Europe has a tenth of the world’s people, a quarter of the world’s countries, and a third of the world’s international migrants. Can European countries with aging populations that “need” immigrants manage migration and select desired immigrants? Can a continent that became a human rights leader after two world wars deal with an influx of African and Asian migrants who apply for asylum?

People move from poorer to richer places and, except for the oil-rich Gulf states, the share of migrants increases with per capita income. Most migrants can be from neighboring countries, as in Switzerland, or from more distant places, as in Australia, Canada, and the US.

There is a migration hump in many developing countries that send people abroad, which means that emigration increases as per capita incomes rise from very low levels. People in countries with per capita incomes of less than $5,000 often cannot afford to emigrate, while those in countries with per capita incomes above $20,000 rarely want to emigrate because they have opportunities at home.

Europe

The share of migrants in the EU-27 countries averages 12 percent (15 percent in the US) but varies from less than two percent in Romania to 20 percent in Austria, Germany, and Sweden. European leaders want to prevent irregular migration, attract more skilled migrants, and integrate low-skilled migrants.

Australia and Switzerland are the Richest Countries with the Highest Shares of Migrants

History

Europe was a continent of emigration from the 1700s to the early 20th century, when WWI, legislation, and WWII stopped most emigration. After WWII, some 12 million Germans who were outside of post-war German borders moved from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and other countries to Germany. Jews and others who survived concentration camps sought new homes, Fremdarbeiter in Germany returned to their home countries, and POWs were exchanged.

Some postwar leaders feared that the sometimes chaotic movements of people after WWII could sow the seeds of another war by leaving resentful minorities in countries that prompt intervention, as Germany intervened in Czechoslovakia to protect minority Germans in 1938. The UN High Commission for Refugees was established in 1950 to assist displaced persons from WWII, and the 1951 Refugee Convention guaranteed everyone the right to seek asylum in another country if they faced persecution at home.
Guest Workers

A new temporary labor migration began in the 1960s. Postwar European economies that were helped by Marshall Plan aid faced labor shortages due to a baby boom, more youth getting more education, and earlier retirement at a time when there was a booming US demand for European exports such as VW Beetle cars. As unemployment disappeared, European leaders allowed the entry of guest workers from southern European countries with lagging economies.

This was expected to be rotational labor migration, meaning that guest workers would work and save several years and then return with their savings to jumpstart development at home.

Italians, Greeks, Spaniards and others moved north, filling jobs in factories, mines, and construction sites. As labor shortages persisted, European governments helped their employers to recruit guest workers in Morocco, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and other countries.

Most migrants returned as expected, but many migrants settled because most governments allowed migrants whom employers wanted to retain to form or unify families, and gave them permanent residence or immigrant status after five years. Northern European employers did not want to lose experienced guest workers and have to recruit and train new workers, while experienced southern European migrants wanted to continue to earn higher wages abroad.

The result was the creation of minority communities in many northern European cities. Labor migration was halted by governments as unemployment rose after oil price hikes in 1973 but most low
skilled migrants stayed because they had achieved immigrant status and economic conditions were just as bad at home, where the social safety net was thinner. Despite this settlement, host governments insisted that guest workers would eventually leave (“Germany is not a country of immigration”), and some taught guest worker children in their home country language to facilitate returns.

Unemployment among low-skilled migrants increased as industries that recruited low-skilled migrants restructured in the 1970s and 1980s. France and Germany tried to induce some settled migrant families to leave by offering departure bonuses equivalent to a year or more of unemployment benefits.

By the 1990s, it was clear that most guest workers and their families were settled, forcing governments to change their policies and plan for the integration of minorities. Meanwhile, the breakup of Yugoslavia led to an outflow of people who sought asylum. Germany dealt with this 1990s asylum crisis by preserving the constitutional right of individuals to apply for asylum, but also pushing its borders out by making it harder for migrants to enter Germany to apply for asylum.

**Enlargement**

European countries in the 21st century recognized that they were countries of immigration. Societies with aging populations that relied on younger workers to pay taxes to fund extensive social welfare systems prompted many political leaders to assert that European countries needed to recruit skilled immigrants even as they struggled to integrate minorities such as Turks who had high unemployment rates.

Most European countries looked to the point systems of Australia and Canada as models of how to select skilled immigrants, and many enacted laws that required foreigners who receive social assistance to enroll in language and culture classes or risk non-renewal of residence permits.

Individual countries grappled with the arrival and integration of migrants just as political leaders promoted intra-EU migration by standardizing higher education curricula and requiring mutual recognition of national licenses and certificates. The Schengen Agreement of 1985 led to the abolishment of border controls within most EU countries, meaning that a foreigner arriving in Paris would not face border controls if continuing to Berlin or Rome.

After 2004, when eight Eastern European countries joined the EU, many Poles and other Eastern
Europeans moved west for higher wages. Existing EU member states could restrict this east-west movement until 2011, and many did. However, the UK did not restrict east-west migration, and the arrival of millions of Eastern Europeans helped to set the stage for Brexit in 2016.

Wages in the new Eastern European member states were only a fifth of wages in Western Europe, leading to the hiring workers in Poland and other Eastern European countries and assigning or posting them in Western European countries. German labor law considered Poles posted in Germany to be Polish rather than German workers and thus covered by Polish wage and social benefits despite being employed in German factories or construction sites. There was widespread opposition to posting workers abroad that culminated in the 1997 EU Posted Workers Directive, which required that all workers receive at least the national minimum wage. However, posted workers or agency work continues because employers can save on payroll taxes by hiring migrants from poorer countries.

Turks are the largest minority in Germany, Europe’s largest economy, and their integration became a subject of debate in the 2010s. On the one hand, half of the players on the German national soccer team had migrant backgrounds, reflecting the successful integration of migrants and their children in sports. On the other hand, Germans were more likely to be employed and less likely to be unemployed than migrants, leading some to argue that admitting more migrants could add to rather than solve problems with the funding of the social welfare system if the newcomers relied on government assistance.

Asylum

The next major European migration crisis came in 2015, when over a million Syrians, Afghans, and other foreigners arrived and applied for asylum. Many Syrian migrants were living in Turkey and used small boats to travel from Turkey’s west coast to nearby Greek islands, from which they went north through the Balkans to northern European countries. When the Hungarian government refused to allow the migrants to continue by train to Germany, then-PM Angela Merkel said Wir schaffen das or Germany can accept and integrate Syrian refugees, prompting Time magazine to name Merkel its Person of the Year in 2015.

Most Germans welcomed the newcomers, volunteering at shelters that housed them and sometimes opening their homes to them in a Wilkommenskultur. However, there were also arson attacks on asylum seeker housing, and male Muslim migrants were accused of attacking young German women on New Year’s Eve.

Germany Accepted Millions of Migrants from Ex-Yugoslavia in the Early 1990s
Year’s Eve in Cologne. The backlash led to a March 2016 EU-Turkey agreement that involved the EU paying Turkey to improve conditions for migrants in Turkey and the Turkish government preventing migrants from leaving for the EU by boat.

**Pact**

The migrant wave in 2015-16 was followed by ambitious plans to integrate the newcomers who had arrived, many of whom did not speak local languages and had few skills. At the same time, many European governments enacted policies to open doors wider to skilled migrants, including foreign students who graduate from local universities and are offered jobs by employers. The migration policy of most European countries was welcome the skilled, integrate the low-skilled, and reduce illegal migration and asylum seeking.

Covid closed borders in 2020 and 2021, but Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to another wave of migrants who were provided temporary protection as well as more asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa. Over a million migrants applied for asylum in EU countries in 2023, and another million are expected in 2024.

The EU has struggled with asylum seekers. EU countries are leaders in human rights, aiming to develop policies that respect human rights and using soft power to influence the behavior of other governments. However, if “too many” migrants arrive in front-line states such as Greece and Italy and apply for asylum, how should they be dealt with?

About 40 percent of asylum applicants in the EU receive some form of protection, although the acceptance rate varies from country to country.
country. Over half of the Syrians, Eritreans, Somalis, and Afghans receive protection, compared with less than 10 percent of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Albanians. The Dublin Regulation of 1990 aims to avoid “asylum shopping” by requiring migrants to apply for asylum in the first EU country they reach, so a migrant arriving in Greece should apply there even if Greece has few jobs and the migrant has relatives in Germany. The Dublin Regulation is routinely violated by front-line countries and migrants, as in 2015 when migrants arriving on Greek islands moved on to Germany and Sweden.

EU leaders have proposed many forms of burden sharing, meaning that other EU states would take some asylum seekers from Greece and Italy or pay Greece and Italy to care for migrants. However, Eastern European countries such as Hungary oppose burden sharing, preferring instead a policy of blocking asylum seekers in transit countries such as Turkey or Libya and turning them back at EU borders.

The EU approved a Pact on Migration and Asylum in April 2024 to deal with migrants who arrive at EU borders and request asylum:

- Migrants six and older will be fingerprinted, photographed, and detained in front-line countries for up to 12 weeks.
- Migrants who transited safe countries en route to Europe, and those from countries where fewer than 20 percent of applicants are granted asylum such as Morocco and Serbia, will be processed in a fast-track system to expedite expulsions.
- Front-line countries are responsible for asylum seekers for up to 20 months.
- Non-frontline EU states must accept at least 30,000 asylum seekers a year from front-line states or pay €20,000 for each asylum seeker they refuse or up to €300 million a year.

The Pact increases funding for the EU border enforcement agency Frontex, whose 10,000 staff help national governments to patrol their borders, and the asylum fingerprint database Eurodac, which aims to...
prevent asylum seekers from applying in multiple countries. Human rights groups and migrant advocates condemned the Pact, while anti-migrant groups argued that it did not go far enough to close EU borders.

The EU Pact aims to reduce the number of asylum seekers who arrive, but what should be done with the 10 million people who settled in the EU over the past decade, including 4 million Ukrainians? Most are unlikely to leave voluntarily, raising the question of whether governments should force migrants out or integrate them. Denmark has since 2021 been returning Syrians to Syria, but other EU countries are offering language and culture classes to integrate Syrians, Afghans, and others who are hard to remove to their countries of origin.

The integration challenge raises many questions. What is the optimal mix of carrots and sticks to encourage migrants to learn the local language and acquire skills so that employers want to hire the newcomers? If fewer newcomers arrive, will settled migrants be easier to integrate?

European Parliament elections suggest that voters are moving right, away from political parties that support migrants and a quick transition to a greener economy. The 720-member European Parliament must approve EU leaders and the EU’s $1 trillion a year budget. Anti-migrant populist parties were the major winners in June 2024 elections, gaining 13 seats, primarily due to gains in France, Germany, and Italy.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum was Approved in April 2024

Centrist political parties in the conservative European People’s Party of similar national parties won 184 seats and the left-leaning Socialists and Democrats won 139 seats. With similar smaller parties, centrists have a majority in the 2024-29 Parliament. The major losers were the Renew coalition that includes French President Marcon’s Renaissance Party, which lost 22 seats compared to 2019 elections, and the coalition of green parties that lost 19 seats.
Perspective

The share of foreign-born residents has risen in all European countries, doubling in Sweden, Germany, and the UK between 1990 and 2020 and increasing seven-fold in Spain.

This influx of migrants brought workers but also newcomers who do not speak the local language and are sometimes dependent on government assistance. Reactions against the changes associated with migrants fueled Brexit in 2016 and the rise of anti-migrant parties in most European countries, especially when mainstream parties emphasized only the economic benefits of migrants and downplayed worries about newcomers as racism.

Migration is a process to be managed rather than a problem to be solved. Governments react to migration issues, solving one problem while sometimes creating another. European countries individually and collectively are struggling to answer the fundamental migration questions of how many, from where, and in what status newcomers should arrive and be integrated. European political and economic leaders agree that more immigration is needed for demographic and economic reasons, but aging populations often resist the changes that accompany migration, raising the question of whether societies that “need” immigrants are willing to accept and integrate them.

Europeans Went to the Polls in June 2024 to Elect a New Parliament

Spain and Italy had the Biggest Jumps in the Share of Their Populations that Was Born Abroad

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