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## Comparative Perspective on Migration Trends in Western and Central Eastern European Countries

**Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to examine migration trends and challenges in the European Union, highlighting the dynamics of immigration and emigration within Western and Central European regions. It explores the socioeconomic and geopolitical factors driving migration, focusing on critical developments, including the 2015–2016 refugee crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 Ukrainian refugee influx. The analysis underscores disparities between Western and Central European countries in terms of migration rates and policy responses, emphasizing the need for cohesive strategies to balance humanitarian and economic priorities. The study provides insights into how migration shapes the EU's social and economic landscape, highlighting the growing significance of integration policies and labor market demands. *Methodology.* The study employs a comparative analysis of emigration and immigration dynamics in Western and Central European countries using data from 2012 to 2022. It incorporates official statistics and reports to identify key patterns of immigration and emigration, with particular attention to the effects of significant migration crises and policy responses. Quantitative data on migration flows are analyzed to reveal regional disparities and evolving trends in migration management. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how economic development, labor market needs, and geopolitical events shape migration dynamics across the EU. *Results.* The study identifies significant differences in migration patterns between Western and Central European countries. Western Europe consistently experienced higher levels of immigration, driven by economic opportunities and established social systems, with Germany, France, and the Netherlands leading as primary destinations. Central Europe, while exhibiting lower overall immigration levels, demonstrated notable growth in recent years, particularly in countries like Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic. Key findings highlight the critical role of EU policies, such as the Temporary Protection Directive [1], in addressing migration challenges. The analysis also reveals the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical crises on migration flows, underscoring the adaptability of EU migration policies in response to emerging challenges. *Value / Originality.* This study offers a novel comparative perspective on migration patterns across Western and Central Europe, addressing a gap in the literature by emphasizing the regional disparities and the evolving role of EU policies in managing migration crises. It provides an updated and comprehensive analysis of migration trends influenced by recent geopolitical events, such as the Ukrainian refugee influx, and explores their implications for economic and social policy-making in the EU.

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**1. Introduction**

Migration in the EU is a complex phenomenon characterized by diverse trends and challenges that demand effective management to ensure positive

outcomes for both migrants and host countries. In recent years, there has been a substantial influx of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly during the 2015–2016 crisis, which underscored the need for revised migration approaches, especially in border

**Keywords**

labor migration, migration policy, immigration trends, emigration trends, refugee crisis, integration strategies, Western and Central Europe

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control. Overall, migration flows in the EU have significantly increased in the last decade, which led to a sharp rise in migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq. The COVID-19 pandemic added further challenges to EU migration policy by introducing extensive restrictions on cross-border movement and travel. This led to a decrease in mobility within the EU, creating new obstacles for immigration management and integration, necessitating policy adaptation to the changing circumstances. More recently, the Russian attack on Ukraine triggered another major wave of migration, with millions seeking temporary refuge in European countries under emergency protection mechanisms. The labor market and migration processes in European countries have been extensively studied by leading researchers, including Boswell C. [2], Ghatak S., Mulhern A., and Watson J. [3], Guardia N. D. and Pichelmann K. [4], Hazans M. [5] as well as Kahanec M. and Zimmermann K. F. [6; 7]. Furthermore, valuable insights and data on these topics are provided by Eurostat.

## 2 Key Migration Trends in the EU

Migration remains a consistent component of the European Union, with significant flows of individuals both between EU member states and from outside the Union. Based on previous research, the key migration trends in the EU can be outlined as follows [2; 4; 6; 7; 8]:

1. **Internal Migration.** Mobility between EU member states has remained a stable trend, primarily for employment or education. In recent years, the highest number of internal migrants has come from Eastern European countries (notably Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria) relocating to Western European nations like Germany and France.

2. **International Migration.** In recent years, international migration to the EU has significantly increased due to conflicts and economic instability in regions such as the Middle East and North Africa, and more recently, due to the 2022 crisis in Ukraine. The EU has welcomed a large number of refugees and asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine.

3. **Family Reunification.** Family reunification is another important dimension of migration in the EU, as many migrants move to join family members already residing in EU member states. National laws in many EU countries facilitate this process, allowing family members to legally join relatives in the host countries.

4. **Labor Migration.** Labor migration is a critical aspect of the EU, where numerous workers from non-EU countries arrive for employment opportunities. This flow of labor is supported by EU policies and agreements that enable member states to recruit workers from outside the EU to fill workforce gaps in specific economic sectors.

5. **Migration of highly skilled professionals** from the EU countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, who often leave their home countries to work or study in Western Europe. This phenomenon, known as "brain drain," is a significant trend that impacts the economies and labor markets of the countries of origin.

6. **Integration.** The adaptation of immigrants to life in host countries is a key focus of EU migration policy. Various integration programs and initiatives, including vocational training, language courses, and cultural orientation, aim to help immigrants build new lives and achieve social inclusion in their host countries.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the EU faced its largest migration crisis since World War II. In response to this extraordinary situation, the EU activated the Temporary Protection Directive for the first time in March 2022. This mechanism enables rapid protection for displaced individuals during large-scale refugee influxes, granting them residency rights, access to the labor market, and healthcare services. This approach reduces pressure on national asylum systems and promotes greater social integration.

At the same time, during this period, we observe the following facts in EU countries [10; 11]:

Between 2012 and 2015, the EU saw a significant rise in the number of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This led to a substantial influx of migrants into countries such as Germany, France, and Sweden. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the EU responded swiftly, providing humanitarian aid, border support, and protection to those seeking refuge from the war.

During these 2015-2016 years, the EU encountered a large-scale migrant crisis that created considerable political and social tensions in some member states, prompting a reevaluation of immigration policies in several countries.

In the wake of the migrant crisis, increased attention was given to external border controls in the EU, leading to the establishment of Frontex – an agency responsible for coordinating border management efforts – and the implementation of stricter immigration policies in certain member states.

Over the past decade, EU immigration policy has undergone various adjustments. In 2019, a new regulation was adopted to support search and rescue operations at sea, aiming to ensure the safe disembarkation of rescued migrants. In 2020, the EU introduced a new Pact on Migration and Asylum [8], designed to create a transparent and equitable system for managing migration.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected migration in the EU, as numerous countries imposed travel and border crossing restrictions, leading to a substantial decrease in the flow of migrants since 2020.

### 3 Empirical Methodology

The analysis of immigration and emigration dynamics is essential for understanding the social, economic, and demographic transformations occurring within countries. Migration patterns reflect complex interactions between economic opportunities, labor market demands, geopolitical factors, and national policies. To provide a comprehensive perspective, this study focuses on Western and Central European countries, regions that offer distinct yet interconnected migration trends. Western Europe, with its advanced economies, well-established social systems, and historical role as a migration hub, contrasts with Central Europe, which has experienced growing economic development and integration into the European Union in recent decades. By examining these regions, the analysis highlights how disparities in economic development, policy frameworks, and labor market needs shape migration flows. This comparative approach provides valuable insights into how different regions respond to global and regional migration challenges, including the refugee crisis, economic shifts, and the COVID-19 pandemic, while emphasizing the significance of migration as a driver of development and social change.

### 4 Findings

Speaking about Western European countries, they generally experienced high levels of emigration throughout the period, with significant year-to-year fluctuations. Germany, France, and the Netherlands consistently received large numbers of emigrants. Immigration numbers in Central European countries were significantly lower compared to Western Europe, but some countries (e.g. Poland, Romania) showed substantial activity, especially in later years.

Western European countries experienced significant fluctuations in immigration flows. In Belgium, the number of immigrants increased steadily by 22.1% from 2013 (120,078) to 2015 (146,626). However, immigration dropped to 123,702 in 2016 before rebounding sharply, culminating in a staggering 68.4% increase by 2022, with 208,356 immigrants compared to 2012. [9]

Germany, the most notable case, saw immigration grow by 17% between 2012 and 2013. Immigration peaked in 2015 at 1,571,047, an increase of 165.4% compared to 2012. Although numbers declined post-crisis, immigration rebounded by 167% from 2020 (728,606) to 2022 (1,943,445), demonstrating Germany's capacity to attract migrants amid its strong economy and labor market demands.

In France, immigration rose modestly by 4% from 2012 to 2014 but faced a plateau until 2017. However, by 2022, immigration saw a 31.6% increase compared to 2012, growing from 327,431 to 431,017. Luxembourg, a smaller but affluent nation, experienced

consistent growth of 53.5% over the decade, with immigration increasing from 20,478 in 2012 to 31,433 in 2022, reflecting its attractiveness for high-skilled workers. [9]

The Netherlands saw a continuous rise in immigration, growing by 34% from 2012 (124,566) to 2015 (166,872) and peaking at 326,798 in 2022, a 162.4% increase over the decade. Similarly, Austria experienced dramatic fluctuations: after a spike of 81.6% in 2015 due to the refugee crisis, immigration stabilized and grew steadily, culminating in a 120.2% increase from 91,557 in 2012 to 201,622 in 2022. [9]

Migrant inflow to Central and Eastern European countries was still moderated, especially taking the Western counterparts into consideration. The Czech Republic witnessed a sharp surge in immigration by 116% between 2015 and 2016, followed by a remarkable 451% increase from 63,095 in 2020 to 347,429 in 2022. This exponential growth reflects the country's growing labor market demands and its strategic location within the EU. [9]

In Croatia, immigration increased gradually after its EU accession in 2013, skyrocketing by 547% between 2012 (8,959) and 2022 (57,972). This trend illustrates the country's growing role as an emerging economic hub and destination for regional migration. Hungary, while facing political debates around migration, saw immigration grow by 73% from 2012 to 2015, peaking at 94,148 in 2022 – an overall increase of 179.4%. Similarly, Poland experienced steady growth, with immigration rising by 26.7% over the decade, reaching 275,515 in 2022. However, Poland also became a key destination for Ukrainian refugees post-2020, contributing to the rise in immigration numbers. [9]

Romania, traditionally a country of emigration, saw immigration rise significantly by 75.1%, from 167,266 in 2012 to 293,024 in 2022. This increase was partly driven by returning nationals and regional labor migration. Slovakia, in contrast, showed minimal growth by 41.8% in 2016, peaking at 7,686 before declining slightly by 7.1% to 5,463 in 2022, reflecting its limited appeal as a migration destination. [9]

Thus, Western Europe consistently received far more immigrants compared to Central Europe. In 2022, Germany alone had more immigrants than the combined total for all Central European countries. Central European countries, while starting from a lower base, demonstrated higher relative growth rates in immigration (e.g., the Czech Republic and Romania in 2022).

The state of migration flows has been extensively studied, underscoring the fact that the dynamic migration patterns in this region significantly contribute to migrant remittance flows, positioning Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries as prominent recipients and donors of migrant remittances. This phenomenon is closely tied to economic factors, particularly employment

opportunities in more developed nations, where wages earned by residents abroad considerably exceed those of non-residents in CEE countries. This discrepancy reflects disparities in the competitiveness of CEE nations in attracting foreign labor.

An analysis of migration trends in the region reveals that immigration to Western Europe has been vital for addressing labor shortages, particularly in aging societies like Germany and the Netherlands. Migrants contribute to key sectors such as healthcare, construction, and technology, driving economic growth and innovation. For instance, Germany's sustained high immigration levels have bolstered its status as Europe's largest economy. As for Central and Eastern Europe, while experiencing rising immigration, continues to grapple with challenges related to population decline due to emigration. However, the increase in incoming migrants, particularly to countries like the Czech Republic and Poland, supports industrial expansion and regional development. Remittances from emigrants also play a crucial role in sustaining economies such as Romania and Hungary. Furthermore, emigration from Western European countries often involves skilled professionals seeking opportunities abroad, reflecting the mobility of the EU labor market. While this outward mobility contributes to cultural exchange and skill development, it can also lead to talent shortages, particularly in high-demand sectors like healthcare and technology. Contrastingly, emigration is driven primarily by economic disparities in Central and eastern European countries, leading to significant workforce depletion. Countries like Croatia, Romania, and Hungary have faced "brain drain," as young and educated workers leave for better-paying jobs in Western Europe. This trend exacerbates demographic challenges, including population aging and declining birth rates, further straining social welfare systems.

Economically, emigration can reduce unemployment in sending countries while contributing to remittance inflows. For example, Poland and Romania benefit significantly from remittances, which support local economies and improve living standards. Demographically, migration offsets declining birth rates in Western Europe, stabilizing population growth and ensuring the sustainability of social welfare systems. In Central Europe, however, the dual pressures of emigration and lower immigration volumes exacerbate demographic challenges, particularly in countries like Slovakia and Hungary. Socially, migration fosters cultural diversity and globalization but also presents integration challenges. Western European countries have implemented robust integration policies, yet public debates about migration's social impacts persist. In Central Europe, where large-scale immigration is relatively new, policies are still evolving, posing challenges for long-term social cohesion.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, migration within the European Union is a multifaceted phenomenon that reflects economic, geopolitical, and social dynamics across member states. The trends in migration underscore significant disparities between Western and Central European countries in terms of immigration and emigration rates, labor migration, and refugee intake. The data shows a certain relationship between economic prosperity and migration patterns. It is evident that Western European countries experience significantly higher levels of both emigration and immigration compared to Central and Eastern European countries, highlighting a more dynamic population exchange in Western European countries, likely driven by stronger economies, better job opportunities, and more attractive living conditions. For instance, countries as Germany, France, and the Netherlands consistently show higher migration figures compared to Central and Eastern Europe. However, some countries (eg., Hungary, Poland, Romania) have seen significant increases after 2020, likely due to regional dynamics, such as employment opportunities for foreign workers. Other countries (Slovakia) however, still exhibit much lower levels compared to their Western European counterparts, likely due to economic challenges, lower wages, and less-established immigration systems.

While Western European nations remain key destinations due to robust economic opportunities and well-established social systems, Central European countries are experiencing increasing immigration, spurred by economic growth and recent political events, such as the Ukrainian crisis. The impact of migration on EU countries varies, with Western Europe experiencing higher overall immigration levels and Central Europe showing notable growth in recent years, indicating an evolving role within the EU's migration landscape. Also, Central European countries like Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, show a gradual decline in certain years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This could suggest economic challenges or tighter immigration policies, limiting the inflow of foreign nationals in these regions.

The EU's responses, including policy adjustments like the Temporary Protection Directive, have facilitated rapid, coordinated responses to unprecedented migration challenges, particularly in times of crisis. This adaptability highlights the importance of cohesive, responsive migration policies that balance humanitarian obligations with economic needs and social stability. Ultimately, migration will continue to shape the social and economic fabric of the EU, making it essential for member states to pursue policies that promote integration, address labor market demands, and support the mutual development of sending and receiving countries.

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