

PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations



Funded by
the European Union

Unpacking Policy Assumptions Across Migration Pathways: A Call to Make Theories of Change Explicit

This policy brief draws from insights that emerged from the PACES project based on a cross-national analysis of migration policy documents in three countries and a focus group with policymakers in February 2026.

PACES project Policy Brief No.2, D3.4 - April 2026



Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Research design and methodology	3
Findings	5
Conclusion and recommendations	9
References	11

Introduction

European migration policies often fall short on their stated objectives—not due to a lack of evidence, but because they rely on oversimplified assumptions about how migrants make decisions and how policies shape those decisions. This brief explores how these assumptions differ across policy areas and how they shape the use, non-use, and misuse of evidence in EU and Member State migration policymaking. As migration consistently ranks among the most important political issues for European citizens¹ and policymakers increasingly adopt measures seeking to steer migrant behaviour in line with national priorities, it is crucial to understand why these initiatives often fall short, so practitioners can design policies that better reflect migrants’ lived realities and decision-making processes.

Gaps between policy expectations and outcomes are well-documented across policy areas in migration governance: for instance, research has shown that restrictive migration policies may produce unintended ‘substitution effects’ that limit their effectiveness or render them counterproductive, contributing to the expansion of irregular migration channels, the diversification of routes, or the longer-term settlement of migrants who might otherwise have returned (de Haas et al., 2019). Similarly, facilitative migration policies designed to attract international talent through legal pathways can also fall short of their objectives,² as migrants’ destination choices depend largely on factors beyond immigration policy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

This brief begins from the premise that the gap between policy expectations and outcomes cannot be explained simply by a lack of evidence, challenging the idea that merely producing more expert knowledge—or communicating it better—will bridge the knowledge-policy divide. Instead, migration policies are underpinned by implicit theories of change: assumptions about how migrants behave and how policy interventions influence decisions not only about whether to migrate, but also where, when, and how. Despite long-standing efforts to improve evidence-based policymaking, the area of

¹Eurobarometer data from late 2025 found that immigration ranked second among the most important issues facing the EU (mentioned by 20 per cent of respondents), following only Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. See European Commission (2025).

² For example, the EU’s flagship Blue Card Directive was designed to attract highly skilled workers and make the bloc more competitive in the global race for talent. In practice, it has been under-utilised by most Member States, with national work and residence permits being seen as more attractive. See European Commission. (2019) and Weigle & Zünkler (2023).

migration remains plagued by myths and misconceptions of what works in shaping global mobility trends. And recent efforts tackling the evidence-to-policy gap in migration governance underscore that research alone rarely shifts policy choices when political incentives and public sentiment pull in other directions (Migration Policy Centre, n.d.).

This policy brief distils lessons from comparative research conducted under the PACES Horizon project analysing dominant assumptions and patterns of knowledge use in national migration policymaking across Europe, as well as insights from a focus group dialogue with policymakers in February 2026. Rather than calling for 'more evidence', the brief examines how assumptions about migrants vary across policy areas in practice, how evidence is used, ignored, or instrumentalised, and what these findings imply for future EU and Member State migration policy development, offering practical recommendations to support more effective policy design.

Research design and methodology

This policy brief draws on two main sources of information: first, a comparative analysis of migration policy documents across three European countries (Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands) conducted by a team of PACES researchers led by Katharina Natter at Leiden University, which resulted in a working paper analysing underlying assumptions and knowledge practices in national migration policymaking (Natter et al., 2025). Based on this robust analysis conducted by PACES colleagues, the Migration Policy Institute Europe organised a focus group in Brussels with policymakers and other stakeholders in February 2026 to reflect on the findings of the comparative study on migration policy assumptions. This mixed-methods design offers insight into how assumptions and knowledge practices play out across policy domains and grounds these findings in practitioners' real experiences.

In-depth analysis of national policy documents

To track the dominant assumptions and the use of expert knowledge underpinning migration policymaking, a team of PACES researchers analysed 180 national policy documents surrounding key migration reforms across Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands since the early 2000s (Natter et al., 2025). Comparing these three countries, which differ in immigration histories, positions in EU migration systems, and traditions of evidence-informed policymaking, sought to examine whether and how institutional context shapes knowledge use. The analysis specifically covered documents focusing on three policy areas: counter-smuggling, asylum reception, and highly skilled worker attraction. These policy issues vary in degrees of politicisation and the types of institutions involved, allowing further insight into how institutional roles and politicisation impact knowledge use in policymaking.³

³ Counter-smuggling represents the most highly politicised domain, closely linked to concerns over national security and sovereignty and typically handled by Ministries of Interior or Justice; refugee reception is also politicised, with mixed humanitarian and welfare framings and greater involvement of Ministries of Foreign Affairs; while worker attraction is generally less politically divisive and primarily overseen by Ministries of Labour or Social Affairs. See Natter et al. (2025).

The analysis covered both policy documents themselves as well as relevant academic literature on migration behaviour and policy effects. Qualitative coding was applied using a four-eye principle, producing 2,304 quotations that either confirmed or challenged dominant assumptions. This approach allowed for a systematic understanding of how knowledge and assumptions on migrant behaviour are incorporated in migration policymaking.

Focus group with policymakers

A focus group provided the opportunity to go beyond analysing policy documents alone, by creating a space for migration policymakers to reflect critically on their own assumptions about migration decision-making—examining their origins, their evidentiary basis, the reasons they may diverge from what research shows, and concrete ways to close the gap between evidence and policymakers’ assumptions. The focus group was held in Brussels in February 2026.

The focus group brought together a deliberately diverse set of actors operating across the full spectrum of migration governance—from European-level institutions and international organisations to operational agencies and civil society bodies. This diversity was intentional: because assumptions about migration decision-making are shaped by institutional mandate, thematic focus, and proximity to migrants themselves, including voices from multiple vantage points maximises the richness of the reflection and guards against the blind spots that arise when any single sector dominates the conversation.

Participants were drawn from four complementary functions within the migration policy ecosystem. EU institutional policymakers—including representatives from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) and the Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA)—who each engage with migration from a distinct regulatory, financial, or geopolitical mandate. Alongside them, UNHCR brought an operational dimension, their direct engagement with migrants in the field allowing them to surface assumptions embedded in programme design rather than legislation alone. At the national level, Fedasil and Enabel represented two distinct Belgian institutional mandates—reception and development cooperation respectively. Finally, participants from the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, the European Policy Centre, and other leading migration experts contributed independent policy analysis perspectives, anchoring the discussion in empirical scrutiny and practical insights on the research-policy interface.

A particular strength of this composition is the opportunity it creates to contrast assumptions held by actors operating under different mandates at the same governance level—comparing how DG HOME and DG MENA frame migrant agency differently despite sharing the same EU institutional architecture, or how Fedasil and Enabel approach migration decision-making from their respective national vantage points. This within-level comparison reveals how institutional mandate—more than geography or seniority—may shape the assumptions that ultimately inform policy design.

The session included a presentation of the key research findings from the policy document analysis, followed by a moderated discussion with two rounds of discussion questions:

- **Assumptions in practice:** To what extent do these identified assumptions resonate with or diverge from your experience? Are there additional or alternative assumptions about migrants and their decision-making that you observe in practice?
- **Evidence and policy challenges:** What challenges arise when attempting to counter overly simplistic assumptions or bring evidence into policymaking? What approaches have worked (or not worked) in practice to overcome them?

The focus group was designed to enrich and test the document analysis findings with illustrative stakeholder perspectives. The focus group data were analysed using a framework analysis approach, structuring participant responses against the three migrant categories—refugees, labour migrants, and irregular migrants—and the different types of stakeholders as analytical dimensions. This allowed for systematic comparison of assumptions across actor types and institutional mandates, highlighting where assumptions converge, diverge, or sit in tension with existing empirical evidence on migration decision-making.

Findings

This section synthesises the main findings from the policy document analysis with outcomes from the focus group discussion, highlighting how migration policies are underpinned by assumptions about migrant behaviour that vary across policy areas and institutional contexts. It uncovers how these assumptions shape not only policy design, but also how evidence is used, ignored, or instrumentalised in practice.

Assumptions about migrants across policy issues: differentiated representations of ‘the migrant’

Across all three countries studied in the comparative policy analysis, ‘the migrant’ appears as a different figure in policy documents depending on the policy area at stake: from a simplistic and sometimes patronising image of the irregular migrant to the hyper-rational yet supposedly easily influenceable highly skilled labour migrant (Natter et al., 2025). These shifting images impact which types of evidence are considered relevant, and what kinds of policy interventions are viewed as feasible.

Figure 1. Assumptions and knowledge use across policy areas, identified by the comparative policy analysis

Policy Area	Dominant Image of ‘The Migrant’	Knowledge Use Pattern
Counter-smuggling	Dehumanisation: smuggled migrants as irrational or uninformed actors; smugglers as agents	Prevalence of knowledge non-use and misuse

Refugee reception and resettlement	Invisibilisation: refugees as passive victims of macro circumstances; as uniform group to be managed	Prevalence of symbolic knowledge use
Essential worker attraction	Hyper-rationalisation: essential workers easily influenceable through policy tweaking	Some instrumental knowledge use

- **Migrants as uninformed or irrational actors in counter-smuggling policies.** In counter-smuggling policies, migrants are often portrayed as unaware of the risks posed by irregular migration or smuggling networks. This assumption runs counter to research that claims migrants are often well-informed about the dangers, but still choose to migrate because conditions at home are perceived as even more dangerous (Alpes & Sørensen, 2015; Van Bommel, 2020). As a result, policymakers tend to treat smugglers as the primary agents in this policy area, while measures aimed at migrants—such as information campaigns—seek to inform individuals who are seen as lacking sufficient awareness.⁴
- **Migrants as passive victims lacking agency in refugee resettlement and reception policies.** In policy documents on refugee resettlement and ‘reception in the region’—strategies that support refugee’s settlement in countries neighbouring their home country—refugees’ individual aspirations are generally overlooked. This ‘invisibilisation’ underscores an image of refugees as a uniform group to be managed in the face of macro-level circumstances, rather than as individuals with agency. As a result, policy approaches tend to focus on large-scale management efforts and coordination, while refugees themselves are framed as passive subjects of broader structural forces (Natter et al., 2025).
- **Migrants as hyper-rational economic optimisers in essential worker policies.** In contrast with the other policy areas studied, policy frameworks concerning essential worker attraction often framed the figure of the migrant as a ‘hyper-rational’ agent, highly responsive to marginal changes in entry criteria and procedural efficiency. As a result, policies tend to focus on efficiency levels and procedural elements but overlook the more nuanced considerations and constraints that shape migrants’ motivations, from earning potential to language to perceptions of social inclusion (Natter et al., 2025).

Participants in the focus group discussion highlighted how dominant assumptions and focus areas differ not only across policy areas, but also across institutions and regions. For example, a participant from the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre cited ongoing comparative work analysing policy documents from Europe and Africa on EU-Africa migration cooperation that points to a mismatch in problem framing: European policy documents tend to over-emphasise destination-side factors such as welfare and visas, while African counterparts focus on origin and journey dynamics, including costs, risks, and smuggling. This divergence reflects how actors’ institutional and geographic positioning may shape which drivers appear most salient, as policymakers tend to

⁴ For instance, this assumption was evidenced by an identified response to an Austrian parliamentary question: “‘The aim [of the information campaign] is for the Afghan population to inform themselves and not believe the smugglers who are only interested in the refugees’ money - and risk their lives to do so.’” See Natter et al. (2025).

prioritise factors that fall within their sphere of influence and dominate the policy discourses they are embedded in.

Divergences in framing and associated approaches were also evident in governance at the Member State level, including among agencies working in the same policy area. For instance, a representative from a national agency working on return and reintegration highlighted their individualised approach focused on case management, working to support migrants during their stay and prepare them for their return, while development-focused actors prioritise broader reintegration assistance and community-level inclusion of returnees in origin countries—sometimes approaching the same policy issue with fundamentally different logics. These differences reflect not only operational choices, but underlying assumptions about the drivers of successful reintegration outcomes: case management approaches tend to emphasise individual vulnerability and the potential to influence outcomes through tailored support, while development-oriented interventions focus on structural conditions and community-level dynamics. These approaches are not necessarily contradictory, as they address different stages of the migration journey or distinct target groups. However, they illustrate how institutional mandates and objectives shape the dominant assumptions embedded in policy and programme design—targeting either individual or structural factors—and thereby influencing which theories of change and forms of intervention are considered most relevant.

However, assumptions and policy logics are not fixed, and research and evidence can play an important role in reshaping them over time. A participant from the European Commission noted that earlier information campaigns to counter smuggling were built on the assumption that migrants leave without adequate knowledge of risks, leading to a heavy reliance on information provision as a deterrence tool. Yet research and evaluations—some of which the European Commission has funded directly—have shown that many migrants are aware of these risks, but still migrate due to social norms, family dynamics, and cultural aspirations.⁵ Growing engagement with this evidence has prompted a shift at EU level toward more nuanced understandings of migration decision-making as socially embedded and evolving over time, illustrating how investments in the evidence base and sustained interaction with research and practitioner experience can recalibrate underlying assumptions. However, the focus group participant noted differences in this shift in logic across Member States, highlighting that uptake of evidence is not consistent across stakeholders or geographic contexts. Through its role as a key funder of comparative migration research and pilot projects—via mechanisms like Horizon and AMIF—and as a coordinating stakeholder that can distil and disseminate policy lessons across Europe through networks like the European Migration Network, the EU is uniquely positioned to generate and spread evidence at scale.

Knowledge use in migration policymaking: patterns and constraints

Across the three countries covered in the policy analysis, the use of evidence and expert knowledge in migration policymaking also varied markedly across policy issues. In counter-smuggling policies, relevant research and evaluation were often disregarded or selectively ‘mis-used’, cited mainly to support predetermined positions rather than to

⁵ See, for instance, the work done under the EU Horizon-funded BRIDGES Project (Trauner, Adam, & Cham, 2023).

inform design. For example, in Austria and Italy, anti-smuggling penalties were a prominent instrument, but often promoted without justification of how they would work in practice (Natter et al., 2025). In refugee reception policies, knowledge was more visible but frequently used symbolically, cited to legitimise pre-determined choices rather than to shape them. Finally, policies designed to attract essential workers showed greater scope for evidence use, though impact evaluations and data were still inconsistently translated into concrete reforms. For example, Italy's multi-annual Flow Decrees were cited as an instance of instrumental knowledge use: while informed by robust data on labour shortages and economic needs, quotas remain limited despite expert evidence, and implementation gaps persist in practice (Natter et al., 2025).

The comparative policy analysis identified a few key factors that influence how knowledge is used in migration policymaking and impede evidence-based practices:

- **Politicisation of migration.** While migration's high political salience places it prominently on policymakers' agendas and has encouraged a burgeoning body of evidence, knowledge that does not align with dominant political narratives can be intentionally sidelined—particularly in the most highly politicised thematic areas. The policy document analysis found that expert knowledge was underutilised in areas such as asylum and irregular migration, where political actors prioritise action over effectiveness. In some cases, policymakers may treat individual studies or reports as definitive, closing down further debate or engagement with additional evidence. By contrast, policymaking tends to engage more consistently with evidence in historically less politicised domains, such as skilled worker attraction (Natter et al., 2025).
- **Institutional division of labour and self-legitimation.** Various ministries working on migration topics derive legitimacy differently, shaping how they engage with knowledge in migration policymaking. In more politicised domains, such as those led by Ministries of Interior or Foreign Affairs, legitimacy is more closely linked to narratives and public positioning, leading to more symbolic uses of knowledge to justify preferences. By contrast, ministries such as Labour or Social Affairs, which are less central to public debates about migration, tend to derive legitimacy from policy impacts on socioeconomic life, encouraging more meaningful engagement with evidence (Natter et al., 2025).
- **Inter-actor dynamics and fragmentation.** In cross-sectoral policy areas such as migration, knowledge is often diffused across multiple institutions and governance levels. This fragmentation can lead to coordination challenges, inconsistent interpretations of evidence, and gaps in information sharing. As a result, knowledge may be diluted or lost in inter-institutional processes, limiting its influence on policymaking (Natter et al., 2025).

These patterns suggest that the migration knowledge-policy gap is less a problem of information supply or communication, and more a structural feature of the broader knowledge ecosystem. Focus group participants also underscored the fact that for many pressing policy dilemmas—such as the drivers of secondary movements or the weight of different push and pull factors in migration decisions—evidence exists, but is not 'black and white'. This ambiguity is hard to translate into clear guidance, especially under

political and media pressure to push simple but sometimes reductive narratives that lose important nuance.

Focus group participants also discussed a narrowing window for evidence to inform policymaking, especially in highly politicised areas, and emphasised how crucial it is for policymakers to remain open to uncomfortable findings from evaluations of policy impact and implementation results. Just as institutional mandates and objectives shape dominant assumptions that guide policy intervention design, they also influence which forms of evidence are deemed relevant. Efforts to enhance evidence-informed migration policy must grapple with the political and institutional constraints that shape knowledge use, rather than assuming that more or better research alone will shift policy decisions.

Conclusion and recommendations

Taken together, the findings presented in this brief demonstrate how migration policies are shaped by underlying assumptions about how migrants make decisions—and how policy interventions are expected to influence those decisions. These implicit theories of change are rarely made explicit in policy documents, but they impact how target groups are defined, how policy instruments are designed, and which evidence is deemed relevant. As long as these assumptions remain unexamined, even well-intentioned and evidence-informed policies risk falling short of their objectives. The recommendations below therefore focus on making these assumptions explicit, strengthening feedback mechanisms, and improving how evidence is integrated into policy design.

Specific steps that can be taken to bridge the gap between policy expectations and outcomes include:

- **Make theories of change explicit.** Policymakers should articulate the assumptions underpinning proposed policy interventions. This includes clarifying how specific measures are expected to influence decisions about whether, where, and how to migrate. Bringing these assumptions into the light enables more scrutiny, testing, and adaptation over time.
- **Address politicisation by embedding ongoing learning and adaptation into policies and institutional culture.** Given the high political salience of migration, insulating policymaking from politics is neither realistic nor desirable. Instead, efforts should focus on instilling a reiterative learning culture among migration policymakers and embedding learning mechanisms in policy interventions—such as iterative evaluations, pilot programmes, and feedback loops that can operate even under political pressure and short policy cycles.
- **Prioritise reflexivity over perfect evidence.** In a context where evidence is often contested or inconclusive, the goal should not be to simply accumulate data or eliminate uncertainty, but to continuously revisit and question underlying assumptions. This requires that institutions are open to revising policies in light of new insights, including findings that challenge established narratives or political preferences.
- **Treat migrant agency and knowledge as dynamic, not fixed.** Migration policies should move beyond static and issue-specific representations of ‘the migrant.’ The same individual may navigate different legal statuses and motivations over time,

yet policies often treat categories as mutually exclusive and behaviourally uniform. Recognising this fluidity can support more realistic and adaptable policy design.

Addressing the gap between policy expectations and outcomes requires rethinking how assumptions, knowledge practices, and institutional incentives play out in practice. When theories of change are weak or unrealistic, even high-quality evidence cannot redirect policy trajectories. Advancing migration governance therefore does not begin with better evidence alone, but with asking more explicit questions: about how change is expected to happen, whose behaviour policies seek to influence, and under what conditions those assumptions hold.

References

- Alpes, J., & Sørensen, N. (2015). Migration risk campaigns are based on wrong assumptions. *DIIS Policy Brief*. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies. (DIIS). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/StudyMigrants/CivilSociety/JillAlpesMigrationcampaigns.pdf>
- de Haas, H., Czaika, M., Flahaux, M., Mahendra, E., Natter, K., Vezzoli, S., & Villares-Varela, M. (2019). International Migration: Trends, Determinants, and Policy Effects. *Population and Development Review*, 45(4), 701–950. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12291>
- European Commission. (2019). *Commission Staff Working Document: Fitness Check on EU Legislation on legal migration* (SWD(2019) 1055 final). https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/af1e9a98-3a6b-4296-8af2-112571bd515f_en
- European Commission. (2025). *Standard Eurobarometer 104 - Autumn 2025*. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3378>
- Migration Policy Centre. (n.d.). *Linking Evidence, Policy and Debate*. European University Institute. <https://migrationpolicycentre.eu/about/linking-evidence-policy-and-debate/>
- Natter, K., Biggi, R., Ike, N., & Assem, M. (2025). *Between knowledge and assumptions: the migrant in the eyes of the policymaker* (PACES Working Paper No. 7). International Institute of Social Studies. <https://www.iss.nl/en/media/2025-04-pacesd33working-paper7natterbiggiikeassemfinal>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Talent Attractiveness 2023*. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/tools/talent-attractiveness-2023.html>
- Trauner, F., Adam, I., & Cham, O. N. (2023). *Why information campaigns struggle to dissuade migrants from coming to Europe*. BRIDGES. <https://www.bridges-migration.eu/publications/why-information-campaigns-struggle-to-dissuade-migrants-from-coming-to-europe/>
- Van Bommel, S. (2020). The perception of risk among unauthorized migrants in Ghana. *Journal of Risk Research*, 23(1), 47–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2018.1517376>
- Weigle, M. & Zünkler, P. (2023). Same but different: Strategies in the global race for talent. *International Centre for Migration Policy Development*. <https://www.icmpd.org/blog/2023/same-but-different-strategies-in-the-global-race-for-talent>

Authors

Abigail Goldfarb, Migration Policy Institute Europe (agoldfarb@migrationpolicy.org), Jasmijn Slootjes, Migration Policy Institute Europe (jslootjes@migrationpolicy.org)

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Katharina Natter and her collaborators, including Riccardo Biggi, Niels Ike, and Merel van Assem, for their invaluable research under PACES Work Package 3 to inform this policy brief. The authors would also like to thank Miina Eriksson for her research assistance and Simona Vezzoli for her feedback on an earlier version of this brief.

The PACES project has received funding under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, grant agreement N 101094279.

Views and opinions expressed are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Scan the QR code or visit www.iss.nl/PACES to view the materials generated by the PACES partners.



This work © 2026 is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

