability of IT systems, such as the visa information, Schengen, and entry-exit systems. These enhancements will allow EU Member States to better leverage data to enforce migration and asylum directives.

The EUAA has taken on a leading role in supporting EU Member States and institutions in implementing this evolving framework. As the Pact enters its operational phase, the EUAA is focusing on four



“The pact is the next level of the creation of a common European asylum system, and we hope this implementation will bring us to more convergence—that’s our main goal.”

Nina Gregori
Executive Director, European Union Asylum Agency

main pillars, as Gregori explained. The first pillar involves restructuring the agency to optimise its impact on 120 deliverables, including updated training modules, guidance services, indicators, and other tools to assist Member States in implementing the Pact. This restructuring will be directed by the EUAA’s management board, comprising representatives from Member States, the European Commission, and UNHCR.

The second pillar centres on support for the Commission, particularly in assessing national implementation plans and fulfilling other requirements under the Pact. A third pillar focuses on helping Member States prepare their own implementation plans, utilising tools from the first pillar, such as training for newly involved staff. For example, while many Member States have implemented national policies, the Pact seeks to standardise seamless border and screening procedures across the bloc. Achieving this will require robust, accurate data to guide resource and workflow planning, a gap the EUAA aims to address through multi-purpose applications designed to model needs and support governments.

Finally, the fourth pillar is dedicated to direct support for Pact implementation through the EUAA’s permanent staff and operational teams. Gregori also highlighted the judiciary’s critical role in ensuring swift asylum processes, particularly for border and return procedures, as well as cases involving potential detention. To this end, the EUAA provides tailored training for thousands of personnel across Member States.

Frontex, for its part, complements the EUAA’s capacity-building efforts with operational activities, such as supporting screening regulations and return provisions. Failla highlighted Frontex’s uniformed service of 2,300 officers, which provides a visual identity to the EU’s migration management system. Frontex’s support ranges from border control to intelligence gathering and border operations.



“Being situationally aware is no longer enough. Situational awareness gives you an understanding of your immediate surroundings, but it does not help you plan, prevent, and anticipate challenges. Foresight is incredibly important to orient a proper operational response at the border and within the Schengen space.”

Stefano Failla
Director, EIBM Intelligence Division, European Border and Coast Guard Agency



Additionally, its research and foresight equip Member States with qualitative information on migratory trends, enabling proactive responses to shifting patterns.

Meanwhile, Rautio clarified that FRA's main role is to focus on the safeguards and rights aspects of the Pact, while emphasising the importance of collaboration between agencies like the EUAA and Frontex to integrate fundamental rights into migration policy. She also said the FRA can apply its broad expertise of human rights across different fields in concert with migration agencies with context-specific knowledge, ensuring frequent contact between implementing officers and compliance authorities to reduce infractions. The FRA's special attention to children's rights will require engagement with Member States, civil society, and other stakeholders to safeguard protections.

Rautio further stressed the importance of upholding the rule of law, even as the migration legal framework grows more complex. She cautioned that compromising on constitutional and treaty-based values

would undermine the European project's credibility. Independent monitoring by Member States, along with proper resource allocation, is essential to ensure screening and asylum procedures adhere to human rights standards, which are vital for the system's credibility. However, she noted current fragmentation in monitoring mechanisms. While many EU Member States have human rights institutions and ombudsman offices, and some have robust border monitoring systems, a more holistic approach is needed. Member States will require additional resources and guidance on processes like legal counselling, a service the EUAA can provide, according to Gregori.

Looking ahead, the panellists anticipate increased use of technology and interoperability as borders become more data-driven and interconnected. However, they also underlined that as criminal networks and state or non-state actors adapt to exploit these advanced systems, the EU must continue investing to stay ahead to address issues such as human trafficking or the weaponisation of migration.

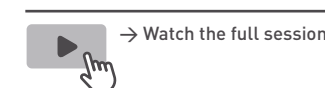


“If the safeguards and rights pillar fail, the system will lose credibility. Without respect for rule of law and fundamental rights, Europe would no longer uphold the values and treaty obligations that are its foundation.”

Sirpa Rautio
Director, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights

Migration governance must also adapt to evolving routes and shifting push-and-pull factors. In this context, Failla urged the EU to adopt a foresight-oriented approach, enabling proactive planning and response to emerging challenges. Frontex, he said, should prioritise intelligence gathering to better inform operational decisions at borders and within the Schengen area. The agency's allocation of its limited resources and assets will also be shaped by instability in neighbouring regions, which remain significant sources of migration. Furthermore, Failla pointed to return rates as a key metric for assessing the Pact's effectiveness. Frontex already plays a supporting role in 45 percent of return cases, organising flights and reintegration assistance. According to Failla, the agency is committed to allocating all surplus resources to improving returns, which remain central to achieving the EU's migration goals.

In addition to monitoring Member States' pact implementation, the EUAA will pilot its new monitoring methodology in collaboration with the Netherlands and Estonia before full implementation in 2026. Gregori argued that the Pact's monitoring framework will bring Member States closer to convergence in migration management, addressing secondary movements, asylum system abuses, and human trafficking while ensuring timely protection for those in need. The Pact could also lay the groundwork for a Europeanisation of asylum procedure potentially enabling mutual recognition of asylum statuses across the EU. Such convergence will position Europe to explore innovative solutions with countries outside the EU, such as return and multi-purpose hubs, paving the path towards a more comprehensive approach that can curb irregular movements, while harnessing opportunities for legal pathways.





Closing discussion

The next five years: Dealing with black swans and staying the course

ON STAGE

Hanne Beirens, Director, Migration Policy Institute Europe
Ana Sofia Walsh, Knowledge Management Director, Fragomen
Guy Stessens, Deputy Director Home Affairs, Council of the European Union

MODERATION

Sarah Schlaeger, Senior Lead Policy and Liaison, Brussels Mission, ICMPD

As the EU embarks on the monumental task of preparing to implement the Pact on Migration and Asylum, what should be prioritised as the new European Commission begins its term? How will governments balance managing irregular entries and asylum claims with attracting international talent and essential foreign workers? Have the black swans of the past few years prepared the EU for what may await around the next corner? In the concluding session of VMC2024, expert panellists shared their key takeaways from the conference and looked ahead to the next five years of migration governance.

Moderated by Sarah Schlaeger, Senior Lead Policy and Liaison at the ICMPD Brussels Mission, the session featured Guy Stessens, Deputy Director for Home Affairs at the Council of the European Union; Ana Sofia Walsh, Knowledge Management Director at Fragomen; and Hanne Beirens, Director of the Migration Policy Institute Europe. ICMPD Director General Michael Spindelegger concluded the session with brief closing remarks for VMC2024.

With the conference held during a high-stakes election year throughout the world—and just ahead of the US presidential election—the political dynamics influencing migration governance emerged as a recurring theme. Stessens argued that political ideologies often obstruct pragmatic action, emphasising the challenging balancing act faced by the European Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament in addressing competing demands from diverse stakeholders; for instance, on debates over the future role of Frontex. He observed that migration governance often becomes a platform for symbolic political gestures rather than problem solving-oriented pragmatism. For example, Stessens highlighted the VMC panel on external processing, where the consensus view suggested that such measures



“Geopolitical surprises are potential black swans which could have significant migration consequences.”

Guy Stessens
Deputy Director Home Affairs, Council of the European Union

would likely have limited practical impact, instead rather serving the purpose of signalling action to constituencies advocating for stricter migration policies.

Stessens also pointed to the nexus between security and migration as another prominent theme, reflecting growing global instability and geopolitical tensions. As migration increasingly intersects with policing matters, interior ministries are poised to take on a progressively larger role in shaping policy. Indeed, recent decisions by EU Member States to reintroduce and bolster internal border controls highlight a growing tendency to frame migration as a security issue. The issue of returns, particularly where security concerns are present, has also risen on the EU agenda. The weaponisation of migration, while currently involving relatively small numbers of individuals, underscores the need for vigilance in an unpredictable geopolitical landscape. He especially warned that the EU must prepare for potentially graver scenarios, which could strain conventional approaches rooted in asylum and human rights norms.

While agreeing that security concerns are undeniable, Walsh advised caution regarding the use of terms like “crisis” or “unprecedented.” She argued that advancements in data and technology now enable the EU to anticipate and mitigate challenges more effectively, reducing the likelihood of genuine black swan events. Looking at the EU, migration forms part of political campaigns, which include a lot of “performative hostility” of saying something about migration and then once in power doing something different. She noted that although political rhetoric on migration often serves performative purposes, it can have tangible consequences for people and businesses, hampering innovation and opportunities for individuals and businesses.

For now, labour migration remains a priority for most governments, given Europe’s demographic challenges and workforce

shortages. However, the polarisation between labour migration and non-labour migration and the politicisation of the latter risks eroding the policy space needed to maintain Europe’s competitiveness. Walsh pointed to fragmented legal pathways and the reintroduction of Schengen border controls as factors undermining the EU’s image as a unified bloc and single market. As a solution to irregular movements, she advocated for improving access to legal pathways and integration, including via hiring practices, upskilling, and streamlining bureaucratic processes. She also highlighted the potential of global mobility to support Europe’s green transition by creating environmentally sustainable jobs across all skill levels. She argued that it is crucial to prioritise the development of ‘green skills’



“Sustainable partnerships must elevate the voices of third countries and recognise their contributions to global migration solutions.”

Hanne Beirens
Director, Migration Policy Institute Europe



“The EU is trying to ride two horses on labour and non-labour migration. While there is no silver bullet for reconciling the two, better workforce integration of migrants provides a promising path forward.”

Ana Sofia Walsh
Knowledge Management Director, Fragomen

for the future, as they have a transformative impact across various industries. Currently, labour migration pathways are better suited to highly skilled workers, particularly in brown industries, highlighting the need for adaptation to greener sectors.

Beirens revisited key dilemmas discussed throughout VMC2024, such as managing tensions between “too many” versus “too few” migrants, as underlined in Ivan Krastev’s keynote speech, and balancing exclusionary versus inclusive approaches to new arrivals. She asserted that on one hand, there are vast and transformative changes to democracies and societies, reshaping geopolitics as we know it. On the other hand, there is the challenge of preventing irregular border crossings while simultaneously embracing democratic changes that redefine how societies are governed. She emphasised that migration’s potential to drive innovation and prosperity often conflicts with perceptions of its detrimental impact on social cohesion.

Drawing on conference discussions about using data and algorithms to better match migrants with communities, Beirens argued that Europe could leverage migration in a more politically and economically sustainable way. However, she cautioned against overreliance on innovative border management strategies that might erode democratic values under the guise of protection. She noted that the constant search for innovation satisfies our human interest in change and new things, but at the same time, it shakes up the familiar, confronting us with proposals for migration policies carving away at fundamental rights and other pillars of our democracies. In this regard, incorporating safeguards that embed transparency, oversight, and accountability into the use of novel technologies is essential to ensuring their sustainable application.

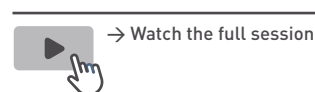
Partnerships emerged as a critical component of effective migration governance. Beirens highlighted an ongoing shift from narrowly focused cooperation on irregular



migration to more comprehensive, route-based approaches. These holistic strategies focus on facilitating access to safe, regular migration pathways and prioritising investments in the protection capacities and socio-economic conditions of countries of origin, transit, and first asylum. As a key support tool, multi-purpose hubs, such as Safe Mobility Offices and Migrant Resource Centres, can play an integral role in providing outreach, assistance, and services to migrants and governments along routes. Beirens also underscored the value of third-country perspectives, particularly in recognising the contributions of remittances, diasporas, and legal migration to nation-building and development. As these migration governance dialogues continue in the future, she advocated for greater interdisciplinary collaboration and urged migration experts to engage with historians, demographers, and economists to incorporate broader contextual insights that can provide the foundation for more economically, politically, and socially sound migration policy.

Finally, closing the curtains on VMC2024, Spindelegger underlined the optimistic outlook and pragmatic spirit of the discussions, particularly against the backdrop of a

contentious year of elections worldwide. He highlighted the eagerness of EU countries to build on and swiftly implement the Pact, viewing this as a constructive step and a strong signal to external partners that the EU speaks with one voice on migration and asylum. The Pact, he noted, has been reinforced by new and strengthened partnerships, such as the EU-Egypt Joint Declaration, which aim to deliver on shared goals and interests. Meanwhile, route-based approaches and labour mobility cooperation offer promise in addressing the international protection and livelihood needs of people on the move, while also enhancing the quality of life in local communities across countries of origin, transit, and destination. As these initiatives progress, Spindelegger underscored that ICMPD, in collaboration with EU countries, would play its part by forging ever stronger migration partnerships and leveraging tools like the Migration Partnership Facility to support countries along migratory routes.



→ Watch the full session



③

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ICMPD strives to ensure an inclusive working environment and be attentive to gender diversity and the plurality of voices represented in our initiatives. When this is not reflected in our events, it is due to the unavailability of speakers or challenges in identifying suitable profiles in our network.

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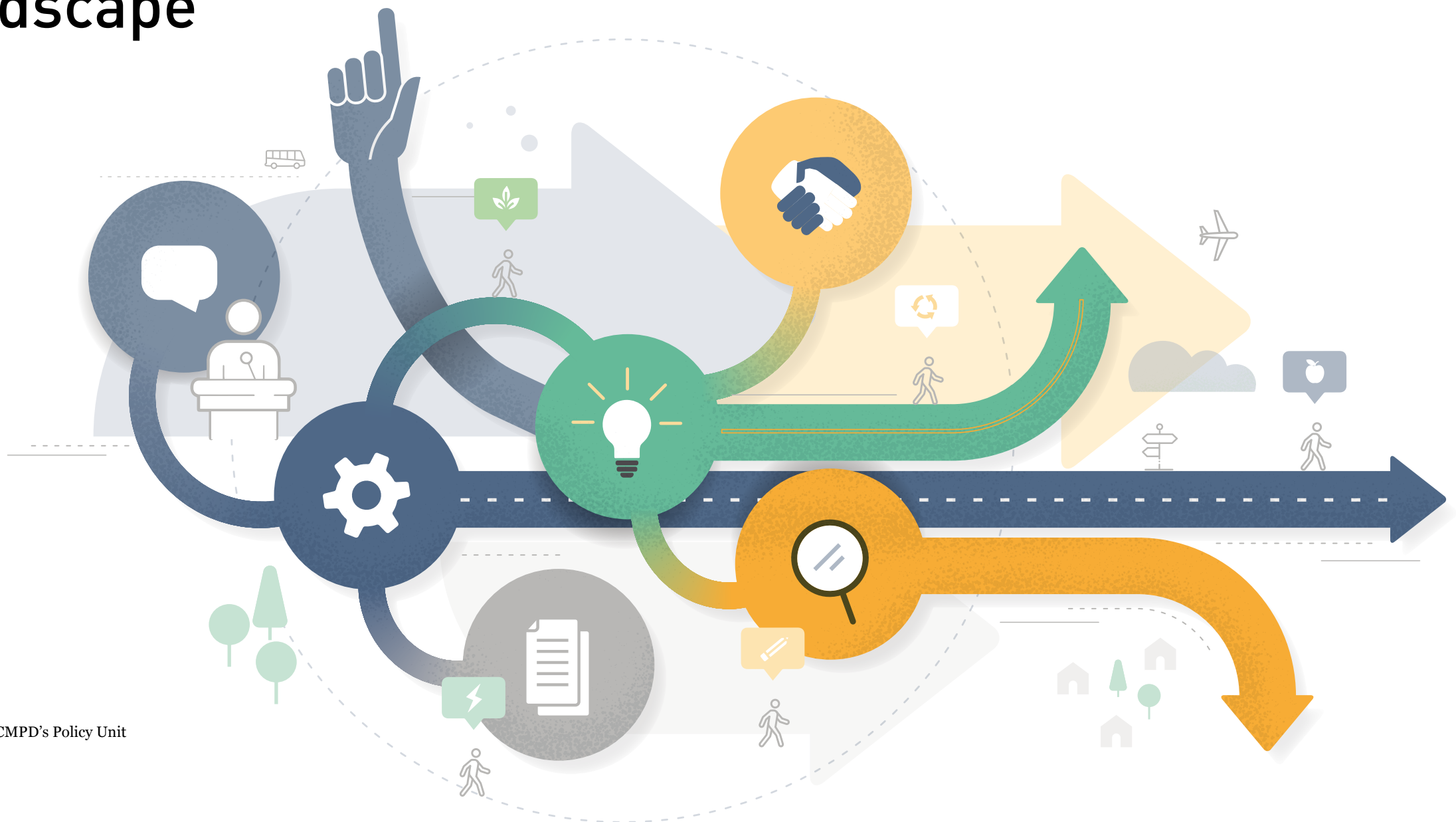
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REFLECTIONS



Five takeaways on migration governance in a shifting geopolitical landscape

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.

Five takeaways

1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 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.



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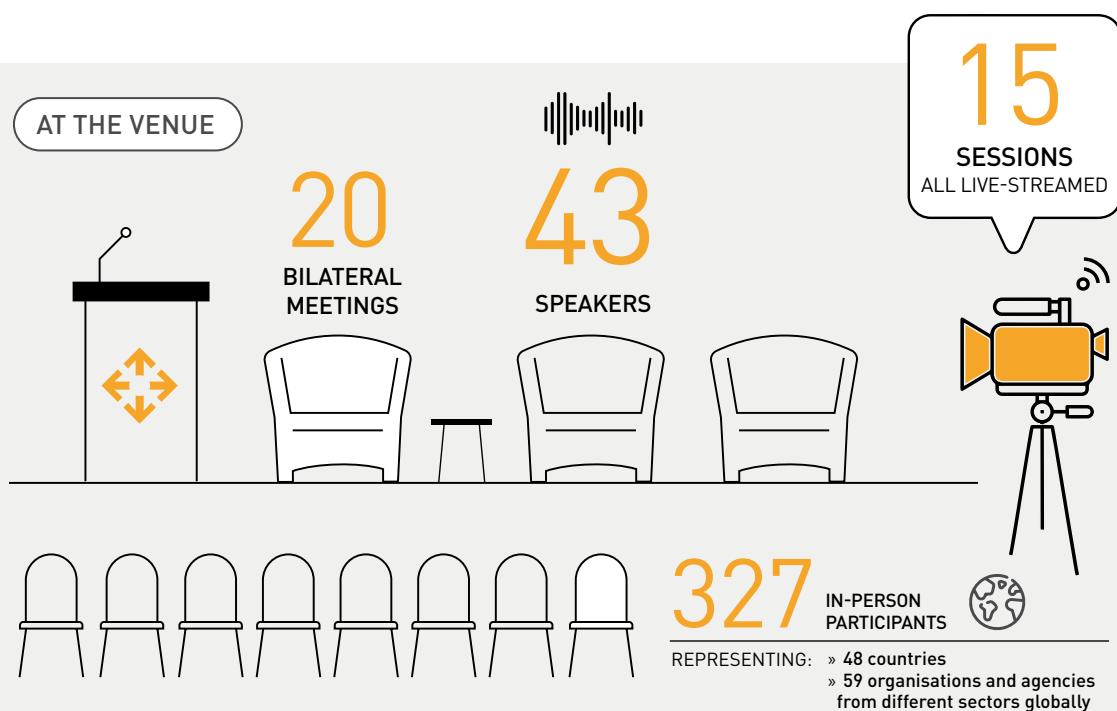
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FIGURES

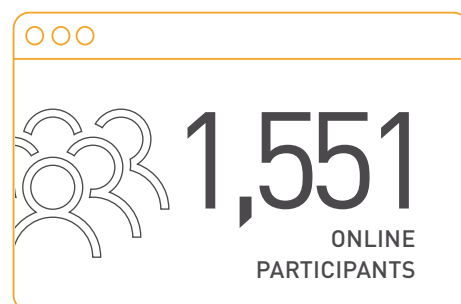


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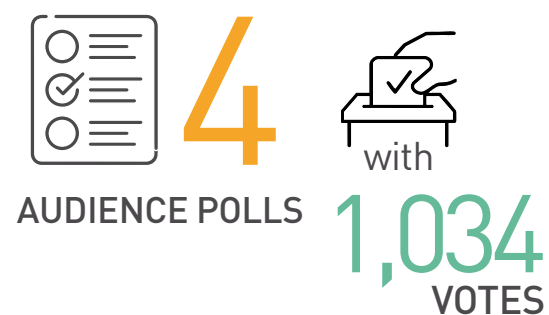
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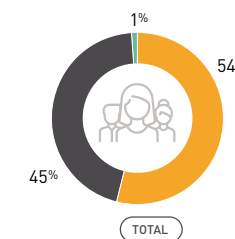
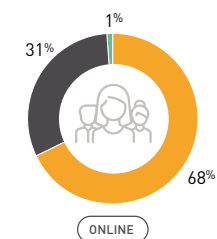
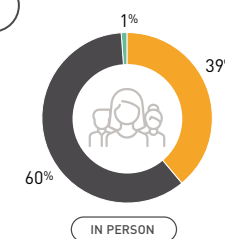
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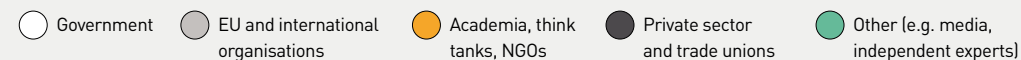
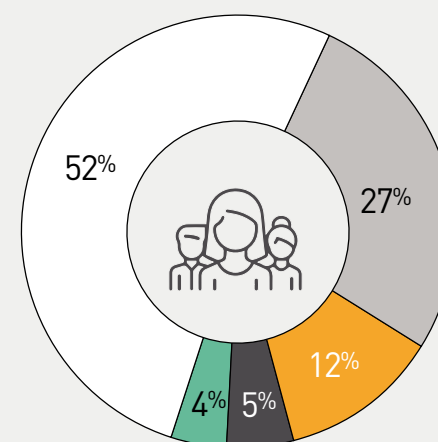
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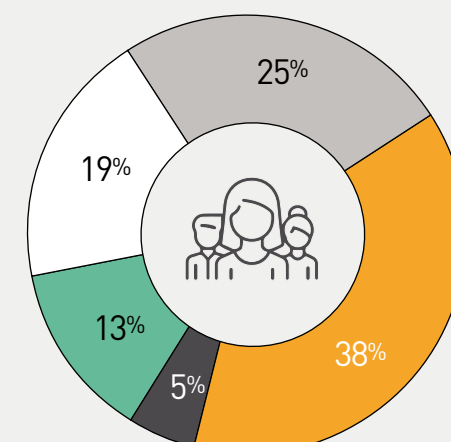
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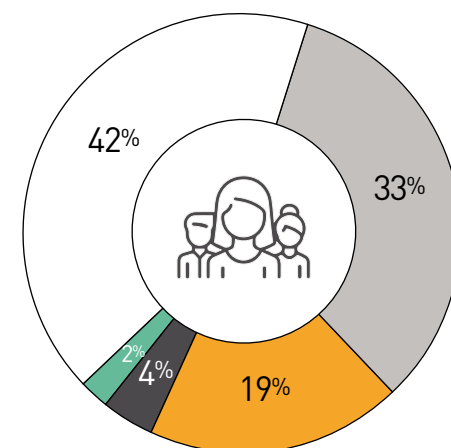
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This report condenses the main highlights of VMC2024; as such, it is not an exhaustive summary of the discussions. The views and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinion of ICMPD.

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The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) is an international intergovernmental organisation purposed with fostering evidence-driven, innovative, and effective solutions to migration challenges.

For more than 30 years, ICMPD has advised and supported its Member States and partners by developing migration policy inputs and innovative practices, while promoting broad, multisectoral cooperation on migration and mobility governance. ICMPD has served as an essential partner to its Member States, associated countries, as well as partners and collaborators in Europe, along migration routes and in key regions connected by migration. ICMPD provides platforms for dialogue and engagement, delivers expertise and evidence, and supports the development of sound, innovative migration policies, and governance systems.

The Vienna-based organisation has a mission in Brussels, regional offices in Istanbul, Malta and Abuja as well as 28 field and project offices in several countries. ICMPD has over 500 staff members and is active in over 90 countries.



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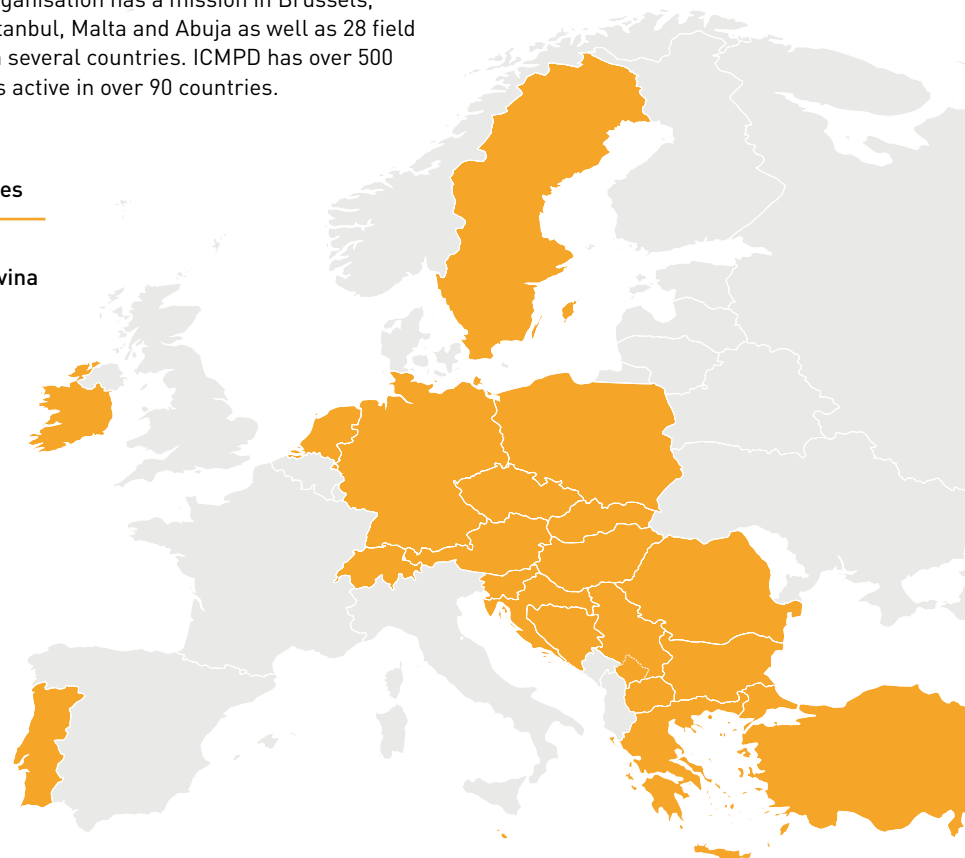
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VMC Team

The Vienna Migration Conference is ICMPD's annual flagship event, and its culmination is the sum of efforts from the organisation's best and brightest across teams and locations.

The core organising team, under the leadership of the Policy Unit, is situated within the Directorate for Policy, Research and Strategy. The Brussels Mission and Regional Offices, furthermore, contribute strategic support.



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We build evidence-driven migration policy options and governance systems that engage and equip our partners with effective, forward-leaning responses to opportunities and pragmatic solutions to complex, regional migration and mobility challenges connected by migration.



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Every autumn VMC offers an indispensable opportunity to discuss unfolding geopolitical dynamics, global trends and the current EU migration agenda.

Making use of ICMPD's wide-ranging expertise and global network, VMC convenes politicians, senior officials, experts, and practitioners from governments, international organisations, civil society, academia, the private sector, and the media to debate the most pressing issues of migration governance.

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