

# POLICY BRIEF

## No.4

### **Enhancing migrant support systems: bridging gaps in pre-migration, integration, and institutional roles**

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**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).

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## **Summary**

This policy brief aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the EU's regular migration system, focusing on the role of social networks in migrants' trajectories. Drawing on 147 social network maps from selected EU and Asian countries, the analysis reveals that migrants predominantly rely on personal networks for practical, emotional, and financial support during re/migration decision-making. This reliance on personal networks often increases risks, as informal networks may lack the resources and information necessary to navigate complex migration processes, potentially resulting in exploitation. Intermediary actors, social media, and digital networks occupy a secondary position in aspiring re/migrants' preference of social networks. To mitigate these challenges, this policy brief recommends strengthening the roles of embassies and consulates, enhancing pre-migration orientation and skills development programs, promoting the positive aspects of social networks in migrant integration, and empowering educational institutions to support migration. These measures aim to reduce the reliance on informal networks, thereby mitigating associated vulnerabilities.

## **Keywords**

migrant support, social networks, embassies and consulates, community hubs, pre-migration orientation, integration policies, educational institutions

## Introduction

In line with the AspirE's<sup>1</sup> general objective of enhancing the EU's regular migration system, this policy brief intends to highlight the critical role of social networks in migrants' decision-making processes by drawing from recent empirical data collected. A central concern in migration studies is understanding the factors that influence individuals' decisions to (re)migrate or remain in their current location. This issue underscores the need for a more nuanced conceptualisation of transnational migration to better comprehend the driving forces behind individuals' aspirations or intentions to (re)migrate or stay. In this context, the social networks of aspiring migrants and those who have migrated play distinct and pivotal roles in shaping their decision-making processes.

Recognising the critical role of social networks in migration decision-making is essential for policymakers aiming to design effective migration strategies. By understanding how these networks operate and influence migration patterns, these key actors can tailor policies to address the specific needs and challenges that migrants face. For instance, policies that strengthen social networks in origin countries can provide migrants with the support they need to make informed decisions, potentially reducing irregular migration and promoting safer migration pathways. Additionally, acknowledging the role of social networks can aid in developing integration programmes in destination countries, ensuring that migrants receive the necessary support to adapt and thrive in their new environments.

The AspirE project investigated these roles of social networks to understand Asian individuals' decision-making process regarding migration to and remigration within the EU, as well as staying put. It adopts the situated framework of "humanising research on migration decision-making"<sup>2</sup> that seeks to emphasise the human aspects of these decisions, moving beyond abstract theories to foreground lived experiences and social dynamics.

The present Policy Brief<sup>3</sup> brings to the fore some key findings of AspirE's social network mapping conducted between October 2023 and August 2024 using an anonymised questionnaire created on Network Canvas<sup>4</sup>. This mapping took place in selected EU and Asian countries: Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Portugal, Italy, Hong Kong and mainland China, Japan, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. AspirE collected a total of 147 social network maps organised into three sets, focusing respectively on actors (individuals, groups, institutions, associations), location of actors (at national or transnational levels), and forms of support (e.g., practical, financial, moral, etc.). Since the social network mapping participants were recruited from AspirE's semi-structured interview respondents, the present Policy Brief also draws some insights from its interviews of aspiring (re)migrants to further enrich its analysis of the roles of social networks.

The present Brief pursues two key objectives: first, to highlight the composition of migrants' social networks and the specific roles these networks play in the migration decision-making

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<sup>1</sup> This three-year project (2023-2025) funded by Horizon Europe RIA n° 101095289 is officially entitled "Decision making of aspiring (re)migrants to/within the EU: the case of labour market-leading migrations from Asia": see <<https://aspire.ulb.be/>>.

<sup>2</sup> 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>>.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> This is an open access and GDPR-compliant software for surveying personal networks: see <<https://www.networkcanvas.com/>>.

process; and second, to provide actionable policy recommendations to inform evidence-based approaches to migration challenges.

### **Trust and mistrust in social networks**

The analysis of AspirE’s social network maps reveals that aspiring Asian re/migrants tend to place a high value on trustworthy peers when selecting re/migration channels. Intermediary actors, social media, and digital networks appear to only occupy a secondary position in terms of aspiring (re)migrants’ preference of social networks.

Personal networks, including family members, friends, and co-villagers play a critical role in shaping their migration decisions. Trust in these networks stems from shared cultural and social ties, which provide a sense of security in navigating the complex migration processes. This trust can help mitigate the uncertainties inherent in migration decisions, as migrants often prioritise the advice of those they know personally, notably those who have already migrated or have experience in the destination country. For example, Japanese migrants tend to rely exclusively on personal networks, as institutional support appears limited. However, being generally wealthier than other migrant groups, they are highly self-reliant and require minimal assistance in organising their migration. In contrast, Thai seasonal workers in Finland depend heavily on kinship ties and village-level intermediaries to connect them with recruitment companies. These personal social networks are crucial for them, as they leverage prior experiences and knowledge to avoid exploitation and excessive fees from recruitment companies. Another essential aspect highlighting the role of personal, familial, and intimate networks is the mention of spouses—either from the same nationality or from the destination country—as significant helpers and facilitators of migration, particularly for Thai women, Vietnamese women, and Filipino migrants.

In addition to personal networks, intermediary actors—such as community-based organisations and migration-oriented agencies—play a pivotal role in facilitating migration. These actors often serve as connectors between migrants and the broader migration system. However, these intermediaries are not always seen as trustworthy. Some migrants, for instance, in mainland China, report negative experiences with exploitative practices, where intermediary actors demand high fees for their services without providing the promised support. These experiences highlight the importance of discerning between trustworthy and non-trustworthy intermediaries, especially in precarious migration channels where exploitation and lack of support are more common, as mentioned by (aspiring) Thai seasonal berry pickers interviewed.

Furthermore, social media platforms and digital networks increasingly influence migration aspirations. Many aspiring migrants, such as Vietnamese and Hong Kongers, turn to online platforms where influencers, experienced migrants, and community leaders share stories and advice. While these platforms and networks can offer valuable insights, they also carry risks, as some individuals may use them to promote misleading or exploitative migration opportunities. For migrants already residing in Europe, particularly those from Japan living in Germany and those from other Asian countries settling in Belgium, social media networks serve as a source of emotional support after the migration. These platforms enable migrants to maintain strong connections with their friends, offering reassurance and comfort.

### **Practical, emotional, and financial support in migration decisions**

Social network maps analysed within the framework of AspirE point to significant forms of support – practical, emotional, and financial – that aspiring (re)migrants procure and play a role in their im/mobility decision-making (see Table 1). These forms of support most often overlap with one another.

Practical assistance and emotional support mostly come from aspiring (re)migrants' personal networks. The former includes help to navigate administrative procedures, information about legal pathways, and ways to access job opportunities abroad. For example, migrants from the Philippines often rely on their families back home to help them with the bureaucratic hurdles associated with labour migration, such as securing work permits or visa applications. These personal networks act as intermediaries, reducing the administrative burdens that aspiring migrants face. In addition to providing information, these networks can also be a source of emotional reassurance, especially in uncertain migration channels. The reliance of aspiring Asian (re)migrants on these networks suggests their perception of official or public services as impersonal, distant, or unreliable.

Practical support appears also available for prospective Asian (re)migrants on specific online platforms and digital networks. These platforms and networks provide them with peer-based information about the realities of migration, enhancing their sense of certainty regarding their mobility projects. They also offer detailed information about the destination countries, which is not always the case for personal networks.

**Table 1. Overview of networks by types, actors, and supports provided**

<b>Network types</b>	<b>Actors</b>	<b>Supports provided</b>
<b>personal networks</b>	family, spouses, friends, co-villagers  (Trust stems from shared cultural/social ties essential for migration decisions.)	<b>practical:</b> administrative help, job opportunities, legal advice  <b>emotional:</b> re-assurance and moral support  <b>financial:</b> funding migration, reducing fees
<b>intermediary actors</b>	community-based organisations and migration agencies  (These actors connect aspiring migrants to broader migration systems.)	<b>practical:</b> facilitating migration processes  (Risk of exploitation due to untrustworthy actors.)
<b>social media and digital networks</b>	platforms where influencers, experienced migrants, and associative leaders share pieces of advice  (These platforms are increasingly influential.)	<b>practical:</b> peer-based information about migration realities, detailed advice about the destinations  <b>emotional:</b> moral support migrants in destination countries
<b>official networks</b>	embassies, consulates, legal advisors, professional institutions  (Aspiring migrants less trust these networks.)	<b>practical:</b> information on visas, employment, legal rights, settlement processes  (There is a potential in these forms of support for misinformation prevention.)

Moreover, aspiring migrants often obtain financial support through their personal networks. Interestingly, financial resources are crucial in determining which migration channels aspiring migrants would choose to pursue. Migrants with more significant financial means are more likely to seek safer and more formal migration pathways, such as university study or investment opportunities. In contrast, those with fewer resources may turn to precarious migration channels, often mediated by exploitative intermediaries. For example, aspiring Thai seasonal workers may

opt for visas that involve intermediaries who charge significant fees for securing jobs abroad, leading to a system where the financial capacity of the migrant often dictates the level of trust and safety in their migration pathway. The presence of financial resources also influences the actors that migrants choose to engage with in their networks. Wealthier migrants tend to have access to more official networks, including educational institutions, legal advisors, and professional services, that ensure a smoother migration process. In contrast, migrants with fewer financial resources may rely more heavily on their reliable personal networks of family members and friends or on informal, less trusted networks, which exposes them to more significant risks of exploitation and vulnerability during their migration journey.

## **Policy recommendations**

Based on the findings of AspirE’s social network map analysis, the present Policy Brief advances the following recommendations to improve the EU’s regular migration system:

### **Recommendation #1: strengthen the role of embassies and consulates**

Migrants most often rely on informal networks (family, friends, and professional connections) for information about migration and the destination country. This reliance on personal relationships sometimes leads to misinformation or scams. Many participants mentioned that they did not receive sufficient support from their destination countries’ embassies despite these being essential sources of information, especially for visa applications. Embassies should take a more proactive and visible approach to offering accessible, accurate, and up-to-date migration information. This approach should encompass clear guidelines on visa applications, employment opportunities, legal rights, and settlement services. Dedicated information hubs could be established within embassies and consulates to regularly engage with prospective migrants, providing workshops or online platforms for pre-migration orientation. Additionally, embassies should collaborate with community leaders and local organisations in migrant-sending countries to disseminate accurate information and counter misinformation or exploitation by unscrupulous agents.

### **Recommendation #2: enhance pre-migration orientation and skills development programmes**

Many aspiring migrants do not obtain adequate information and resources on the migration process, which may lead to misinformed decisions about their destination or job opportunities. A better understanding of the destination country’s legal, social, and economic conditions would allow migrants to make more informed decisions and prepare better for integration. In some countries, migrants arrive without adequate skills aligned with the labour market demands of the destination country, limiting their employment opportunities. Policies should establish mandatory pre-departure orientation programmes that provide detailed information about migration processes, including legal rights, job market opportunities, living conditions, and integration services. Governments, non-profit groups, or migrant organisations could lead these programmes, and they should collaborate with destination countries to provide skills and development opportunities aligned with the needs of the host country’s labour market. This collaboration could include vocational training, language learning, and cultural orientation programmes that prepare migrants for short-term and long-term success. The present recommendation appears aligned with the EU Talent Pool that “aims to be an EU-wide online platform matching profiles of jobseekers from outside the EU with job vacancies for shortage occupations of EU employers”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> This has been part of the EU’s skills and talent mobility package. On 13 June 2024, the Council of the EU took a position regarding the said Talent Pool proposition: see < <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/06/13/eu-to-facilitate-recruitment-of-third-country->

### **Recommendation #3: promote the role of social networks in migrant integration**

Migrants often rely heavily on co-national networks—family, friends, and informal groups—from their home countries for emotional support, assistance in navigating bureaucratic systems, and sharing information about employment and living conditions. While these networks provide essential support, over-reliance on co-national networks may result in social isolation and hinder the development of diverse social contacts, which are crucial for successful integration. Hence, policies should encourage migrants to diversify their social connections beyond co-national networks. For instance, older migrants (over 35) have different support needs than younger migrants, often seeking more professional and institutional help rather than relying solely on family or friendship groups. Policies should also encourage the establishment of community hubs within migrant communities to act as a bridge between formal institutions and informal networks. These hubs could offer tailored services such as legal aid, language courses, job placement assistance, and health support. Governments should promote formal partnerships between private and non-profit organisations and migrant-led community groups, ensuring that information and resources are readily available to migrants of all ages. Additionally, social networks should be recognised as a vital resource for integration. Policies should support their formal recognition as a complementary mechanism to help migrants adapt to their new environments effectively. By fostering diverse social connections, migrants can build a more robust social support system, improving integration outcomes.

### **Recommendation #4: empower educational institutions to support migration**

Higher education plays a significant role in facilitating migration, particularly for students and skilled workers who rely on universities for visa processes and initial residence permits. However, many migrants are unable to leverage the full support potential of universities once they have completed their studies or are transitioning to employment. Universities are essential actors in migration, but they tend to play a limited role in long-term integration once students graduate or transition to work life. European universities should be encouraged to establish more comprehensive support systems for international students that go beyond admission processes. These systems should include career services, legal and administrative assistance, and clear pathways for post-graduation migration. Formalising partnerships between European universities and institutions in Asian countries is equally important. Such collaborations could involve student exchange programmes, joint research initiatives, and employment opportunities, fostering mutual benefits and facilitating brain gain for origin and destination countries. Incentivising universities to adopt migrant-friendly policies is crucial. These policies should assist international students in navigating the transition from study to employment and skilled migrants in obtaining work permits. As the 2024 Commission Work Programme states, the European “Commission will present this year an initiative on the recognition of third country nationals’ skills and qualifications by combining systemic long-term measures to improve recognition, with short-term action to address some of the most imminent EU skills gaps”<sup>6</sup>.

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jobseekers/#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20Council%20agreed%20its,shortage%20occupations%20of%20EU%20employers.>.

<sup>6</sup> European Commission. 16 March 2023. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, and 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. 15. Available at: <[https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/Communication\\_Long-term-competitiveness.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-03/Communication_Long-term-competitiveness.pdf)>.