



FUTURE MIGRATION  
SCENARIOS FOR EUROPE

Policy Brief

# Why do people migrate? Where do they choose to migrate?



**Policy brief:**

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## Introduction

Today, approximately 3.4 percent of the world's population are international migrants – people living outside their country of birth. In the future, the number of people who move from one country to another may increase due to population growth in developing countries, increased mobility, political unrest in some world regions, and climate change. The question is how much may international migration flows increase and where will migrants go?

The Horizon 2020 project *Future migration scenarios for Europe* (FUME) focuses on understanding the patterns, motivations, and modalities of migration at multiple geographical scales, from international through regional to the local, and on developing possible future scenarios of migration to Europe. These scenarios shall improve our understanding of the complexity and diversity of migration – and support migration, integration, labour market and cohesion policies at different governance levels.

This policy brief answers key FUME research questions, summarizes important project findings, and presents policy recommendations. It is based on fieldwork carried out in selected countries of origin including in-depth individual and group interviews of migrants, a review of migration literature, an expert survey of migration researchers, and a Delphi survey of migration experts.





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## Why do people decide to leave their home region?

Understanding the drivers of migration, and people's motivation to migrate is a precondition for making projections of future migration patterns. FUME researchers have interviewed potential migrants and migration experts in four countries of origin – Iraq, Tunisia, Senegal and Ukraine – and analysed demographic trends, livelihood opportunities, the demand for and supply of labour, as well as environmental threats to shed light on people's motivation to leave or to remain in their places or regions of origin. In addition, migration experts from Europe were interviewed about their expectations regarding future migration to Europe. From the analyses, these factors are likely to influence people's decision to migrate going forward.

### 1. Economic and labour market prospects:

Labour market opportunities matter. If people encounter difficulties in finding a job that corresponds to their qualifications, offers a good wage and safe working conditions, their willingness to migrate increases. Interviewees from countries of origin described their hope to find better work opportunities and higher wages as a key motivation to move abroad. Labour migration is also one strategy for families to diversify household income and reduce the risk of poverty.

*"I am willing to leave because there is no future here to live for. Because there are almost no work options for the youth, many students graduate with no plans for the future, especially since the 2014 ISIS crises worsening the country's economy." (Female, 24 years, Iraq)*

### 2. Educational aspirations:

Related to the previous point, interviewees in countries of origin also mention good education opportunities in Western countries as a motivation to migrate. Personal aspirations and the desire to improve personal opportunities also matter.

*"Recently, going abroad to study has become the norm not only for urban residents, but also for rural residents. Such a reorientation has taken place, and there is an opportunity to migrate not only within the country, but also abroad – this is such a new phenomenon. (Interviewee, Ukraine)*

### 3. Political stability and security:

Political instability, military conflict and terrorism create incentives to emigrate and may even lead to forced migration. Interviewees in countries of origin argued that people whose personal security and livelihoods are at stake or who worry about the safety and wellbeing of family members may see migration as a promising path to obtain safety and better living conditions.

*"In August of 2014 Daesh (ISIS) attacked Shingal, we were forced to leave our home region, and this was the reason... We left many things there, such as memories, friends, and native region, which altogether was psychologically difficult." (Female, 24 years, Iraq)*



Picture: Elizabeth Lies/Unsplash.com

#### 4. Environmental factors:

Climate change is rarely mentioned as a motivation to migrate, but environmental factors – which in turn are influenced by climate change – are considered important. Interviewees in case study countries are, for example, worried that extreme weather events such as droughts might occur more frequently in the future. This might decrease the availability of arable land, reduce agricultural productivity, and deteriorate living conditions. People in areas dependent on agriculture may then be forced to search for better opportunities elsewhere. Nonetheless, the concrete impact of climate change on migration flows – and if migrants would move shorter or longer distances – is now difficult to predict.

***“Even difficult climate conditions influenced the situation, such as drought. Many problems are affecting agriculture and causing losses. Hence, they choose to migrate [...]. They migrate because of the difficult conditions.” (Interviewee, Tunisia)***

#### 5. Societal norms about migration:

Research suggests that once migratory movements have started, a ‘culture of migration’ can develop. Mobility and the willingness to contribute to household income by searching for work abroad may become a social norm, especially among young people. This can explain why migration may occur even when the context in destination countries has changed and provides less opportunities. Cultures of migration are important to identify and consider when discussing potential future migration flows to Europe.

***“It has always been almost a tradition with us. [...] It’s in our culture ... we, the men, only move in search of what is best for us and our families, which means we always attempt to try the adventure somewhere else.” (Man, Senegal).***

#### 6. Individual socio-demographic characteristics:

Not all population groups are equally likely to migrate to another country. Young people, especially those who are single and with no or few children, are usually more likely to emigrate than their older peers. Men used to be more likely to migrate than women, but this pattern seems to be changing in some countries of origin. Higher educated people are more likely to move from poorer countries in search of better career opportunities. They also tend to have more options to migrate legally via visa schemes. People with lower levels of education more often must resort to irregular migration channels to reach Europe or other industrialized countries.

***“Those who do not hold any academic diplomas usually choose to migrate illegally, most commonly to Italy. People who hold legal documents choose a better destination such as Switzerland, Germany, or the United States” (Interviewee, Tunisia).***



Overall, the decision to migrate always reflects the hope to find better living conditions or opportunities elsewhere, be it in the realm of education, work, or personal life. It is important to keep in mind that the concrete causes and motivations to migrate are complex, may differ from person to person, and can also change over time. The various migration factors mentioned above may also differ substantially across countries of origin. To estimate future migration flows to Europe, it is therefore important to consider different world regions and their economic, cultural, and geographic context individually.

It is also important to stress that a motivation to migrate does not necessarily need to translate into concrete action. Instead, as FUME researchers argue, many potential migrants never realize their dreams of moving and finding better opportunities abroad, a status termed 'involuntary immobility'. The wish to migrate is an imperfect indicator to inform policy makers about future migration levels or the characteristics of future migrants.





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## How do migrants choose a country or region of destination?

The decision to move abroad is just the first step in the migration process. The decision where to move is just as important. In order to understand why migrants choose a certain destination to settle, FUME researchers again obtained important information via interviews with potential migrants in the four countries of origin and with migrants who have settled in different countries of destination. In addition, a literature review, and a Delphi survey with migration experts from around Europe provided insights into which factors in destination areas are most influential in attracting migrants. Some key factors emerged from these analyses:

### 1. Economic opportunities and demand for migrant labour:

The most important factors that attract migrants to a specific destination city or region are labour market opportunities and good earning possibilities. Potential migrants in countries of origin and migration experts who were interviewed highlighted how demand for immigrant labour increases the attractiveness of a destination region. Soon, population ageing in many European countries will likely lead to labour shortages and an increased need for immigrant workers in the care sector and other sectors of the economy, potentially increasing opportunities for migrant workers.

*"Well, as I said, Kurds love to migrate to UK and Germany. Germany because of its good economy, but UK because of the language and then the economy."  
(Tunisia)*

### 2. Social welfare systems and quality of life:

In addition to labour market opportunities, the quality of life in European countries as well as generous social welfare systems are considered to influence migrants' choice of destination, albeit to a lesser degree. Differences in welfare systems between European countries have also been identified as one of the factors that influence onward movements within the European Union once migrants have reached the continent. Case studies in some countries of origin also indicate that perceptions of gender equality and opportunities for women in Europe may attract some groups of migrants, most notably women looking for greater independence.

*"The health sector is highly developed there [in Europe]. There is insurance on all aspects of the human life. For example, in Iraq, you will only be able to take your children to a doctor if you can afford it. Otherwise, the health services are costly for people. In Europe, your children's future is pretty much insured and safe."  
(Man, 27 years, Iraq)*

### 3. Social networks:

Networks between established migrants in destination countries and potential migrants in countries of origin influence migration decisions. Established migrants can provide information on life in the destination country, often via social media, can share knowledge of employment opportunities or help with initial accommodation, thereby reducing the initial risks and costs associated with migration. This also explains why newly arrived immigrants often tend to cluster in areas or neighbourhoods with already large immigrant populations. This especially concerns poorer and lower-skilled migrants. They depend on interpersonal networks of family

members and friends to a stronger degree than highly qualified migrants. While networks by and large facilitate and thereby encourage migration, they may also have the opposite effect. Established migrants may discourage others from moving to the same destination area if, for example, labour market competition is already fierce.

***"Yes, my friends have always encouraged me to leave the country because they have greater employment options now [...]. They also tell me that if I move to Germany, there will be a lot more work prospect. Furthermore, they tell me that if I come to Germany, we will assist as much as we can." (Male, 25 years, Iraq)***

#### **4. Migration policies:**

The role of migration policies is a further factor that is discussed in the academic literature. Existing publications suggest that migration policies, even restrictive ones, cannot completely curb migration, since various types of migration factors will always compel some people to leave their home countries. Restrictive migration policies rather influence how people migrate, increasing the prevalence of illegal migration and human smuggling. They may also influence people's preferences on which European country to go to. Especially highly-skilled migrants who have more opportunities in different potential receiving countries may be dissuaded by restrictive migration policies and anti-immigrant rhetoric and favour countries with more welcoming migration and integration policies.

***"Although Europe has barricaded itself and has become a sanctuary, it does not prevent people from leaving, those who are leaving are looking for different ways." (Expert, Senegal)***

***"Based on my observation, people were preferring Sweden in the past. Right now, they are not preferring Sweden, they prefer Germany because Sweden is stricter, it's getting stricter, day after day, on giving the approvals for migrants. People are changing preferences; people are looking for any land that give the opportunity to live like other." (Man, 27 years, Iraq)***

Based on these different factors, migration experts who were interviewed by FUME researchers expect that western EU member states will be the most popular destination for both low-skilled and high-skilled migrants in the near future, followed by countries in northern Europe. Southern EU member states are expected to become main receiving regions for lower-skilled immigrants.



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# How may the socio-economic context in and migration trends to Europe develop in the future?

Some existing sets of global scenarios for socio-economic development are widely used, most notably the Shared Socio-Economic Pathways (SSPs). At the same time, scenarios for environmental change, most notably the Representative Concentration Pathways (RCPs), have been used to assess future environmental conditions. The migration scenarios for the European context that have been developed in the FUME project are based on socio-economic scenario databases. This shall ensure that the FUME scenarios are in line with these commonly used global scenarios based on an established alignment procedure.

Six unique, internally consistent migration narratives have been developed in the FUME project to describe future migration flows to Europe. These narratives are based on relevant factors that influence migration, as described above, as well as predicted pathways of change and interactions between those factors. Migration experts provided input and estimations on how migration levels would likely develop in each of the six narratives.

## 1. Intensifying global competition:

The COVID-19 pandemic comes to an end. Global economic growth, which has slowed down until the mid-2020s, accelerates while all world regions recover from the pandemic's negative effects. European countries recover faster from COVID-19 due to vast vaccination campaigns and wider remote working and learning possibilities. Developing countries will join the economic growth trend in the second half of the 2020s. From 2030 onward, the world is becoming more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. The world is shifting toward more clean and modern energy sources. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions decrease globally. There is a marginal increase in the demands for migrants in the EU and a continuation/marginal decrease in pressure to migrate in developing countries. As a result, migration within the EU is marginally increasing and migration from outside the EU continues at previous levels.

## 2. Recovery in Europe and stagnation in developing countries:

Countries in Europe and other developed countries recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic while developing countries continue to suffer from economic stagnation until the end of the 2020s. The burden of the crisis increases the inequalities both within and between countries. Consequently, conflicts in Africa, the Middle East, and North Africa continue, and some new conflicts arise. CO<sub>2</sub> emissions stay high. The EU continues to be seen as a safe and secure destination for migrants from developing and developed regions. There is pressure to migrate among people with all skill levels from conflict zones.

## 3. Rise of the East:

Economic stagnation in developing countries ends toward 2030. The conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa end and lead to improvements in the economy. Economic growth slows down in Europe toward the end of the 2020s, followed by economic stagnation after 2030. The tolerance and collaboration for migration policies decrease. At the same time, South and South-East Asia are becoming attractive destinations for migrants thanks to the continuation of economic growth. There is a global shift in migration patterns. More restrictive migration policies in the EU focus on skilled migration via bilateral agreements with developing countries.

#### **4. Longer economic slowdown in all regions:**

Economic stagnation due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war lasts longer than expected in all regions. Europe and other developed regions are experiencing a slowdown while the developing countries are faced with a worse economic crisis. There is a decrease in migratory demand in the EU, and there is a continuing pressure to migrate people with all skill levels from conflict zones.

#### **5. Slowdown until 2030 (COVID-19 and Russia-Ukraine war):**

The global economic downturn finishes at the end of the decade. After 2030, with economic improvements in Europe and North America, the support for developing economies, welfare states and global cooperation increase. There is demand for migrant labour in Europe after 2030, especially in the Western and Northern EU. The world is becoming more tolerant, and the advantages of migration are better understood. Policymakers work together toward better migration management to reduce irregular migration and attract regular migration, especially higher educated migrants.

#### **6. Slowdown between 2031-2050 (Disaster):**

The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic end, and there are economic improvements in all regions while globalization continues until 2030. After 2030, the world faces another global crisis (epidemic/conflicts/war/extreme climate change) leading to an economic decline and a rise in nationalism and inequalities. Demand for migrant labour continues at previous levels until 2030 and then decreases. Migration is mostly managed with bilateral agreements between countries.

According to results obtained with this method, economic growth and faster population aging can be expected to cause the largest increases in the demand for migrants in Europe. Decreased political stability, an intensification of climate change and a stalled demographic transition are expected to lead to the largest increases in the migration pressure in developing countries. These findings indicate that global developments like global warming may cause asymmetric outcomes in terms of migration pressure in less developed countries and demand for migrants in Europe. Migration experts who were interviewed as part of the FUME project overall expected that the largest changes in migration would result from developments in sending countries, rather than from developments in Europe as a receiving context.



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## Key policy messages

Based on FUME research, several key messages emerge aimed at policymakers at the EU and national levels within Europe.

### **Europe will remain an attractive destination for migrants in the coming decades.**

All six migration scenarios that were developed as part of the FUME project assume a continued pressure to migrate in developing countries. Economic, political, demographic, social and environmental developments in sending areas will influence the decisions of potential migrants to leave and are difficult to forecast in detail.

### **European need for immigrant labour will likely increase in the coming decades.**

Population ageing and the decline of working-age populations in Europe will likely increase the demand for immigrant labour going forward. Already today, employers in various sectors report challenges in recruiting new staff, especially in Northern and Western European countries. During periods of economic growth in Europe such unmet labour demands may further increase. The concrete demands for foreign labour are difficult to predict. They will depend on economic trends, labour market participation in Europe, processes of innovation and automation, and will likely differ from sector to sector, may vary across countries and change over time.

### **Migration policies cannot completely control migration flows.**

During recent years, anti-immigrant rhetoric has resurfaced and parties who promise to curtail migration have had electoral successes in several European countries. Nonetheless, and in contrast to promises made by party rhetoric, research shows that even restrictive migration policies can not completely control migration flows. More restrictive immigration policies in Europe will push migrants to resort to illegal migration and increase human smuggling, thus increasing risks for their life, health and wellbeing. It is important for policy makers in Europe to recognize that immigration cannot be completely controlled, and plan accordingly.

### **Monitor the effects of automation.**

Processes of automation may lead to a decrease in demand especially for lower skilled workers in some sectors in the future. This is important to consider for future immigration and integration policies. Competition for the relatively few available jobs in so-called elementary occupations is strong, and lower-skilled migrants often need a long time to achieve labour market integration and find a job. Nonetheless, migration pressures of lower-educated people is likely to persist in the future. A key question is then how to integrate lower-skilled migrants into the increasingly specialized and advanced European labour markets in the future.

### **Harness the opportunities of immigration for rural and remote areas.**

Many rural and remote areas in Europe suffer from outmigration and depopulation. Both trends accelerate population ageing and labour shortages may appear, hampering economic growth and leading to the risk that public services need to be downscaled. Immigration is one potential opportunity to combat such trends. If international immigrants could be encouraged to move and stay in rural and remote areas, this could add to the population and labour force base there, counteract many of the effects of depopulation and revive

declining areas. It should be considered how immigration could be made more beneficial for rural and remote areas in Europe, how immigrants could be matched with local employers that search for workforce, how integration in the smaller communities could be supported and how immigrants could be encouraged to stay in the longer term.

### **In summary:**

Due to continuing migration pressures in countries of origin, demand for migrant labour in Europe and the impossibility to completely control migration flows even under the most restrictive policy developments, policy makers in Europe must plan for future migration flows to Europe and carefully consider and weigh policy options to make these developments beneficial for all sides – receiving countries, sending countries, migrants, and their families.



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