

POLICY BRIEF

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Mapping Asian migration to Europe: policy insights from two-step focus group discussions

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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 synthesises insights from 21 focus group discussions across Asia and Europe, involving 139 migration experts and practitioners. The findings show that economic opportunity, family welfare, and children’s education remain the strongest drivers of Asian migration to Europe, even as motivations diversify. Social networks and intermediaries play a decisive role in shaping mobility, providing essential support but also creating dependency and misinformation. Across European destinations, migrants face slow administrative procedures, fragmented governance, and opaque digital systems that generate prolonged insecurity. Sudden policy shifts—such as abrupt visa changes or evolving labour recruitment rules—significantly disrupt mobility plans. Language barriers remain one of the most persistent obstacles to employment, integration, and social participation. Re-migration within Europe is increasingly common, shaped by career needs, family transitions, and assessments of long-term stability. The brief calls for predictable legal reforms, improved administrative coordination, ethical recruitment oversight, recognition of diaspora infrastructures, and expanded language-integration pathways to support safer and more coherent mobility systems.

Keywords

Migration governance; cross-border dynamics; administrative fragmentation; integration barriers; social networks; re-migration pathways; labour mobility systems; stakeholder perspectives

Introduction

This policy brief synthesises the findings of the AspirE Focus Group Discussion (FGD) dataset, which explores the aspirations, decision-making processes, and mobility trajectories of Asian migrants to Europe. The data was collected through a two-step FGD design that ensured both national depth and cross-country comparability.

Step 1 (October 2024) consisted of national FGDs conducted separately in each participating country. Each session gathered a minimum of six social agents—migration practitioners, nongovernmental organisation (NGO) personnel, governmental representatives, consultants, and community leaders—who offered grounded insights into the migration dynamics within their country. These discussions illuminated how policies, labour markets, social networks, and local contexts shape aspirations and decision-making at the national level.

Step 2A (November 2024) involved paired FGDs linking each Asian team with its corresponding European partner team (e.g., Portugal-China/Hong Kong, Finland-Thailand, Germany-Japan, Czech Republic-Vietnam). Each session included at least three social agents from each country, creating a direct dialogue between origin and destination contexts. This step highlighted how governance systems, recruitment processes, education pathways, and social networks interact across migration corridors.

Step 2B (December 2024) conducted exclusively among European teams, focused on intra-European re-migration and onward mobility. In these discussions, three experts from each European team engaged with three experts from the Belgium team, which served as the European reference point. These FGDs revealed the drivers of re-migration, the role of administrative systems, integration barriers, and the differentiated opportunities migrants encounter across European states.

Together, this methodology produced a comprehensive, multi-scalar understanding of Asian-European migration trajectories, capturing perspectives from origin, destination, and intra-European mobility. Across the 21 focus group discussions conducted in Europe and Asia, a total of 139 migration experts, practitioners, and community actors participated: 76 in Step 1, 32 in Step 2A, and 29 in Step 2B. The findings presented in this policy brief reflect not only the structural determinants of migration but also the lived experiences, institutional bottlenecks, and cross-border governance gaps that shape contemporary mobility patterns.

Cross-country comparative findings

1. Migration motivations are diversifying but economic and family drivers remain central

Across the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, China/Hong Kong, Japan, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, and Czechia, FGDs converge on a common finding: migration continues to be driven primarily by economic opportunity and family welfare.

In the Philippines, Vietnam, Belgium, and Portugal, livelihood and security remain the strongest motivations; while in China and Hong Kong, Golden Visa pathways and education-oriented relocation for children dominate, with political unease operating as a less explicit push factor. Japanese participants highlighted dissatisfaction with rigid work culture, gender inequality, and the search for personal reinvention as key reasons to migrate. Among Thai participants, seasonal mobility to Finland is rooted in rural indebtedness and the lack of viable local opportunities. In Italy, long-standing Filipino migration is now primarily shaped by family reunification. Meanwhile, in Germany and Czechia, well-established diasporas and strong social networks continue to attract both skilled and semi-skilled Vietnamese and Japanese migrants.

Across all contexts, even among highly skilled movers, the aspiration to secure better futures for children – through education, stability, or family unity – emerges as a powerful and recurring driver of both initial migration and subsequent re-migration decisions.

2. Social networks and intermediaries play a structuring role

FGDs reveal that migration networks are pivotal across all countries, but their impacts diverge. In the Vietnam-Czech Republic-Germany corridor, long-standing diasporas provide crucial information, financial assistance, employment links, and settlement support, effectively sustaining multi-decade migration chains. In Italy, dense Filipino communities in major cities facilitate access to jobs, housing, and upward mobility. In Portugal and China/Hong Kong, information circulates largely through private WeChat or Facebook groups, and the circulation of unverified advice can sometimes lead to uncertainty and misunderstandings. In Czechia, intermediaries dominate the migration process, guiding applicants through complex, opaque visa systems but also creating dependency, particularly for those facing linguistic or bureaucratic barriers. In Belgium, migrants rely heavily on relatives, marriage partners, NGOs, and circulating diaspora narratives of welfare and security. Across all contexts, networks serve as vital enablers of mobility — yet they also introduce risks when intermediaries become powerful gatekeepers who charge excessive fees, control information, or cultivate unrealistic expectations about life and work in Europe.

3. Bureaucracy, administrative delays, and institutional fragmentation deepen migrant vulnerability

Across Europe, FGDs underline that bureaucratic delays and institutional fragmentation significantly deepen migrant vulnerability. Long waiting times for appointments, inconsistent implementation of rules, poor coordination between ministries, and digital systems that are difficult or impossible to navigate all contribute to prolonged insecurity. For Thai berry pickers, misalignment between Finnish and Thai authorities remains a central obstacle, shaping both recruitment and protection mechanisms. Vietnamese migrants in Czechia or Germany face similar uncertainty as unclear visa pathways, shifting requirements, and inconsistent student-to-worker transitions generate chronic instability. Together, these issues make administrative systems a major determinant of migrants' everyday well-being and long-term plans.

4. Policy frameworks strongly shape or distort mobility decisions

Across countries, participants described how policy frameworks can abruptly redirect entire migration trajectories: Finland's 2024 suspension of Schengen visas for Thai berry pickers halted recruitment cycles overnight; Italy's *decreto flussi* was portrayed as opaque and misaligned with labour market needs; and in Portugal, the restructuring of SEF into AIMA has caused prolonged delays in the issuance of residence visas and other essential bureaucratic procedures, creating significant uncertainty and hardship for applicants who depend on timely documentation. In Germany, months-long waits for residence permit appointments affect workers, students, and Japanese expatriates alike, while in Czechia, poor coordination between ministries results in fragmented support and inconsistent procedures for Vietnamese migrants.

More broadly across Europe, shifting rules on student-to-worker transitions, family reunification, and renewal criteria add layers of uncertainty that destabilise planning. Throughout the discussions, migrants and experts repeatedly call for predictable, phased, and better-coordinated legal changes that do not abruptly disrupt long-term aspirations or investment in migration pathways.

5. Language barriers remain one of the greatest obstacles

Across all European destinations, FGDs show that language barriers remain one of the most significant obstacles to integration, shaping migrants' access to employment, their ability to navigate bureaucratic systems, their interactions with schools, and their overall social and emotional well-being. Limited proficiency affects not only newcomers but also long-term residents: Japanese-Germany discussions revealed that some elderly migrants still were not fluid in German language, leading to isolation and, in some cases, return migration. In both Czechia and Portugal, participants emphasised that the scarcity of multilingual information forces migrants to rely on informal intermediaries, reinforcing dependency and exposing them to structural vulnerabilities. Ultimately, language proficiency emerges as a critical determinant of long-term security, autonomy, and social participation.

6. Re-migration is increasing driven by family needs, career paths, and welfare considerations

Onward or return mobility is increasingly widespread across the countries studied, shaped by shifting opportunities, family needs, and perceived stability. Vietnamese migrants commonly move from Czechia to Germany or return to Vietnam when business prospects improve, while Japanese migrants seldom move onward from Germany—yet when they do, family transitions or career trajectories usually drive the shift. Among Filipinos in Italy, rising living costs and limited upward mobility encourage consideration of alternative destinations such as the UK, Canada, or countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Portugal sometimes functions as a temporary steppingstone to families who later relocate to other countries where labour incomes are higher. Across these diverse cases, re-migration choices remain closely tied to children’s educational pathways, responsibilities toward aging parents, marital dynamics, and broader assessments of long-term security.

Integrated analysis: macro-meso-micro dynamics

At the **macro level**, focus group discussions reveal that migration systems across Europe are becoming increasingly selective, privileging skilled workers while restricting low-skilled mobility. Policy volatility – including shifts in visa rules, investment schemes, and labour recruitment frameworks – generates widespread uncertainty and disrupts long-term planning for migrants and employers alike. Labour shortages in key sectors stand in contrast to restrictive or slow-moving recruitment systems, creating structural mismatches between supply and demand. Administrative bottlenecks, such as appointment delays and inconsistent procedures, further complicate legal pathways and often push migrants toward intermediaries as the only viable means to navigate complex bureaucracies.

At the **meso level**, social networks, intermediaries, and civil-society organisations shape the migration experience as much as formal institutions do. Diaspora communities function as stabilising anchors, offering information, financial support, and emotional reassurance, yet these same networks can reinforce dependence and limit autonomy. Intermediaries, both formal and informal, often play a decisive role in securing visas, documentation, or employment, especially where public systems are fragmented or opaque. NGOs and local associations provide essential orientation and support but rarely receive the structural backing needed to respond to rising demand. Across contexts, migrants rely far more on personal networks than on official channels when choosing destinations, preparing paperwork, or assessing risks.

At the **micro level**, migration aspirations emerge from deeply personal and family-centred considerations. Individuals place strong emphasis on long-term stability, reunification with loved ones, educational opportunities for children, and a sense of safety and well-being. Gender shapes these aspirations in visible ways, influencing the feasibility of movement, the types of jobs accessible abroad, and the pressures

migrants face before and after migration. Digital platforms now play a central role in shaping expectations, making it possible for people to plan mobility with limited language proficiency or institutional knowledge — but also increasing the risk of overly optimistic or incomplete understandings of life abroad.

Policy recommendations

1) Ensure stability and predictability in legal frameworks by avoiding abrupt or unanticipated changes. Across all levels of governance, the focus group discussions highlight the need for predictable, coordinated, and migrant-centred policy frameworks. Sudden or unannounced changes in migration rules can destabilise entire mobility cycles, especially in seasonal work, student migration, investment migration, and family reunification. EU institutions, national governments, and regional authorities should therefore commit to phased and well-communicated reforms, accompanied by clear timelines, transparent criteria, and accessible multilingual information. This predictability is essential not only for migrants but also for employers, recruitment systems, and public administration. This approach aligns with the objectives of the **EU Pact on Migration and Asylum (2024)**, which emphasises predictable and coordinated governance, and with principles in the **EU Seasonal Workers Directive (2014/36/EU)** aimed at preventing irregularity caused by sudden status changes.

2) Promote administrative coherence and digital accessibility. Across cases, fragmented governance, slow processing times, and inconsistent interpretations of procedures create vulnerability and force migrants to rely on informal brokers. Public authorities at all levels should strengthen coordination between ministries, improve interoperability of digital platforms, and invest in user-friendly systems that reduce bottlenecks and appointment backlogs. Local administrations, which are often the first point of contact for newly arrived migrants, require adequate resources, training, and staff to implement these systems. Civil society organisations can complement this effort by offering fact-checking services and pre-departure guidance to counter misinformation circulating through informal networks. This is consistent with the **EU Interoperability Regulations (2019/817 and 2019/818)**, which promote integrated information systems for migration management.

3) Diaspora and informal support networks and local associations should be recognised as migration infrastructure, not informal add-ons. Their role is essential as they implement their action on the field, and frequently they are the first contact for migrants. NGOs and diaspora associations can play an important role here by offering culturally grounded support, mentoring, and community-based learning spaces.

4) Language access and integration pathways represent another area where coordinated action is needed. Local authorities, supported by national and EU

funding, should expand free or low-cost language programs and connect them directly to employment, vocational training, and social services. Intercultural mediators, community interpreters, and local hubs for administrative assistance are essential to reduce dependence on intermediaries and to help families navigate schools, healthcare, and bureaucratic procedures. This recommendation aligns with the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 - Commission Communication (24 Nov 2020) and Regulation (EU) 2021/1147 - Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF 2021–2027), which set a legal basis and funds to support national/local integration measures (including language and vocational training). However, we acknowledge that these action plans and regulations are already in place and are strategic/prescriptive, but not a binding single rule on how local hubs must operate. Implementations depend on Member States/local authorities translating Commission actions and AMIF grants into concrete local services.

5) Surveillance for ethical recruitment and migrant protection. As labour demand in agriculture, caregiving, and service sectors continues to grow, EU institutions and national governments should reinforce safeguards that ensure fair recruitment, regulate private agencies, and prevent predatory fee structures. Establishing clear standards for intermediaries – combined with cross-border oversight and cooperation with Asian counterparts – is crucial to reducing exploitation. At the same time, governments should expand social security portability and recognition of qualifications, enabling migrants to maintain stable rights even when moving across borders or returning home. These objectives resonate with the **EU Employer Sanctions Directive (2009/52/EC)** and the **EU Platform on Undeclared Work**, which promote cross-border monitoring and decent working conditions.

6) Family reunification, children’s education, and long-term security are central to mobility decisions and should be treated as core components of migration policy. National and local authorities should incorporate these elements into integration strategies, while NGOs and civil society partners continue supporting vulnerable groups. By recognising migrants’ multidimensional needs – economic, social, familial, and emotional – a more coherent and humane governance framework can emerge, aligning institutional objectives with the lived realities of migrants.

Conclusion

The focus group discussions reveal a European and Asian migration landscape marked by opportunities but also structural vulnerabilities. Aspirations to migrate or re-migrate are deeply embedded in family strategies, life-course planning, and transnational social networks. Migrants frequently navigate governance systems that can be slow, complex, and lacking in transparency and predictability.

A more coherent migration governance system in the EU – one that is predictable, accessible, multilingual, and coordinated – would significantly reduce migrant

precarity and support legal mobility channels that match Europe's demographic and labour needs. Avoiding sudden legal changes, strengthening bilateral agreements, expanding language-integration pathways, and regulating intermediaries are key steps toward safer, more inclusive mobility systems.