

# **POLICY BRIEF**

## **No.5**

### **Tracing migration aspirations over time: insights from Asia–Europe video diaries**

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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

Drawing on 284 video diaries recorded across eleven Asian and European countries, this policy brief provides evidence-based insights into the temporal dynamics of migration and (re)migration decision-making. The analysis shows that migrants' aspirations evolve over time in response to life events, family obligations, labour market realities, and administrative constraints. Across cases, bureaucratic delays and fragmented procedures emerged as significant barriers, often trapping migrants in long periods of “structural waiting” that restrict access to rights, housing, and employment. Intermediary actors—whether recruitment agencies or informal online channels—strongly shape expectations, frequently contributing to misinformation and post-arrival disappointment. Sudden policy shifts further destabilize mobility trajectories, demonstrating the high sensitivity of migrants' plans to regulatory volatility. Language barriers consistently limit integration, contributing to emotional strain and social isolation. Based on these findings, the policy brief recommends strengthening transparent information systems, ensuring predictable policy implementation, expanding language and integration support, and enhancing coordinated administrative processes that allow migrants to plan their lives with stability and confidence.

## Keywords

Migration temporality; Structural waiting; Administrative barriers; Policy volatility; Intermediary actors; Language integration; Social networks; Aspirations and decision-making.

## Introduction

This policy brief draws on an extensive qualitative dataset of video diaries that focus on the temporality of migration and (re)migration decision-making among Asian migrants aspiring to move to, within, or from the European Union. The dataset was generated within the Horizon Europe project AspirE – *Asian Prospects in (re)migration to and within the EU*, through a coordinated collection of 284 pseudonymised video diaries recorded by the participants across eleven European and Asian countries throughout 2024.

These video diaries constitute a large-scale, multi-country, and multi-lingual corpus that captures intimate, self-recorded reflections on migrants’ aspirations, dilemmas, constraints, and evolving decisions over time. Participants recorded entries every three months—typically in March, June, September, and December—allowing researchers to trace both short-term fluctuations and longer-term trajectories in migration plans.

The dataset spans eleven countries where data collection took place—Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong and Mainland China, Italy, Japan, Philippines, Portugal, Thailand, and Vietnam—covering aspiring migrants, current migrants, long-term residents, and returnees. Video diaries were recorded in nine languages: Japanese, English, Thai, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Cantonese, French, Italian, and Mandarin. Participants range in age from 19 to 73, and include 22 self-identified men, 55 women, and 1 non-binary participant, and represent diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

The videos were recorded in locations chosen freely by participants: most often in their homes (living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, gardens), but also in workplaces, and in meaningful public or natural spaces (rice fields, forests, airports, stations, restaurants, libraries). This diversity of spaces contributes to the situated, contextualised nature of the narratives.

To ensure rigorous ethical protection, the dataset underwent a multi-step process of transcription, pseudonymisation, voice-over rerecording, and quality certification. Across the eleven countries, more than 60 researchers and research assistants contributed to this work and to the verification procedures following the project’s Pseudonymisation Guide. As a result, the final dataset is fully pseudonymised, available only for internal consortium use, and stored under controlled access. It will be fully anonymised 5 years after the end of the project, in order to make it accessible in an open data format.

While methodological choices varied slightly according to national contexts, all video diaries shared a common thematic core:

- Temporal evolution of migration and remigration aspirations and the evolving assessment of life in Europe
- Impact of policy constraints
- Impact of family responsibilities and other real-life events,
- Economic and lifestyle motivations
- Contradictions between imagined futures and lived experiences
- Uncertainty, hopes, and emotional and psychological states.

Across the dataset, the video diaries provide rich insights into how migrants navigate bureaucratic procedures, labor market conditions, family ties and obligations, geopolitical events, economic instability, and shifting opportunities. Importantly, they reveal that temporality is not linear: aspirations may accelerate, pause, transform, or become suspended depending on both personal circumstances and external structural factors—including migration policies, administrative delays, recruitment systems, and visa regimes.

The analysis presented in this policy brief synthesises comparative findings from all participating countries in Europe and Asia. It identifies the policy-relevant mechanisms shaping aspiration formation, aspiration suspension, forced change of destination, remigration, and decision-making over time. The policy brief also outlines how EU and national migration policies—directly or indirectly—create specific temporalities that influence migrants’ capacities to plan, decide, and act. Finally, it proposes concrete policy recommendations aimed at supporting more transparent, predictable, and humane mobility frameworks for current and aspiring migrants.

## Cross-country comparative findings

### 1. Aspirations change over time but not always in expected ways

In some countries, like Finland, Italy, and Portugal, aspirations to (re)migrate remained stable. In Portugal, for example, even when participants expressed disappointment with living conditions, their commitment to immigrating long-term did not change.

In contrast, the video diaries show significant shifts in aspirations across several countries: in the Czech Republic, young migrants reconsidered staying due to labour uncertainty or the prospect of family reunification; in Japan, participants suspended their migration plans in response to global uncertainties and the comforts of life at home; and in the Philippines, the diaries revealed a shift from short-term tourism intentions to long-term migration aspirations. Taken together, these cases illustrate that aspirations evolve through feedback loops in which experiences trigger reflection, reflection reshapes aspirations, and these revised aspirations in turn guide new decisions.

### 2. Bureaucratic delays severely restrict integration and decision-making

Mainly across Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Germany, and Czechia, participants struggled with:

- Scarce appointment slots for residence permits
- Delayed issuance of tax numbers and health IDs
- Contradictory requirements between government departments
- Limitations during the “limbo state”: difficulties in accessing public services and rental markets and limitations on changing employers, study, or travel while waiting for the residence permits.

In Portugal, for example, migrants described a “deadlock loop”: tax offices request a residence permit, but the migration office requests a tax number first. The lack of status-for-waiting periods prevents migrants from planning their lives and exposes them to increased vulnerability in their daily life.

### 3. Intermediary agencies strongly influence migration aspirations

When reality did not meet expectations, disappointment often followed. This was particularly visible in:

- Portugal, where Chinese migrants reported that agencies advertised overly positive information, creating false expectations.
- Thailand, where berry-picking migrants depended entirely on recruitment agencies to navigate visas and logistics.
- Philippines, where information gaps shaped unrealistic migration goals.

### 4. Policy shocks disrupt migration trajectories

Across the dataset, we find some cases where sudden policy shifts disrupted migrants' plans and reshaped their aspirations. In the Czech Republic, changing political conditions altered young migrants' sense of security and influenced whether they envisioned staying or leaving. More recently, in Portugal, administrative and legal changes affected migrants' long-term settlement plans. The most dramatic example, however, emerged from Thailand: Finland's unexpected 2024 suspension of Schengen visas for berry pickers abruptly halted the migration plans of all Thai participants. Families lost non-refundable fees, recruitment agencies cancelled trips, and migrants faced both financial hardship and emotional distress. These cases underscore the extreme sensitivity of migration systems to policy volatility and illustrate how abrupt regulatory changes can reverberate through entire networks of migrants, families, and intermediaries.

### 5. Language barriers are universally identified as a core obstacle

Across Portugal, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, Belgium, and Finland, participants consistently described language barriers as one of the most pervasive obstacles shaping their migration trajectories. Limited language proficiency restricted access to jobs, reduced opportunities for social participation, and contributed to feelings of emotional isolation. It also created practical barriers in securing housing, navigating healthcare, and interacting with public services—challenges that were compounded by the scarcity of clear, multilingual information. Crucially, the absence of integrated pathways linking language learning with employment, training, and social integration generated what migrants repeatedly described as a condition of “structural waiting,” in which they were unable to move forward with their plans despite strong aspirations and significant effort.

### 6. Social networks, family, and gender shape aspirations

Family, social networks, and gender norms emerged as powerful forces shaping migrants' aspirations and decisions over time. In many cases, the core motivation behind migration was the desire to provide a better life for one's family, with family reunification acting as a particularly powerful driver of long-term planning. Several participants made decisions directly tied to intimate relationships—for example, the Japanese migrant in Germany aspiring to migrate onwards to Canada. Among participants from the Philippines, family obligations at home routinely overshadowed long-term migration planning, while in Vietnam, the presence—or absence—of supportive social networks shaped delays and recalibrations in migration timing. In Portugal, some migrants were prompted to seek deeper integration into the local society after negative experiences within co-ethnic communities, highlighting how social environments redirect aspirations. Gender norms further influenced decision-making, particularly through caregiving responsibilities that dictated who could

migrate, when, and under what conditions (e.g. ‘the dutiful Thai daughter’). Collectively, these findings show that migration aspirations are deeply relational: decisions are not made by individuals alone but are embedded within family strategies, emotional ties, and gendered expectations.

## Policy recommendations

Policy recommendations emerging from the video diary dataset point to the need for coordinated, multi-level action involving EU institutions, national governments, local authorities, and civil society actors.

1) Across countries, migrants consistently stressed the importance of accurate, transparent pre-departure information, highlighting widespread gaps between expectations and the realities of work, housing, costs of living, and administrative procedures. EU and national authorities should therefore **collaborate with trusted intermediaries—embassies, labour agencies, migrant organisations—to ensure that prospective migrants receive reliable, multilingual guidance that counteracts misinformation and prevents exploitative recruitment practices**. In particular, it would be helpful to engage digital platforms such as major social media and messaging platforms to flag fraudulent recruitment advertising and promote verified, first-hand information for prospective migrants. This recommendation aligns with the **EU Skills and Talent Mobility Package (2023-2024)**, which emphasises trustworthy information provision, and with the **Employer Sanctions Directive (2009/52/EC)**, which seeks to reduce exploitation linked to irregular recruitment.

2) A second priority concerns **reducing structural waiting within migration and social integration systems**. Long and unpredictable delays in issuing residence permits, tax numbers, health numbers, or student documentation place migrants in administrative limbo, preventing access to basic rights and discouraging long-term settlement. National administrations and local service providers should introduce provisional mechanisms that allow newcomers to work, rent housing, register for healthcare, and enrol in education while their applications are processed. Streamlined institutional coordination—supported by digital tools and harmonised procedures—would further prevent contradictory instructions and bureaucratic deadlocks. This approach resonates with the goals of the **recast EU Single Permit Directive (2024)**, which requires faster and more transparent processing of residence and work permits, and with EU efforts toward the **interoperability of migration and border-management systems**. Provisional access would significantly reduce vulnerability and facilitate smoother integration trajectories.

3) A further policy priority concerns the predictability and pacing of legal and regulatory changes. Across multiple countries, sudden policy shifts—such as Finland’s abrupt 2024 suspension of Schengen visas for Thai berry pickers or recent migration policy changes in Portugal and the Czech Republic—immediately disrupted long-term plans that migrants had been preparing for months or even years. These abrupt shifts generated financial loss, emotional stress, and a profound sense of instability. To mitigate such harms, EU and national authorities should **adopt phased or gradual implementation of new migration rules, accompanied by early**

**communication, transition periods, and protective measures for those who have already invested in migration procedures.** Predictable policy timelines not only protect migrants but also support employers, local communities, and consular actors who rely on stable mobility systems. This recommendation is consistent with principles embedded in the **EU Seasonal Workers Directive (2014/36/EU)**, which aims to ensure transparency and prevent sudden irregularity, and with the European Commission’s broader call for **predictable labour mobility frameworks** under the Skills and Talent Mobility Package. Predictability supports migrants, but also employers, municipalities, and consulates that depend on stable mobility systems.

4) The data shows that language remains one of the most significant barriers to social and economic integration. Governments and municipalities should **expand accessible, flexible, and affordable language training linked directly to vocational pathways, entrepreneurship support, and community integration programmes.** For instance, programs such as ‘Portuguese as a non-native language’ can be used as an example to implement other language training in different countries. Investment in digital learning platforms, multilingual interfaces, and community-based conversation networks would advance both inclusion and employability. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and local associations can play an essential role in delivering context-specific language support and bridging newcomers into local life. This recommendation complements EU priorities under the **Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027)**, which emphasises language learning as the foundation for successful integration.

5) Policies must **recognise that migration decisions are embedded in family strategies and social networks.** Support for family reunification, caregiving responsibilities, and gender-sensitive mobility is crucial to ensuring that migrants can make stable, long-term decisions. Local authorities and NGOs can enhance social integration by fostering inclusive community spaces, reducing dependence on potentially exploitative networks, and promoting cross-cultural engagement. This recommendation aligns with the **EU Long-Term Residents Directive (2003/109/EC, recast ongoing)** and the EU’s legal framework on **family reunification (Directive 2003/86/EC)**, which together emphasise stable status, equal treatment, and the protection of family life as pillars of integration.

The EU contains many specific, applicable instruments related to our recommendations: family reunification (2003/86), seasonal work (2014/36), single permit (2011/98), digital access (2018/1724), interoperability (2019/817/818), AMIF funding (2021/1147), social security portability (Reg. 883/2004), protections against exploitation (2009/52; 2011/36; 2008/104\*).

The main barriers to fully realising the recommendations are (a) uneven Member-State transposition/implementation and local capacity; (b) resource/staff shortages at local offices; (c) the need to pair legal instruments with sustained funding (AMIF) and operational guidelines (training, UX design, multilingual outreach); and (d) where EU instruments are strategic/political (e.g., the Pact) they require further legislation or consensus to create legally binding predictability.

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\* For further information, consult <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html>

## Conclusion

Across different regional contexts, participants reflected on their aspirations, fears, expectations, administrative challenges, and daily living conditions in Europe or during preparation phases in Asia. The diaries reveal that:

1. Migration aspirations evolve over time, shaped by life-course transitions, social networks, gender norms, labour market opportunities, and emotional processes.
2. Administrative delays—particularly in residence permits, tax numbers, and healthcare registration—severely constrain migrants’ autonomy and long-term planning.
3. Intermediary recruitment agencies and online information sources frequently provide inaccurate or overly optimistic narratives, producing disappointment and mistrust post-arrival.
4. Language barriers represent one of the strongest impediments to integration across almost all destinations.
5. Policy shocks (e.g., Finland’s 2024 ban on Schengen visas for Thai berry pickers) illustrate how sudden regulatory changes disrupt migration plans and cause financial loss.
6. Visual anonymity (avatars) and the emotional openness in the diaries show significant gaps between migrants’ imaginaries and lived realities, often intensified by precarity and uncertainty.

Migration decisions are non-linear and temporal, not one-time choices. Aspirations shift in response to opportunities, constraints, emotions, and policies. Policymaking must reflect this dynamic and support migrants at all stages of their journeys.