

POLICY BRIEF

No.3

Regular migration from Asia to Europe. Administrative obstacles, EU countries' desirability, and policy recommendations

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot*
Vanessa Tkotzyk**
Antoine Roblain***

* Research Associate of Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) & Senior Lecturer at the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) | asuncion.fresnoza@ulb.be | ORCID no. 0000-0002-4865-9686

** AspirE's Postdoctoral Researcher, Goethe University Frankfurt (GUF) | VTkotzyk@gmail.com | ORCID no. 0000-0003-4528-7343

*** Associate Professor in Social Psychology, Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) | Antoine.Roblain@ulb.be | ORCID no. 0000-0003-4542-6702

AspirE – Asian prospects in (re)migration to/within the EU – is a three-year research project (2023-2025) that examines the decision making of aspiring (re)migrants from selected Southeast and East Asian countries (China, Japan, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam) to and within selected EU member countries (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy and Portugal).

Consortium partners:


Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Belgium (coordinator)
The Education University of Hong Kong, China
Masarykova univerzita, Czech Republic
Tampereen korkeakoulusäätiö sr, Finland
Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany
Università degli Studi di Milano (UniMi), Italy
Waseda University, Japan
Scalabrini Migration Center Inc., Philippines
Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal
Mahidol University, Thailand
Foundation for Isaan Education and Popular Media, Thailand
Institute of Sociology – Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), Vietnam
Vietnam Asia Pacific Economic Center (VAPEC), Vietnam

Collaborators:

Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), Belgium: Sergio Carrera, Miriam Mir & Anjum Shabbir
External Experts Advisory Board: Elisa Fornalé (World Trade Institute, Switzerland), James Farrer (Sophia University, Japan), Stefan Rother (University of Hamburg, Germany) & Sureeporn Punpuing (Mahidol University, Thailand)
External Ethics Advisor: Roderick G. Galam (Oxford Brookes University)

Contact:

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot
Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC)
Institute of Sociology, Université libre de Bruxelles
Avenue Jeanne 44, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

 aspire@ulb.be | <https://aspire.ulb.be/>

 https://twitter.com/AspirE_EU_Asia

 <https://www.facebook.com/AspirE2023EUproject>

Authors:

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot, Vanessa Tkotzyk & Antoine Roblain

Publication date:

December 2024

Citation suggestion:

Fresnoza-Flot, A., Tkotzyk, V. & Roblain, A. 2024. *Regular migration from Asia to Europe. Administrative obstacles, EU countries' desirability, and policy recommendations*. Policy Brief, n° 3. Brussels: AspirE.
Available at: <https://aspire.ulb.be/impact/policy-briefs/policy-brief-3-regular-migration-from-asia-to-europe>

Editorial design:

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot & Catherine Gonzalez



This project receives funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the call HORIZON-CL2-2022-TRANSFORMATIONS-01-04 – Grant Agreement n°101095289.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

The contents of the document are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union. The European Union is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

Summary

Aiming to provide empirical evidence-based policy recommendations, the present Policy Brief draws from the analysis of 281 semi-structured interviews of aspiring (re)migrants collected in the framework of the Horizon Europe-funded research project “AspirE” (Asian prospects in re/migration to/within the EU). Interview analysis shows that certain groups of Asians face some administrative obstacles in their home and receiving countries. In their home countries, aspiring Asian migrants to the EU experience long waiting hours, delays, and complications of visa application process and interviews. In their receiving EU countries, Asian migrants undergo long waiting hours, language barriers, and slow processing of documents. Some Asians from visa-non-exempt countries also experience restrictions (e.g., annual quota policy and mandatory visa). Another finding of the AspirE project is the preference of many respondents for anglophone countries and economically developed Asian nations over EU states as destinations. Since administrative hurdles influence Asians’ mobility aspirations and affect their psychological and/or emotional well-being, this Policy Brief proposes three recommendations: first, carry out regular evaluations of migration application processes and the number of successful and non-successful applicants; second, publish and update regularly official information in the local language(s) and English; and third, lessen the administrative procedures for regular migrants.

Keywords

regular migration, administrative hurdles, second option, temporary hub, (aspiring) Asian migrants, EU, policy recommendations

Introduction

Focusing on Asia-European Union (EU) migration pathways, the present Policy Brief¹ aims to provide recommendations to improve the EU regular migration system. To do so, it draws from the results of interview analysis of the Horizon Europe-funded research project “AspirE”² (Asian prospects in re/migration to/within the EU). Against the backdrop of increasing migration movements from the Asian continent to the EU countries, AspirE intends to identify the drivers of the mobility aspiration and/or intention of Asian people at the micro and meso levels.

For this purpose, AspirE carried out qualitative research in 11 countries: five in East and Southeast Asia (Hong Kong and mainland China, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam) and six in the EU (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Portugal). From March 2023 to March 2024, it conducted 281 semi-structured interviews of aspiring (re)migrants (i.e., at least 25 persons per country). It generally recruited study participants through snowballing or referral techniques and social media postings. The general thematic focus of its interviews was decision-making regarding (re)migration to or within the EU and non-migration.

In line with AspirE’s humanising approach³, the present Policy Brief highlights the findings from the project’s analysis of individuals’ narratives and provides insights on what affects interviewed people’s decision to migrate, remigrate, or stay. By doing so, it reveals the critical gaps in the implementation of EU mobility policies and the reasons behind “desirable” Asian (aspiring or intending) migrants’ choice of EU countries as either a second option or a temporary hub. It also provides three policy recommendations to improve the EU’s regular migration system.

Administrative hurdles and impact on aspiring or already onsite migrants

The key findings of AspirE’s semi-structured interviews show how the administrative dimension of the migration process can affect the lives of aspiring Asian migrants and those already residing in their destination countries in the EU. Whereas migrants who received support from several actors (e.g., lawyers, intermediary agencies) and institutions in their home and/or receiving countries experienced smooth administrative procedures, those without support faced administrative hurdles (see Table 1).

Aspiring migrants in three of the five selected Asian countries/territories of the AspirE project experienced slow administrative procedures in their home countries: Mainland Chinese, Hong Kong people, and Vietnamese. The first two groups reported delays during the application process for the Portuguese golden visa; their waiting period ranges approximately from two to three years. They also reported long waiting hours when applying for a visa in Germany and Italy since the global pandemic of COVID-19. As regards Vietnamese, the complication of their visa application process and interviews, as well as long waiting hours at the embassies, stems from the fact that Vietnamese need visas for short-term stays in the EU and from the specific restrictions of their destination countries: for example, the Czech Republic imposes an annual

¹ This Policy Brief would not be solid without the constructive comments and insightful suggestions of Giacomo Solano (Assistant Professor in Migrant Inclusion, Nijmegen School of Management, Department of Economics and Business Economics, Radboud University, The Netherlands).

² This collaborative research, entitled “Decision making of aspiring (re)migrants to/within the EU: the case of labour market-leading migrations from Asia” and funded by Horizon Europe RIA n° 101095289, aims to map to what extent spatial mobility policies consider aspiring (re)migrants’ behaviour, identify the micro- and meso-level drivers of mobility aspiration and/or intention, and determine the temporality of (non-)mobility decision-making: see <<https://aspire.ulb.be/>>.

³ Fresnoza-Flot, A. 2024. Humanising research on migration decision-making: a situated framework [version 2; peer review: 1 approved, 2 approved with reservations]. *Open Research Europe*, 3:142. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.16483.2>>.

quota for Vietnamese migrant workers entering its territory⁴. Other aspiring Asian migrants interviewed did not report slow administrative procedures. For example, Filipino respondents, who were about to realise their migration aspirations, were not involved in any administrative procedures. Likewise, Japanese nationals interviewed did not face any administrative hurdles on their way to their destination country for a short-term visit, as they could enter the EU without applying for a visa. This case echoes AspirE’s observation from its policy content analysis showing how the EU Visa List Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 facilitates the mobility of nationals of visa-exempt countries compared to those of non-exempt nations⁵. Interestingly, among the visa categories, the one for family reunification is commonly seen as the most efficient and accessible migration pathway. Stricter migration laws limited the availability of entry pathways to some countries, such as Italy. Aspiring Asian migrants perceive visas for family reunification as easier to navigate than work or tourist visas.

In their receiving countries, many Asian migrants encountered administrative obstacles, notably slow processing of documents, long waiting hours, and language barriers. For instance, though investing in the destination country, Hong Kong and mainland Chinese experienced delays in different stages of their settlement-related application process. A lack of language skills regarding the receiving country also poses challenges to Asian migrants during their paper processing. This language problem is partly rooted in the situation in aspiring migrants’ home countries. For instance, new migrant-worker recruiting countries such as Poland and Hungary lack established language institutes or courses in the Philippines, leaving aspiring Filipino migrants with no option to learn the said countries’ languages formally. Other factors causing language problems are the unawareness of certain Asian migrants about the language requirement in their receiving countries and their underestimation of the importance of learning the language of the said countries, which represents a backlash of migrants’ embeddedness in closely tied kinship networks. For instance, Vietnamese aspiring migrants might not necessarily be involved in the migration process as their family members arrange everything for them. This results in an uneven flow of information and varying degrees of the information’s quality and accuracy, as well as information silos isolating the newly arrived migrants from government services and integration programmes of their receiving state.

Table 1. Main administrative hurdles for aspiring (re)migrants

Administrative hurdles	
Home country	Receiving country
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - long waiting hours - complication of visa application process and interviews - delays during the application process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - annual quota - mandatory EU-Visa - long waiting hours - language barriers (i.e., limited language options for documents, lack of official language learning institutions/programmes, individual language skills of actors) - slow processing of documents

⁴ Dang, A. N., Nghiem, T. T., Nguyen, Q. T., Ho, N. C., Nguyen, T. L. & Khuat, D. L. 2024. *Aspiring migrants’ behaviour in mobility policies: the case of the Vietnam* (Country report). Brussels: AspirE. Available at: <<https://aspire.ulb.be/impact/reports/mobility-policy-report-vietnam>>.

⁵ Fresnoza-Flot, A., Carrera, S. & Shabbir, A. 2024. Critical gaps in the implementation of EU and selected Member States’ policies on migrating from Asia to the European Union. *Policy Brief*, n° 2. Brussels: AspirE. Available at: <https://aspire.ulb.be/impact/policy-briefs/policy-brief-2-critical-gaps-in-the-implementation-of-eu-and-selected-member-states-policies-on-migrating-from-asia-to-the-european-union>; see also Fresnoza-Flot, A. 2024. Three ways in which EU mobility policies and their implementation treat Asians unequally. *Research Exchange*, n°3. Available at INNOVATE: <<https://migrationresearchtopolicy.eu/2024/11/12/three-ways-eu-mobility-policies-and-their-implementation-treat-asians-unequally/>>.

The delays in the administrative processes impact migrants' mobility aspirations. Those who do not see any other option might risk falling into irregularity⁶. Migrants from visa-exempt countries, like Japanese nationals, choose different options, such as returning home or moving onward. Delays in the administrative processes and uncertainty about the visa status also affect the psychological or emotional well-being of migrants. Certain migrants reported giving up hope and not seeing a future anymore. The feeling of being in limbo can cause tremendous psychological stress and paralyse them or result in panic reactions. These implications on migrants' well-being underline the need to rethink the bureaucratic procedures in dealing with visa applications and other migration-related document processing to make them more accessible to migrants and avoid long waiting periods.

EU as a second option or temporary hub for “desirable” migrants

AspirE's interview data analysis shows that many respondents prefer anglophone countries and economically developed Asian nations over EU states as destinations. In contrast, other respondents select their EU destination countries as temporary hubs. These findings suggest a gap to address in the context of the EU's promotion of regular migration, notably of “desirable” migrants such as highly skilled workers and wealthy individuals.

The preference of many respondents for anglophone countries lies in their interest in the English language (the case of Japanese) and their fluency in it (the case of Hong Kong and Filipinos⁷). Other respondents refrained from migrating to anglophone countries for several reasons: for example, they considered these countries as having visa regulation systems stricter than that in the EU; they did not receive a job offer from employers based in those countries; or they could not afford the tuition fees of universities there. In the case of Vietnamese aspiring migrants, wealthy Asian countries (Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea) appeal to them due to their familiarity, lower migration costs, and more favourable policies for unskilled and skilled workers than those in the EU. Therefore, some EU countries (Germany, Italy) in the AspirE project are only the second choice for some of the (aspiring) Asian migrants, and sometimes these migrants end up in an EU country (Belgium) by what they call an “accident”.

Other study respondents consider the EU a temporary hub for attaining individual or collective projects. These migrants do not intend to stay permanently in their EU destination countries. For instance, wealthy or highly skilled Hong Kong Chinese are not interested in staying in Portugal; they consider this country their plan B to keep their jobs and families in Hong Kong. Only those who were extremely worried about the political situation at home were the ones who were aspiring to migrate to and settle in Portugal. Another example is the case of Thais in the Isan region, who aspire to be seasonal workers in the Finnish wild berry industry. They are eager to earn money in Finland to continue their agricultural endeavours in Thailand. In short, they intend to return to their home country instead of staying in Finland. The case of Hong Kong and Thai respondents reverberate one of the key findings of The World Bank Group's report regarding migration in Europe and Central Asia: “After 15 years, fewer than half of migrants in the European Union remain in the destination country. Some return migrants stay in their home country, whereas some others have multiple migration episodes (seasonal or circular)”⁸.

⁶ Shabbir, A. 2024. *A critical appraisal of the EU's regular migration system. Objectifying, structurally discriminatory and not aligned with basic EU and international standards* (AspirE's Policy Brief, n° 1). Brussels: CEPS, p. 37. See also Carrera, S. & Shabbir, A. (2024). *Humanising EU migration policies. The transitioning of statuses in the EU regular and legal migration law*. Brussels: CEPS, p. 51. Available at: <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/humanising-eu-migration-policy/>.

⁷ English is one of the official languages in Hong Kong and the Philippines.

⁸ Bossavie, L., Garrote Sánchez, D. & Makovec, M. 2024. *The journey ahead. Supporting successful migration in Europe and Central Asia*. Washington: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, p. 12.

Policy recommendations

Based on the results of AspirE’s analysis of its interviews with aspiring migrants to the EU in selected Asian countries and Asian migrants in selected EU member states, the present Policy Brief proposes the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1: implement regular evaluations of migration application processes

To address the slow processing of and delays in migration-related documents in the implementation of specific EU mobility policies at the national level, relevant government departments, agencies, or offices should carry out regular evaluations of the application processes, specifically its duration by document types (e.g., residence permit, work permit, renewal of legal stay, among others) and the number of successful and non-successful applicants. The evaluations can combine process mapping and time-motion studies to enhance administrative procedures. Process mapping visually outlines each step in a workflow, helping to identify redundancies and bottlenecks and clarifying roles and responsibilities within the organisation. Simultaneously, time-motion studies analyse the duration and movements associated with each task, highlighting areas for efficiency gains. Finally, engaging administrative staff in the evaluation process is also vital. Collecting and incorporating their feedback into the analysis provides valuable insights into challenges and improvement opportunities. By combining these analytical tools with active staff involvement, public institutions can identify and address existing inefficiencies and establish an organisational culture focused on continuous improvement and collaboration. Policymakers can also make informed decisions, leading to the optimisation of administrative procedures. Such improvements not only enhance the efficiency of the migration system but also foster trust among applicants, thereby encouraging more individuals to pursue legal migration pathways.

Recommendation #2: lessen the administrative procedures for regular migrants

This recommendation should be a high priority for policymakers to make the EU the first destination choice and not a second option or temporary hub for highly skilled workers and wealthy professionals, who are “desirable” migrants, as shown in AspirE’s analysis of EU mobility policies and their implementation⁹. Lessening restrictions on regular migrants during administrative procedures appears possible if there would be implementation of regular evaluations of migration application processes (see Recommendation #1), as this assessment is crucial to identify disparities in the administrative treatment of application documents among implementing local government departments, offices, and even intermediary agencies. Awareness of these disparities can provide institutions with vital insights into which steps in the administrative procedures are causing delays and should be modified or suppressed. This Recommendation #2 is aligned with the EU’s ‘strategy to boost’ its ‘long-term competitiveness’ as indicated in the 2024 Commission Work Programme¹⁰. As the EU faces a skilled labour shortage, the Work Programme states that ‘(a)ddressing skills shortages requires facilitating mobility by making it easier to recognize skills and qualifications across Member States and those of third-country nationals’¹¹.

Recommendation #3: enhance language support

⁹ Shabbir A. 2024. *A critical appraisal of the EU’s regular migration system. Objectifying, structurally discriminatory and not aligned with basic EU and international standards* (AspirE’s Policy Brief, n° 1). Brussels: CEPS. Available at: <<https://cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/aspirE-PB-Migration-System-EU-1.pdf>>.

¹⁰ This Programme adopted on 17 October 2023 is available on this website: <https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategy-documents/commission-work-programme/commission-work-programme-2024_en>.

¹¹ European Commission. 16 March 2023. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Long-term competitiveness of the EU: looking beyond 2030*. COM(2023) 168 final, p. 14. Available at: <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/Communication_Long-term-competitiveness.pdf>.

To lessen the language barriers that migrants experience during their application for specific documents, official information published online (website of relevant government departments and offices) and on printed materials (guidebooks, brochures, pamphlets) should be available not only in the local language(s) but also in English. Translation assistance desks and/or hotlines can be helpful for non-English speaking migrants. Finally, enhancing language support aligns with the EU's commitment to combating racism, as outlined in the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025¹². This plan emphasises the importance of promoting non-discrimination, equality, diversity, and pluralism across EU Member States. By providing official information in multiple languages, including English, and offering translation assistance, migration institutions can ensure that migrants have equal access to essential services and information. This approach addresses language barriers that often lead to exclusion and discrimination, thereby fostering a more inclusive society. Regularly updating this information ensures clarity and prevents confusion among migrants, further supporting their integration and participation in society. Collaborating with local NGOs and community organisations can enhance these efforts by offering culturally sensitive language support and fostering a sense of belonging.

¹² European Commission. 2020. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025*. COM(2020) 565 final.