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ISSUE BRIEF

Migration Governance in Unsettled Times

How Policymakers Can Plan for Population Change

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BY MEGHAN BENTON, NATALIA BANULESCU-BOGDAN, AND KATE HOOPER

Executive Summary

Populist claims that immigration is chaotic, unlawful, and unfair are increasingly resonating even with publics that believe some level of immigration is needed to maintain economic competitiveness. Part of the backlash can be explained by the growing gulf between the realities of migration governance and how issues are perceived on the ground. In elections from the United States to Germany in late 2024 and early 2025, voters have ousted incumbents seen as failing to address bread-and-butter issues such as high inflation and have soured even on aspects of immigration that used to command bipartisan consensus. This backlash augurs more disruption to economies and immigration systems in coming years, and the risk that immigration—already blamed for everything from the soaring cost of living to pressures on housing—could be further instrumentalized in a volatile political landscape.

Yet the fundamental paradoxes at the heart of immigration policy will endure. Fast-aging populations in advanced economies are increasingly reliant on immigrants to sustain their workforces, even as the political tide shifts against immigration. Businesses that desperately need migrant workers' skills are struggling to recruit them as restrictions on legal pathways take effect. Immigration to higher-income countries still holds an allure for much of the world's population, even if the only routes available are costly and life-threatening. And within destination countries, the diverging economic fortunes of fast-growing urban centers and depopulating rural areas are threatening inclusive economic growth and setting up competing priorities for immigration policymaking.

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Promoting the type of long-term thinking needed on immigration is a tall order at a time when policymakers are grappling with acute short-term pressures, but nonetheless essential if governments are to navigate emerging demographic and economic challenges. Ultimately, governments need to find ways to articulate a vision for orderly, planned migration that serves national interests, that occurs at a pace the public will accept, and that connects to other strategies around economic growth and productivity, workforce development, and public services. But long-term thinking on immigration faces both technical and political barriers. Voters inherently give more weight to examples of the visible harms

of population change (such as overcrowding in schools) over evidence of the large, long-term economic benefits of immigration. And politicians, as a result, have an incentive to prioritize short-term firefighting, to the detriment of more complex (and less sexy) whole-of-government planning that requires breaking down siloes and transparently assessing costs and benefits.

Turning down the heat on immigration issues in favor of long-term planning will require governments to prioritize control and invest in cross-government coordination to prepare for and respond to different scenarios. While coordination mechanisms are often forged in moments of crisis, there is a strong case for maintaining these structures to allow for regular information-sharing, collaboration, and consolidation at the political and technical levels. Meanwhile, highly consultative planning exercises such as those carried out in Australia and Canada to set multi-year targets for different types of immigration or through the United Kingdom's independent Migration Advisory Committee's calls for evidence can collect input from stakeholders inside and outside of government, as well as allowing for nuanced thinking around temporary vs. permanent admissions and national vs. regional priorities.

More proactive, whole-of-government planning on immigration should do three things:

- **Plan for population change.** Governments will need to acknowledge the impacts of rapid population growth and move quickly to alleviate any pressures on already overburdened infrastructure and public services—especially housing—before tensions ignite.
- **Plan for productivity.** Immigration is only part of the answer to population aging; keeping economies competitive will also require activating groups underrepresented in the workforce (including some immigrants already residing in a country and people nearing retirement age) and potentially raising the retirement age. Advanced economies should also plan for a smaller ratio of workers to residents, pointing to a need to invest in productivity and to prioritize skilled and high-growth-sector immigration.
- **Plan for predictability.** Irregular migration can stymy forward-looking decision-making on regular migration. Creating space for planning requires a greater degree of control in current admissions. But control does not have to be synonymous with restriction. As governments make tough decisions on reducing irregular arrivals, they can also build out regular pathways and make the case for expansion through greater predictability, setting targets for different admissions streams in immigration levels plans.

Above all, fixing migration governance depends on regaining social license for sensible immigration policies. The costs and benefits of immigration are not shared equally, and there will inevitably be certain segments of society that feel they are losing out; these losses should be confronted directly, and policymakers should be more transparent around their vision and choices—including the hard trade-offs—to regain control of the narrative and to help their countries navigate the changes that are to come.

1 Introduction

A string of populist gains has radically changed both the politics and governance of migration, pushing governments of all stripes toward greater restrictions and reducing the appetite for experimentation. The backlash comes at a particularly fraught time. Advanced economies with aging populations are increasingly reliant on immigrants to sustain their workforces, and more people worldwide are seeking

out opportunities to move, whether for work, family, or protection. There is a clear humanitarian imperative to ensure vulnerable populations can access protection through safe and legal channels instead of resorting to dangerous, illicit journeys (from which smugglers are reaping enormous profits). But as public concerns about how population growth could affect the soaring cost of living and as housing pressures have grown, support for even legal immigration has waned. Meanwhile, chaotic scenes at borders and a perception of a loss of control over admissions have prompted quick fixes, at the expense of longer-term, sustainable solutions.

In reality, it has not proved straightforward to capitalize on this demographic asymmetry in a way that delivers on its economic promise, preserves human rights, and maintains public confidence.

As governments look to the future, they will need to regain control of their immigration systems while proactively planning across government for demographic shifts. Immigration is often held up as a silver bullet to plug nagging labor shortages in the graying Global North, while allowing lower-income countries to turn their youth "bulge" into a lucrative export. But in reality, it has not proved straightforward to capitalize on this demographic asymmetry in a way that delivers on its economic promise, preserves human rights, and maintains public confidence. Expanding legal pathways to the scale that would be needed to meet demand for migration and address unprecedented levels of displacement would entail admissions at a volume and speed not easily tolerated by destination-country publics. In the absence of such pathways, a slick and nimble global smuggling architecture has emerged to meet powerful drivers of supply and demand—further undermining public confidence in migration governance and creating untold harm.

The increasingly toxic discourse around immigration also deters policymakers from adjacent portfolios from engaging on these issues, closing doors to the whole-of-government policy thinking that is so badly needed. The affordable housing crisis playing out in many advanced economies is perhaps the most acute example. Immigration has been blamed for raising housing prices and reducing supply, even if the factors behind these issues are more complex and addressing them requires a whole host of solutions that lie largely outside the immigration policy portfolio (for example, investing in housing supply and reviewing zoning and lending rules). But immigration and immigrant integration policymaking often operate on a separate, parallel track to housing and other relevant policy areas.

Still, even with a sparse set of choices and the limited public finances available in the current landscape, politicians and officials should seek to take the right first steps toward building a better-functioning immigration system. The choices that are made today will determine whether they are able to alleviate flashpoints for public tensions, and in doing so create the space needed for policy innovation in areas such as promoting wage growth and reversing population decline in hard-hit rural regions. This will require not just technical savvy but political ingenuity: governments need to get much better at gaining public buy-in for social change. This issue brief explores the factors behind this breakdown in immigration governance and lays out strategies for reform, looking at lessons from recent years and the possible decision points ahead.[1]

2 Breaking Points and Circling Sharks: Why Migration Governance Is Broken

Immigration policymakers have the unenviable task of trying to plan for long-term needs while being graded primarily on how well they manage short-term frictions. When immigration soars to the top of policy agendas, it is only the most visible pieces that attract public attention and therefore consume political bandwidth, to the detriment of the long-term issues crying out for more attention—such as how population growth can (and cannot) be used to combat demographic decline and sectoral imbalances. As governments work to regain control of immigration and public confidence in their ability to manage it, there is a risk they will focus only on deterring future arrivals rather than the more difficult and less headline-grabbing process of managing social and demographic change.

There are four major barriers to addressing the long-term impacts of immigration:

A. Visible Disorder Creates a Short-Term Bias

Headline-grabbing "emergencies" around irregular migration—even if the numbers involved are small in the grand scheme of things—have meant that addressing the most visible crises has taken up considerable bandwidth while future workforce and economic needs are relegated to the backburner. Social media and other forms of algorithmic content curation have also increased the level of misinformation around immigration and diversity, exacerbating demand for quick fixes and deterrence policies. For instance, the small boats crisis in the United Kingdom has consumed the immigration conversation in the country, while longer-term questions around economic growth are overlooked: demographic change does not lend itself to tabloid headlines.[2]

Publics are also disproportionately focused on visible harms. In the United States, even as *The Economist* described the U.S. economy as "the envy of the world,"[3] Americans rejected this ten-thousand-foot view and voted out the Biden administration, in part due to the things they could see: high inflation and the rising cost of consumer goods. Although migrant apprehensions at the border (and in many cities, violent crime) were significantly down compared to prior periods, adjacent issues such as homelessness and petty crime made people feel fundamentally unsafe and magnified the sense of disorder. In short, even if people are objectively better off, their experience of the world may reflect a more narrow or distorted perception of what is happening around them.[4]

B. Managing Immigration Effectively Requires Deeper Policy Coordination

Many of the flashpoints of tension over immigration occur in arenas under the remit of other agencies, such as housing and economic policy. In Canada and parts of Europe, public opinion has hardened around immigration due in part to strains on local housing markets attributed to rapid population change.[5] Whether and the extent to which immigration has a meaningful impact on these issues can be debated,[6] but what is clear is that poor coordination between immigration and adjacent portfolios (such as housing) is leaving festering issues inadequately addressed. Even urgent, clearly interlinked issues such as an absence of emergency housing for asylum seekers—issues that can create phenomenal costs and poison public trust—are often poorly coordinated.[7] But with many fires burning, housing ministries can be reluctant to add immigration or asylum issues to their portfolio, especially where new arrivals are viewed as straining already reduced

public coffers and competing for resources with other vulnerable groups.

A related challenge is that population growth is outstripping housing construction and necessary expansions in public service capacity, as evidenced by the impact of the arrival of millions of Ukrainian temporary protection recipients in European countries already struggling with housing and child-care shortages.[8] As populations age and labor needs grow, huge market forces driving immigration will likely see more populations' growth outstrip housing construction and place further pressures on public service capacity, unless governments engage in more joined up planning (see Box 1).

C. *Regions Have Different Needs and Feel Immigration's Costs and Benefits Unevenly*

The migration interests of nations as a whole versus those of individual cities and regions are increasingly at cross-purposes. National immigration policy faces the challenge of somehow squaring the diverging needs of cities welcoming sizeable numbers of new arrivals and those of more rural or remote regions grappling with fast-aging populations and difficulties recruiting and retaining workers. An examination of demographic futures in Canada, for example, distinguishes between "fast" Canada (primarily major cities, where immigration is driving rapid population growth) and "slow" Canada (comprised of smaller cities and more rural areas experiencing rapid population decline).[9]

National policymaking also has to contend with the reality that immigration's benefits and costs are not evenly distributed across communities, and there are clear "winners" and "losers"—a fact that is often lost in policy conversations based on averages. Governments have generally relied upon macro indicators (such as a country's GDP growth) to understand the overall positive fiscal impact of immigration without paying due attention to its more localized effects.[10] Some communities may sour on immigration due to highly visible, short-term pressures related to new arrivals (such as overcrowded schools or spikes in petty crime), even if local residents have simultaneously benefited from immigrants performing hard-to-fill jobs or contributing to a locality's tax base—successes that are harder to see.

Politicians should be aware that the metrics individuals and communities use to assess a policy's success will be different than those used by the political elite. One job loss or one homicide is earth-shattering for a family—and can reverberate for generations—though such individual events would be considered statistically insignificant in national reporting. It is this space between big-picture goals and on-the-ground realities where resentment can balloon and fester, and why it is almost always ineffective to attempt to counter people's concerns about hyperlocal changes with arguments about national stability and growth, trends that are not readily seen and felt.[11]

D. *The Long Arc of Immigration Policy Is Poorly Served by Short Electoral Cycles*

Wide pendulum swings on immigration policy as new governing coalitions assume power have resulted in more disruption than is seen in many other policy spaces. For instance, the second Trump administration took dozens of executive actions on immigration immediately upon assuming office in January 2025, halting the U.S. refugee resettlement program, stopping asylum processing at the border, and setting new immigration enforcement priorities.[12] Elections can also scuttle long-term planning in more subtle ways, as incoming administrations use their new mandate to redirect resources and hire new staff, which can unravel the progress made and expertise accrued in previous administrations.

BOX 1
The Demographics Conundrum

For aging societies, immigration has often been invoked as a silver bullet that can be deployed to bring in more people of working age and slow the effects of falling fertility rates. The logic behind this is that people of working age are increasingly concentrated in lower-income countries with higher birth rates, whereas economic opportunities are overwhelmingly in high-income countries with aging populations—a mismatch that can only be solved with greater mobility. This demographic argument is often set up in opposition to pro-natalist policies promoted by far-right populists, which often evoke the racist undertones of the "great replacement theory." In fact, for high-income countries, immigration will be a vital but not comprehensive tool to address labor shortages and skills needs, and will need to be considered alongside productivity investments, supporting family-friendly policies, and potentially raising the retirement age. Using immigration effectively as part of this suite of approaches is conditional on acknowledging the following key points:

Altering the age composition of the population is not a one-time investment: Using immigration to maintain a desirable ratio of workers to retirees requires expanding the size of the working population year on year as new cohorts of workers retire (including, eventually, immigrants themselves). This has huge implications for housing supply and public services and may point to a need to use immigration in combination with other interventions, such as raising the retirement age. And as more immigrants age and retire, governments will need to think proactively about the implications for social protection systems to ensure all workers have a safety net to rely on, especially if they have spent time working in more precarious jobs (e.g., the gig economy) or if they choose to return to their country of birth in retirement.

Skills are more important than numbers: Demographic change is often treated as a numbers game, but aging countries and regions need workers with the right skills, not just warm bodies. Using immigration to slow the effects of demographic change will only work if the majority of immigrants successfully integrate into the labor force, which depends in large part on whether the numbers are manageable and education levels are relatively high. If, conversely, new arrivals are unable to find work or are pushed into the informal economy, their presence will do little to mitigate the effects of shrinking workforces. The skills composition of future arrivals will also inform related investments in productivity that will enable countries to navigate the transition to having a smaller workforce relative to the size of their overall population.

Governments have limited control over where newcomers put down roots: Like other workers, immigrants gravitate to urban centers where employment opportunities are more plentiful. So far, no country has discovered the magical mix of carrots and sticks to get people to not only move to but stay in the declining regions that most need them. Thus, while major metropolitan areas continue to expand (even when immigration slows), smaller cities and more rural areas are struggling to attract and retain enough workers and their families to sustain local economies, infrastructure, and services. Looking ahead, these gaps are projected to widen, as even small decreases in immigration could double the old-age dependency ratio in places aging the fastest. Governments, therefore, must solve two equations at once: accommodating ongoing growth in cities while simultaneously supporting rapidly aging communities elsewhere.

Sources: Daniel Hiebert, *Understanding the Impact of Immigration on Demography: A Canadian Case Study* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2025); Adolfo Flores and Arian Campo-Flores, "Many Aging Migrants Pay Taxes. They Stare Down a Retirement with No Benefits.," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2024; Guillaume Marois, Alain Bélanger and Wolfgang Lutz, "Population Aging, Migration, and Productivity in Europe," *PNAS* 117, no, 14 (2020): 7690–7695; Volker Grossmann, "How Immigration Affects Investment and Productivity in Host and Home Countries," Institute of Labor Economics, World of Labor, October 2021.

Changes in policy direction can also dismantle the physical and digital infrastructure underpinning immigration systems. Refugee resettlement infrastructure can take years or decades to rebuild after cuts as qualified staff, once let go, cannot simply be rehired overnight,[13] nor can public-private partnerships simply be reignited. President Donald Trump's dismantling of the Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) created by the United States and partners in Latin America during the Biden administration may have a similar effect. SMOs, widely recognized to be a nascent but promising model in which several countries collaborate to share information with would-be migrants about labor and humanitarian pathways and receive case referrals from offices across the Americas, would also need to be rebuilt from the ground up should a future administration wish to restart the program.[14]

On the other side of the spectrum, some politicians who campaigned on restricting immigration find these promises hard to keep once in office. The UK government that took office in July 2024 campaigned on reducing the share of immigrant workers in certain sectors, but executing this well is not a short-term project that can be easily accomplished in one political term. Reducing the country's reliance on immigrants to sustain the health-care workforce, for instance, is likely to require massive and sustained investments both to train new doctors and nurses and to address retention issues.[15]

All told, there seems to be a fundamental discrepancy between what officials think is needed (moderate-scale, mostly economic immigration) and what the public will countenance, with limited prospects for rebuilding public trust in immigration systems through messaging alone. Yet governments should not feel powerless in the face of these challenges, given the robust evidence that publics will support immigration if it is orderly, controlled, and adequately resourced.[16]

3 Finding Wiggle Room to Forge a Long-Term Strategy

Promoting long-term thinking on immigration at a time when policymakers are tackling acute short-term pressures is a tall order, but nonetheless essential if governments are to navigate emerging demographic and economic challenges. Fostering this medium-to-long-term perspective on immigration and immigrant integration will require cross-government coordination to think through and plan for different scenarios, policy priorities, and corresponding capacity.

In many policy contexts, a wider set of actors now recognizes they have a stake in immigration outcomes and should be enlisted in this endeavor. This includes treasury departments thinking about economic productivity and their future tax base, housing departments reckoning with short-term pressures on housing supply and the implications of demographic change, and health departments struggling to see how to maintain their pipeline of doctors and nurses without hiring growing numbers of medical professionals from other countries. It also includes energy departments seeking to meet ambitious green transition targets that risk being stymied by labor shortages, and education departments seeing how reliant their universities are on international students to prop up their finances and support research and innovation budgets.[17] And outside of government, employers across sectors continue to make the case for more immigration, while in some countries, trade unions have assumed more of a voice both in advocating for immigrant workers and in calling for investments in local workforces alongside admission policies.[18]

It is also clear that addressing the more visible and closer-to-home aspects of immigration—those so

critical to how the public views the issue—demands prioritizing immigration policymaking that goes beyond simplistic goals of deterring arrivals or reducing numbers. Research conducted by More in Common underscores that, if given the choice between reducing immigration or gaining greater control over immigration, majorities in the United Kingdom and the United States will choose control.[19] However, people also generally assign greater weight to their individual experiences, whether these are positive (including interacting with or sponsoring newly arrived refugees) or negative (including specific challenges in schools or neighborhoods).

This points to an actionable four-pronged agenda for reforming immigration governance:

A. Prioritizing Managed Migration and Control

The feeling that governments have lost control of migration has taken hold in both North America and Europe. Regaining control over irregular migration, which is often comprised of a mixture of people who would and would not qualify for humanitarian protection, requires hard policy changes that balance a mix of enforcement to potentially deter some would-be migrants and adequate legal channels to accommodate the demand for migration in both origin and destination countries. But it also requires articulating a vision for managed migration that members of a society can understand and that they see as reinforcing domestic priorities. The Biden administration's approach—which was built around regional cooperation on immigration enforcement, a more orderly system for border arrivals, asylum restrictions, and expanded legal pathways—eventually yielded a precipitous fall in irregular migration at the U.S.-Mexico border to the lowest levels in almost five years.[20] However, critics have noted that these restrictions came on the defensive rather than as part of a vision articulated from the start, and persistent failures at the border in the meantime were perceived as creating easily exploitable loopholes, undermining confidence in system fairness.[21] In contrast, Denmark's center-left Social Democrats have embraced an explicit goal of "zero asylum" (shorthand for zero people arriving through unofficial channels) since 2019—a position more often voiced by far-right parties.[22] But their continued electoral success suggests publics sometimes support even severe restrictions in the name of minimizing disorder.

There is evidence that managed humanitarian protection streams—including resettlement and sponsorship—attract more public trust, even among those traditionally opposed to expanding asylum.

For societies to feel they have control over migration, members of the public also need to feel a sense of agency over the conditions under which people come into their communities. There is evidence that managed humanitarian protection streams—including resettlement and sponsorship—attract more public trust, even among those traditionally opposed to expanding asylum. For instance, ahead of the launch of Welcome Corps in the United States in 2023, More in Common found that community sponsorship is popular with Americans of all backgrounds, and notably, among Republicans, the policy increased support for accepting refugees by 19 percentage points.[23] However, no country has yet succeeded in deterring all spontaneous arrivals, or diverting them into an orderly process away from the border. Therefore, as long as people are still claiming asylum at borders, countries will need to grapple with difficult trade-offs around humanitarian values and commitments—notably, to what extent to deter asylum seekers in the name of control.

B. Developing More Transparent and Predictable Immigration Planning

The border is not the only arena where policymakers need to demonstrate more effective management of migration. More transparent and predictable immigration planning across the board—whether economic or family streams, temporary or permanent—can help governments spell out the diverse goals and trade-offs of immigration policy and show progress in meeting those goals. In essence, it has now become necessary to "make the case" for immigration even in places such as Canada that have long enjoyed a deep consensus on its benefits, but where publics are increasingly asking hard questions about the cost–benefit calculation.

Canada's highly consultative immigration levels plans, which outline immigration targets for the three years to come, have allowed the government to collect input from different stakeholders on a regular basis and to plan for specific capacity and staffing needs based on tweaks to each major admissions pathway. Though such plans initially focused on permanent immigration, the 2025–27 plan includes targets for both temporary and permanent admissions, after the addition of more than 1 million temporary visas in 2022–23 and 2023–24 led to public concern about a "population trap" (that is, population growth outstripping infrastructure capacity expansions).[24] The Australian government similarly publishes multi-year plans. Though these focus only on permanent migration, they have an important regional dimension, with state migration plans that seek to feed regional skills needs upward into federal-level planning.[25] Australia also develops separate humanitarian levels plans that set an overall target for admissions via both asylum and humanitarian pathways streams (such as resettlement).[26]

Some governments have opted to create independent bodies of experts that can assess the evidence on migration, weigh the pros and cons of different policy issues, and even contribute to decision-making in limited circumstances. For example, the Migration Advisory Committee in the United Kingdom is involved in making decisions about labor shortages and recommending other adjustments to economic migration systems. This has had the advantage of taking the heat out of issues and depoliticizing economic migration recommendations, and the current government is seeking to join up immigration and workforce planning even further.[27] Similarly, the creation of Jobs and Skills Australia has allowed for independent economic advice around long-term issues without being under a particular department's remit. For instance, the body has been analyzing the clean energy workforce to understand how to smartly combine policy levers from different ministries (in particular, how to balance immigration vis-à-vis workforce development) to meet current and future workforce needs and support Australia's clean energy ambitions.[28] As with any independent body, however, it is important to set clear expectations for how and where they will provide input into decision-making, otherwise consultations can become simply a check-the-box exercise.

This has had the advantage of taking the heat out of issues and depoliticizing economic migration recommendations.

The mechanics involved in such plans and consultations can help governments regain control of the narrative, for instance by providing an alternative metric for evaluating success relative to reductionist net immigration targets or irregular arrival statistics. They can also facilitate coordination between migration departments and other government entities,

including by allowing for early warning systems related to pressures on public services.

C. Improving Whole-of-Government Coordination Beyond Crisis

Given the cross-cutting nature of immigration and immigrant integration issues, which carry implications for a wide array of policy portfolios (such as development, foreign affairs, labor, education, and housing) and all levels of government, it is hard to think of any action on migration that can successfully be carried out by national interior ministries alone. Yet whole-of-government coordination mechanisms are often only forged in moments of crisis, where the need for holistic action becomes all too apparent.[29] In some cases, governments have swiftly formed "war rooms" when new emergencies surface, building on past approaches. For instance, Sweden applied its 2015–16 migration crisis strategy to its COVID-19 and Ukraine responses.[30] And Ireland created local integration teams (bringing together local authorities, community service providers, and volunteers) as part of its Ukraine response, based on its experience implementing a "community call" during COVID-19.[31] But as immigration challenges become a pattern rather than an aberration, these structures will need to become more permanent.

In moments when immigration has high political salience, some governments have opted to appoint a focal point to draw together some or all relevant migration issues. The United States, for example, has often relied on a "border czar" to take the lead on border security issues, while several European countries (such as Belgium, France, Germany, and Sweden) have appointed migration ambassadors to lead on internal- or external-facing elements of their migration policy. Often, these positions are filled by senior officials, reflecting the political salience of the issue and the need to engage at high levels of government. But their successes have largely related to foreign policy and diplomacy, and a migration czar tasked with coordinating the day-to-day work of immigration and immigrant integration departments and to manage population change, for instance, has yet to be tried.

D. Planning for Regional Variation and Explaining Trade-Offs

Countries such as Australia and Canada have long experimented with regional immigration pilot initiatives or programs, and with region-weighted selection criteria within their immigration systems (see Box 2). This regional approach can help address the specific—and diverse—needs of local communities; for example, local employment needs may be different from national shortage lists, and employers in rural areas with lower wages and cost of living may struggle to meet the salary threshold for federal immigration programs. Soliciting a greater degree of input from local communities can also secure more community buy-in for newcomers' selection and integration. But this specific approach comes with downsides, such as adding new layers to already complex immigration systems. This type of approach also does not address the challenges of retaining working-age families in declining regions, especially once new arrivals secure permanent residence and face no restrictions on switching jobs or relocating.

Although difficult, governments will need to engage the public in conversations about immigration policy trade-offs. For example, while the government may commit to reviewing overall numbers, it is important to articulate the case for admissions in different areas and how they connect to other norms, priorities, or needs, such as a commitment to family unity or to protecting vulnerable populations, the critical financial contributions of international students to universities' budgets and a country's human

capital pipeline, or the risk of rising food prices and even shortages if seasonal agricultural visas are reduced. Equally, it is important to be up-front about costs and provide mainstream forums in which people's concerns can be heard, rather than relegating them to fringe news outlets or social media, where conspiracy theories can pick up speed unchecked.

BOX 2
Regional Immigration Programs

Australia and Canada both allow their regions to provide input on their immigration systems, whether through specific regional visas or by giving weight in admissions decisions to immigrants' ties to non-metropolitan areas. Australia has temporary and permanent skilled regional visas, and migrants can obtain additional points under the country's Skilled Migration Points Test for holding an educational qualification from "regional Australia" (that is, outside Australia's major cities). A state or territory government or related regional authority (such as a council or local chamber of commerce) seeking to meet specific labor market needs can also make use of a designated area migration agreement to access a broader range of overseas workers than might otherwise be admitted under the country's standard skilled visa programs. In Canada, all provinces and territories except Nunavut and Quebec have a provincial nominee program, through which they can nominate individuals for admission who have locally in-demand skills, and the former immigration pilot program for Atlantic regions has since become a permanent program. In January 2025, Canada also launched a Rural and Francophone Community Immigration pilot to aid those communities in attracting and retaining new migrants.

Sources: Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), "Immigrate as a Provincial Nominee," updated January 17, 2025; IRCC, "Atlantic Immigration Program," updated February 24, 2025; IRCC, "Canada Launches Rural and Francophone Community Immigration Pilots" (news release, January 30, 2025); Australian Department of Home Affairs, "Designated Area Migration Agreement," updated September 23, 2024; Australian Department of Home Affairs, "Regional Migration," updated September 23, 2024; Australian Department of Home Affairs, "Points Table for Skilled Nominated Visa (Subclass 190)," updated September 23, 2024.

4 Conclusion: The Case for Future Planning

Making the case for long-term immigration decision-making has always been difficult, but several trends have further narrowed the space for action. Rising public anxiety has eroded the political will for any reforms whose benefits will take time to materialize. Unprecedented global displacement and sophisticated smuggling networks have outpaced governments' foresight capabilities, leaving policymakers constantly on the back foot. At the same time, even planned migration is facing steep uncertainty, as the changing world of work has created a new playing field and the rise of remote work, outsourcing, and AI have made it more difficult to assess genuine labor market needs.

As many countries' populations and workforces age, this disconnect between what is needed and what is publicly countenanced will inevitably grow if governments continue to struggle to make the case for immigration. One notable threat is that a continued erosion of legal pathways will further seed disorder and chaos as people are forced to move through irregular channels to take up jobs (which will certainly be available), unite with family, or seek safety, creating a vicious cycle in which publics are unwilling to discuss ambitious reforms until they first have "control." Ultimately, planning for and taking steps to mitigate the negative side effects of legal migration—and to maximize its benefits—will be much easier than addressing the economic and social fallout of demographic decline combined with irregular migration. This will also make for more flourishing societies and productive labor markets, as it will avoid a downward spiral in which increasingly restrictionist policies push more people into irregular channels and ultimately unauthorized or under-the-radar work.

Regular, robust planning offers an opportunity to review the immigration system as a whole, respond thoughtfully to emerging needs and constraints, and shift toward greater transparency in decision-making. Governments can also use planning exercises to discuss and solicit input on their goals for immigration policy, communicate trade-offs and constraints, and make a more proactive case for how immigration can benefit local communities in different ways.

In particular, governments should:

- **Plan for population change.** Population aging will lead to population growth, at least in the short term, and this will require governments to address housing, infrastructure, and public services capacity pressures in a more thoughtful and joined-up way. In many cases, this will mean deprioritizing immigration as the central issue and instead shifting to focus on developing a multifaceted population policy.
- **Plan for productivity.** It has become increasingly clear that pro-natal policies and immigration policies alone cannot hold off population aging, and that they instead need to be complemented with efforts to activate groups underrepresented in the workforce (including some immigrants already residing in the country and people nearing retirement age) and, potentially, to increase the retirement age. Whatever mix of policies is chosen, advanced economies should also plan to survive with a smaller ratio of workers to residents, pointing to a need to prioritize skilled and high-growth-sector immigration, which are associated with the greatest economic gains.
- **Plan for predictability.** While some societies strongly distinguish between regular and irregular migration, namely in cases where countries have the geography to be able to control irregular arrivals, the experience of most destination countries is that irregular migration can poison public perception of immigration writ large, limiting the space for smart, forward-looking decisions on legal migration. As governments make tough decisions about how to manage their borders, which may include restricting asylum, they could simultaneously commit to building out non-asylum protection pathways. Investing in regular consultations and levels planning for regular migration programs, meanwhile, can improve transparency in decision-making and create a greater degree of predictability in those immigration channels.

Above all, fixing migration governance depends on regaining social license for sensible immigration policy. This may necessitate a period of greater control and enforcement, in which governments demonstrate their ability to manage their immigration systems transparently and fairly. While mainstream politicians can face immense pressure to co-opt the rhetoric of the far right and to embrace far-reaching restrictions, they should not overlook the low-hanging fruit that can allow governments to convey control without reneging on international obligations or missing out on the benefits of migration. Moving quickly to close perceived loopholes can help take the wind out of anti-immigration sails, for example, while greater transparency about vetting procedures and related investments in technology to screen candidates can allay public concerns about managing entries. Shoring up the foundations of the immigration system can turn down the heat on immigration issues, and in doing so, provide policymakers with the space to engage in forward-looking population planning exercises that will be essential for navigating the changes ahead.

Endnotes

1 This issue brief focuses on domestic policy, but any efforts to adapt to demographic change should also acknowledge that much of the world is aging—a trend that will both intensify competition for skilled workers and lead to more regional mobility. See Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Age of Depopulation," *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2024.

2 For instance, there were almost ten times as many UK parliamentary questions that referenced "small boats" than "legal migration" in the year ending June 2023, despite the fact that small boat arrivals represented less than 4 percent of total long-term immigration to the United Kingdom during that period. See Peter William Walsh and Mihnea V. Cuibus, "People Crossing the English Channel in Small Boats," Migration Observatory, June 28, 2024; Laura Cheatham, "Long-Term International Migration, Provisional: Year Ending June 2023," UK Office for National Statistics, November 23, 2023; Meghan Benton and Susan Fratzke, "Creative Approaches to Tackle Irregular Migration" (paper prepared for the International Organization for Migration Inter-Governmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum, and Refugees meeting on irregular migration, May 29, 2024).

3 Simon Rabinovitch and Henry Curr, "The American Economy: The Envy of the World," *The Economist,* October 19, 2024.

4 For instance, 77 percent of Americans said they believe crime is on the rise, according to a Gallup poll in 2023, despite the fact that violent crime has been falling—in part because police forces have been prioritizing violent crime instead of visible signs of disorder and homelessness. See Charles Fain Lehman, "It's Time to Talk about America's Disorder Problem," The Causal Fallacy, September 25, 2024.

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9 Daniel Hiebert, *Understanding the Impact of Immigration on Demography: A Canadian Case Study* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2025).

10 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2017).

11 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, M. Murat Erdoğan, and Lucía Salgado, *Confronting Compassion Fatigue: Understanding the Arc of Public Support for Displaced Populations in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2024).

12 Muzaffar Chishti and Kathleen Bush-Joseph, "With 'Shock and Awe,' the Second Trump Term Opens with a Bid to Strongly Reshape Immigration," *Migration Information Source*, January 23, 2025.

13 In the United States, for example, the first Trump administration's decision to slash annual refugee admissions (to 15,000 in fiscal year 2021, down from 110,000 in fiscal year 2017 under the Obama administration) was not easily reversed when the Biden administration took office. See the White House, "Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2021" (memorandum, October 27, 2020); White House, "Presidential Determination -- Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2017" (memorandum, September 28, 2016). The reduction in refugee admissions precipitated mass layoffs within the country's network of resettlement agencies, whose funding is directly tied to the number of refugees admitted. Even when the Biden administration restored the resettlement program on paper, the infrastructure took years to rebuild and it was only in President Joe Biden's final year in office that the United States was able to reach pre-Trump admission levels.

14 Bram Frouws, "Are 'Safe Mobility Offices' the Solution for Europe's Irregular Migration Challenges?," Mixed Migration Centre, October 8, 2024.

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16 See, for example, More in Common and University College London (UCL) Policy Lab, *Change Pending: The Path to the 2024 General Election and Beyond* (London: More in Common and UCL Policy Lab, 2024).

17 See Elizabeth Collett, *International Student Mobility: A Post-Pandemic Reset or a Broader Challenge?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2025).

18 At times, employer advocacy can have a powerful impact. See, for example, the behind-the-scenes negotiations between the Dutch government and ASML (a chip manufacturing firm that is the Netherlands' largest company) on visas following public comments from ASML's CEO that an inability to hire people with the right skills could prompt the company to move some operations to another country. See Toby Sterling, "Dutch Government Scrambling to Keep ASML in Netherlands," Reuters, March 6, 2024.
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20 Susan Fratzke, Meghan Benton, and Andrew Selee, "Legal Pathways and Enforcement: What the U.S. Safe Mobility Strategy Can Teach Europe about Migration Management" (short read, Migration Policy Institute, December 2024).
21 Testimony of Brian S. Hastings, Chief of Law Enforcement Operations, U.S. Border Patrol, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Randy Howe, Executive Director for Operations, Office of Field Operations, CBP, before the U.S. Senate, Committee on Homeland Security, "Unprecedented Migration at the U.S. Southern Border: The Exploitation of Migrants through Smuggling, Trafficking, and Involuntary Servitude," June 26, 2019.
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31 Author interview with civil-society representative from Ireland, November 2024.

About the Authors

MEGHAN BENTON @meghan_benton

Meghan Benton is Director of Global Programs at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), with responsibility for the strategic direction of the International Program and its flagship Transatlantic Council on Migration and Latin America and Caribbean Initiative, as well as other global work. She is also on the board of MPI Europe. Her areas of expertise include labor mobility, immigrant integration, border management, and humanitarian protection. She has a particular interest in how digital technology is reshaping immigration and asylum systems, and in how innovations can lay the groundwork for a more managed, predictable migration system. She convenes MPI Europe's Integration Futures Working Group, which seeks to develop a forward-looking agenda for integration policy in Europe.

Dr. Benton previously held positions at Nesta, the Constitution Unit at University College London (UCL), and the Institute for Public Policy Research. She received her PhD in political science from UCL, a master's degree in legal and political theory (with distinction) from UCL, and a bachelor's degree in philosophy and literature from Warwick University.

NATALIA BANULESCU-BOGDAN @nataliabbogdan

Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan is Deputy Director of MPI's International Program and a Nonresident Fellow with MPI Europe. Her areas of expertise include social cohesion and identity, values and civic engagement, and the intersection of nationalism and migration. Since she joined MPI in 2008, Ms. Banulescu-Bogdan has primarily worked with the Transatlantic Council on Migration, through which she has helped advise participating governments on various aspects of migration management. She has provided technical support to countries holding the rotating presidency of the European Union and to the annual Global Forum on Migration and Development.

Previously, Ms. Banulescu-Bogdan worked at the Brookings Institution. She obtained her master's degree in nationalism studies from the Central European University in Budapest and her bachelor's degree in international relations from the University of Pennsylvania.

KATE HOOPER

Kate Hooper is a Senior Policy Analyst with MPI's International Program, where she leads the Institute's global work on labor migration. She is also the primary point person for the Transatlantic Council on Migration, MPI's flagship international initiative that brings together senior policymakers, experts, and other stakeholders to discuss responses to pressing migration, protection, and immigrant integration issues. Her

areas of research include legal migration pathways, fair and ethical recruitment, labor market integration, and complementary pathways for displaced populations.

Ms. Hooper holds a master's degree with honors from the University of Chicago's Committee on International Relations and a bachelor of the arts degree in history from the University of Oxford. She also holds a certificate in international political economy from the London School of Economics.

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1275 K St NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20005
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