

PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations



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From Evidence to Action: PACES Findings for Migration Policymaking

This policy report draws from insights that emerged across the PACES project, synthesising ten core policy takeaways from the project.

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Executive Summary

This report distills the ten core policy takeaways from the PACES project on two interlinked questions: how people make decisions about whether, when, and where to migrate, and how policymakers make decisions about migration policies. Drawing on research across origin, transit, and destination contexts, as well as analyses of migration policymaking itself and public attitudes towards it, PACES shows that migration decision-making is dynamic, context-dependent, and often poorly captured by the simplified assumptions that shape policy debates. The findings point to a common lesson for policymakers and practitioners: more effective migration governance depends not only on better understanding migrants’ lived realities, but also on better understanding how evidence is used—or sidelined—in the design of migration policy.

1. **Regular pathways matter more than deterrence for shaping migration aspirations.** PACES finds that migration policies have limited influence on whether people aspire to move, except where they create credible and accessible regular pathways. Restrictive measures may alter routes or timing, but rarely eliminate aspirations when the underlying drivers of migration remain unchanged.
2. **Migrants and European publics share a preference for regular migration.** Across origin and destination contexts, migrants *and* European publics overwhelmingly prefer legal migration. This makes legal pathways one of the few areas where migrant preferences, public concerns, and domestic interests can align.
3. **Policy knowledge is limited at departure but grows along the journey.** Migrants often leave with only vague knowledge of destination-country policies, but migration and integration rules become more influential as they encounter them in transit and destination settings. The impact of migration policy on migration decision-making should therefore be understood as evolving across the journey, not as fixed at the point of departure.
4. **Migrants lack practical information, but know irregular journeys are risky.** PACES shows that many migrants move with major information gaps about legal pathways, procedures, rights, and available services, while already being well aware of the dangers of irregular migration. This suggests that practical, trusted information is more valuable than deterrence messaging about risks alone.
5. **Public attitudes are more moderate and nuanced than often assumed.** A large ‘moveable middle’ in European publics evaluates migration policies pragmatically rather than from fixed ideological positions. Public support depends not only on attitudes toward migration in general, but also on how specific policy choices are designed and presented.
6. **Perceived inequality continues to fuel migration aspirations.** Migration aspirations are shaped not only by poverty or lack of opportunity, but also by relative deprivation and

increasing exposure to others' lifestyles and opportunities through social media and transnational networks. Development does not automatically reduce migration aspirations and can, in some phases, increase them.

7. **Physical safety is a central driver throughout the journey.** Concerns about violence, insecurity, and protection shape decisions not only to leave, but also to move onward, stay in transit, or remain in a destination country. Safety is therefore not a one-off trigger but a continuing factor in migration decision-making.
8. **Social protection influences mobility in different ways depending on context.** PACES challenges the idea that welfare systems simply attract migrants or that stronger social protection in origin countries automatically reduces migration. Formal and informal systems of support can both enable and constrain mobility, depending on accessibility, adequacy, and what migrants risk losing by moving.
9. **Migration policies often rest on simplified behavioural assumptions.** Different policy areas rely on different and often inconsistent images of 'the migrant', even though real-life migration trajectories are fluid and people may move between categories such as student, worker, asylum seeker, or irregular migrant. Policies are more likely to work when they reflect this complexity rather than relying on rigid typologies.
10. **Evidence influences policy unevenly.** PACES finds that research is more likely to inform policy instrumentally in less politicised domains, while in highly contested areas it is often used selectively or symbolically. Evidence does matter, but its uptake depends on political incentives, institutional structures, and the capacity of policymakers to absorb and use it.

Taken together, the PACES findings point to a clear lesson: migration policymaking is more likely to be effective when it focuses on realistic policy leverage, recognises the dynamic nature of decision-making, and invests in the institutional conditions that allow evidence to shape policy in meaningful ways.

Introduction

Migration policy in Europe is at a critical juncture, marked by a striking and persistent paradox. On the one hand, many EU Member States face acute demographic decline and growing labour and skills shortages, prompting calls for more strategic labour migration pathways. On the other hand, migration governance continues to be heavily shaped by deterrence-oriented approaches, with increasing emphasis on restricting irregular arrivals. Both strands of policymaking—attraction and restriction—share a common underlying assumption: that migration decisions can be shaped, steered, or prevented through targeted policy interventions. Yet, the evidence base on how migrants actually make decisions, and how policies influence these decisions in practice, remains fragmented and unevenly integrated into policymaking.

This tension is unfolding at a moment of significant institutional change. The entry into force of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum on 12 June 2026 represents a historic milestone in the evolution of the EU's migration governance framework. However, the Pact is not an endpoint. Its ultimate impact will depend on how its instruments are implemented across diverse national contexts, how trade-offs between control and access are managed, and whether implementation choices are informed by robust evidence on what works. At the same time, migration has become an increasingly polarised political issue across Europe, frequently dominating electoral debates and public discourse. Policy discussions are often driven more by political positioning and public sentiment than by empirical evidence, creating further challenges for designing effective and sustainable responses.

Against this backdrop, there is a clear and urgent need to strengthen the evidence base underpinning migration policymaking, particularly in relation to how policies interact with migrants' decision-making processes. A wide range of policy instruments—such as information campaigns, legal migration pathways, border controls, return policies, and cooperation with third countries—explicitly or implicitly aim to influence whether, when, and where individuals choose to migrate. However, fundamental questions remain insufficiently answered: Which policies are most effective in shaping migration decisions? Under what conditions do they work, and for whom? And how can policymakers better account for the complex, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of migration decision-making?

The PACES project (Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst social transformations) was designed to address these questions by advancing understanding of the drivers of migration decision-making and the role of policy interventions in shaping these processes. Through a combination of empirical research, comparative analysis, and stakeholder engagement, the project explored: (a) how migrants and individuals aspiring to migrate make decisions across different contexts; (b) how policies and policy narratives influence these decisions, both directly and indirectly; and (c) how evidence on migration decision-making can be more effectively integrated into policymaking.

This report synthesises the key findings and policy-relevant insights emerging from the PACES project, distilling ten core takeaways for policymakers at EU and national levels. It also reflects on the broader challenge of embedding evidence into migration governance, drawing in particular on discussions from the policy lab convened by MPI Europe, which brought together policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to examine how evidence on 'what works' can better inform policy design and implementation.

From Evidence to Action: PACES Findings for Migration Policymaking

This section distils the core insights from the PACES project into ten key takeaways for policymakers and practitioners. Together, they move beyond individual case studies to highlight recurring patterns in how migration decisions are made, how policy assumptions diverge from these realities, and what this means for the design and implementation of more effective measures. Each takeaway is intentionally concise and action-oriented, linking empirical findings to concrete implications for EU and national policies, and is meant to be read as a set of building blocks that can inform ongoing debates around the Pact, legal pathways, return and reintegration, and cooperation with partner countries.

#1: Migration aspirations are shaped more by available regular pathways than by policies designed to deter migration.

Migration policy debates in Europe often suggest that governments can, and should, achieve near-total 'control' on migration—shaping not only who arrives and how, but even whether people want to migrate in the first place. Against this backdrop, the PACES findings are striking: across research sites, migration policies played a far more modest role in shaping people's aspirations than is commonly assumed. What mattered much more were broader social, economic, and structural conditions, and—crucially—the presence of credible, accessible pathways for mobility. This runs

counter to a dominant political narrative that presents deterrence measures as the primary lever for controlling migration, and it raises tough questions about the realism of promises that policies alone can fully steer or suppress migration aspirations.

PACES research shows a clear asymmetry between the impact of policies that *enable* movement and those that seek to *deter* it. Policies that create real, attainable opportunities for regular mobility—such as bilateral labour agreements, transparent recruitment channels, and predictable visa regimes—more readily shape aspirations and concrete plans. By contrast, deterrence measures tend to have limited effects on people’s underlying desire to move, even when they change how people think about routes, timing, or destination choice. In other words: when people have strong reasons to leave, restrictive policies often reconfigure *how* they try to move, rather than *whether* they aspire to migrate at all.

This dynamic came through vividly in PACES fieldwork across six cities in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Algeria. In Adama, Ethiopia, for example, long-standing labour migration corridors to Gulf countries, supported by bilateral recruitment agreements and an ecosystem of employment agencies, provided residents with realistic, socially recognised pathways for regular migration, primarily for women engaging in domestic work:

‘In the past few years, **the government started to facilitate legal migration** especially to the Arab countries. It even provided training for many migrants. There is an exit exam for the trainees after completing their training. If they pass the exit exam, there is a certificate given to them which they took to the countries they get permission to work. However the government does not tolerate the illegal migration at all.’ – Interview conducted in Adama, Ethiopia with a 42-year-old married woman with children, secondary education (Pécoud et al., 2026).

Interviewees in this context often expressed a clear preference for formal channels and voiced strong negative attitudes toward irregular routes, which were seen as both risky and unnecessary given the availability of legal options. In areas where such pathways were absent or opaque, however, irregular migration—though still stigmatised—was more commonly framed as a necessary or legitimate strategy for pursuing work and life opportunities abroad. The contrast underscores that it is the presence (or absence) of viable options, rather than deterrent messaging alone, that most powerfully shapes how people imagine their futures.

These findings resonate strongly with the aspirations-capabilities framework in migration studies, which conceptualises migration as the outcome of both a desire to move and the ability to do so (Carling, 2002; Carling & Schewel, 2017). A large body of research has shown that migration aspirations are primarily driven by perceived opportunities, social networks, economic conditions, and individual life projects, while policies often have a more direct impact on the routes and modalities of mobility than on underlying preferences (Carling et al., 2018; de Haas, 2021). In this light, deterrence measures are prone to generating substitution effects: they may redirect flows, push migrants toward more hazardous routes, or shift movements to different destinations but only rarely do they extinguish the aspiration to move when the structural drivers remain unchanged (de Haas et al., 2021).

For policymakers, this finding should be read as both a warning and an opportunity. First, this finding cautions against political claims that migration can be ‘controlled’ through deterrence measures alone: overpromising to publics on the ability of such measures to stop migration flows risks

widening the gap between policy promises and outcomes, potentially undermining public trust in migration governance and government institutions more broadly. At the same time, the research points to a more constructive avenue for influence: shaping *opportunities* rather than attempting to suppress aspirations. Expanding safe, regular, and accessible migration channels can have a greater impact on migration trajectories, reduce reliance on irregular routes, and align individual strategies with legal options

#2: There is a shared preference for regular migration channels among migrants and European publics.

Migration debates in Europe often frame migrants' preferences and public preferences as fundamentally at odds. The PACES findings tell a very different story. Across origin and destination contexts, there is striking convergence around one core preference: both migrants and European publics overwhelmingly favour regular migration over irregular routes. This makes legal pathways one of the rare areas where migrant aspirations, public concerns, and domestic interests can be aligned rather than traded off.

Interviews with residents in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Algeria show that very few *aspire* to migrate irregularly. Irregular routes are generally described as a last resort, chosen when legal options are perceived as unavailable, unaffordable, or administratively out of reach. As one interview participant in Ethiopia explained:

'It's better to go legally. A person who goes legally does not face the same hardships as someone who goes illegally. Illegal migration is dangerous and stressful for both the individual and their family.' – Interview conducted in Kebri Beyah, Ethiopia with a 23-year-old single woman with no children, secondary education, and a strong aspiration to migrate (Pécoud et al., 2026).

Interviews conducted with African migrants in Europe revealed similar dynamics, with irregular migration framed as a result of limited opportunities for legal entry:

'We're not just talking about Slovakia, but this is a general phenomenon in the Western countries. A lot of applications from the Africans are rejected. **That's why they try these illegal means to find themselves here, the dangerous routes and all that.** ... That's a general information that if they could be encouraged and given more information on how they can legally travel, then maybe it will be more beneficial for them.' – Interview conducted in Slovakia with a 40-year-old man, entrepreneur from Kenya.

Importantly, this preference for legal pathways is not limited to migrants. PACES research on public attitudes towards migration suggests that legality also plays a central role in how European publics evaluate migration policies. Findings from a conjoint experiment involving 9,000 respondents across six European countries reveal that migration policies offering clear legal bases for admission, establishing conditional pathways to regularisation, and tying rights to recognised legal status are more likely to obtain majority support than policies that are detached from formal legal criteria (Jeannet, 2026). These findings suggest that legality matters not only for shaping migration decisions, but also for generating political support for migration policies. Together, these findings puncture the idea that migrants and European publics sit on opposite sides of an unbridgeable divide. Both groups express a strong preference for regular, predictable, and rule-governed mobility.

This suggests that expanding and better communicating legal pathways is not politically naïve, but one of the few strategies that can simultaneously respond to migrant aspirations, address public concerns around order and control, and serve domestic labour market needs.

As European countries face demographic ageing, labour shortages in key sectors, and growing competition for workers, expanding accessible legal migration pathways may represent one of the few policy interventions that aligns simultaneously with migrant preferences, public preferences, and domestic interests. Well-designed legal pathways can help meet labour market needs while reducing reliance on irregular migration and the risks associated with irregular journeys. Policymakers should recognise legal pathways as a mechanism for creating migration systems that are both more effective and more politically sustainable.

#3: Migration policy knowledge and impact are limited at departure, but grow along a migratory journey.

Migration decisions are not made once, at departure—they evolve along the journey. PACES findings show that migrants typically begin with very limited knowledge of migration policies in destination countries. Interviews with residents across Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Algeria revealed that most respondents were only vaguely aware of visa requirements or the risk of return, with little understanding of specific legal or administrative systems (Pécoud et al., 2026).

This changes as migrants move. Direct encounters with border controls, administrative procedures, and legal requirements bring policies into sharper focus and make them more consequential for decision-making. For instance, PACES survey data collected among migrants in Niger, Tunisia, and Italy found that restrictions and border controls had a greater impact on the journey to Tunisia and Italy, compared to earlier stages of the journey. Similarly, for migrants already in Europe, policies governing residence, regularisation, labour market access, and integration play a decisive role in whether they stay, move onward, or reconsider their plans. As one migrant in Slovakia described, navigating unfamiliar and complex administrative procedures nearly derailed her plans altogether.

These findings reinforce a well-established insight: migration is a dynamic process, not a single decision. Aspirations and destinations are continually reshaped by new information, institutional encounters, and lived experiences along the route (Bakewell, 2010; Crawley et al., 2019; Carling et al., 2018). Crucially, this challenges the common policy assumption that influencing decisions at the point of departure is sufficient.

For policymakers, the implication is clear: migration decision-making must be understood as an ongoing process that extends across the entire migration journey, rather than focusing solely on the point of departure or entry. Policies encountered after departure—especially those affecting legal status, access to work, and integration—can be just as influential as enforcement measures in shaping migration decisions and outcomes, alongside other personal factors such as social networks, family ties, and language proficiency. A more effective approach requires looking across the entire migration trajectory and recognising how conditions in destination countries shape not only whether migrants stay, but also whether they move on.

#4: Migrants lack the information they need, but already understand the risks of irregular journeys.

PACES interviews show that many migrants move with significant information gaps about routes, legal procedures, and rights—both in transit and after arrival. In interviews conducted among migrants in Niger and Tunisia, only around half of respondents felt ‘well informed’ about the rules and regulations governing entry and residence in their intended destination countries, despite already being on the move.¹ These gaps persist in Europe: African migrants in Italy, Spain, and Slovakia described ongoing difficulties accessing clear guidance on residence procedures, social rights, and available services, with complex administrative systems generating uncertainty and anxiety. As one African migrant in Slovakia put it, the main obstacle was not formal exclusion but the absence of information: services were available, yet no one explained how to access them, forcing him to ‘dig’ for information he had assumed did not exist:

‘The biggest problem with getting this kind of services it’s not that you are rejected, because you are a foreigner, also it’s that part, but for me **the biggest part in getting services is information**. The services are actually available to me as a foreigner, but no one to tell me this, I kind of have to dig this information after thinking it was not possible before.’ – Interview conducted in Slovakia with a 34-year-old man, researcher.

These findings reinforce evidence that migration decisions are made under conditions of imperfect information, with migrants relying heavily on social networks and informal sources rather than comprehensive knowledge of policy regimes and opportunities (Williams et al., 2012; Bertoli et al., 2020; Dekker et al., 2018). PACES suggests a clear mismatch between the information policymakers prioritise and what migrants actually need. Messaging about the dangers of irregular migration appears to have limited influence, partly because many migrants are already aware of the risks, while practical information on legal pathways, administrative procedures, and access to services is much harder to obtain (Pécoud et al., 2026).

For policymakers, this finding points to the importance of improving access to reliable information throughout the migration journey. Rather than focusing on deterrence messaging through information campaigns in origin countries, policy measures can more effectively support well-informed migration decisions—and more effectively reduce irregular migration—by providing clear and up-to-date information on international recruitment opportunities, legal migration pathways, administrative procedures, and migrants’ rights and obligations. Measures that improve access to trusted information may also reduce the likelihood that prospective migrants unintentionally rely on misinformation, exploitative intermediaries, or irregular migration pathways. The forthcoming EU Talent Pool, for example, can serve not only as a labour matching mechanism but also as a trusted source of information on legal opportunities for migration to Europe (European Commission, 2023). However, for such initiatives to meaningfully shape migration aspirations and decisions, the pathways they promote must be perceived as realistic and attainable: combining transparent information with opportunities for requisite skills development or pre-departure destination-country language training can help migrants meet necessary criteria to take advantage of such opportunities. This finding also highlights the importance of ensuring that migrants can access information about rights and obligations upon arrival, including residence procedures, employment rights, and available social services.

¹ Interviews conducted to inform forthcoming PACES deliverable D5.2 found that only half of respondents in Niger (50 per cent) and Tunisia (51 per cent) consider themselves to be ‘well informed’ regarding the rules and regulations about entering and living in the intended country of destination.

#5: Public attitudes toward migration and migration policies are more nuanced and moderate than commonly assumed.

Evidence from PACES suggests that public attitudes toward migration are more complex and less polarised than often portrayed in political discourse and media narratives. Findings from the conjoint experiment mentioned above—involving 9,000 respondents across Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden—revealed that a majority of respondents in all countries hold moderate views on immigration. Rather than adopting fixed ideological positions, individuals in this ‘moveable middle’ weigh different policy characteristics when forming opinions on migration. Importantly, attitudes toward migration do not align neatly with traditional partisan divides: across the respondents with moderate views on immigration in the six countries studied, 22.8 per cent identified as politically conservative, 26.2 per cent as moderate, and 51.0 per cent as progressive (Jeannet et al., 2026).

The findings of this experiment echo a growing body of research showing that public preferences on migration are shaped not only by underlying attitudes towards immigration, but also by the design and characteristics of specific policies. For instance, evidence generated under the PRIME project showed that support for policies involving irregular migrants varies significantly depending on policy design features and national context (Gschwind et al., 2025). Rather than being divided into two opposing camps of ‘pro-migration’ and ‘anti-migration’ voters, publics appear to hold more nuanced views that vary across policy domains and depend on how policy choices and trade-offs are presented.

For policymakers, these findings suggest that public opinion may be more open to carefully designed migration policies than media narratives or political rhetoric imply. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of grounding migration policymaking in empirical evidence on public preferences, rather than relying on assumptions about what citizens want or reacting primarily to the views of the most vocal and polarised actors. PACES analysis of national migration policy documents found that public opinion was sometimes invoked as a justification for particular policy choices, but was rarely supported by systematic evidence on actual public attitudes (Natter et al., 2025). Better understanding and engaging with the large ‘moveable middle’ can widen the space for politically sustainable approaches: for example, by tailoring policies and communication to values that many citizens share—fairness, order, and protection for people in need—rather than framing debates as zero-sum choices. This can help policymakers design reforms that are both more responsive to public concerns and more consistent with long-term migration governance goals and evidence on what works.

#6: Perceived inequality and relative deprivation will continue to fuel migration aspirations as people’s exposure to information—and to others’ living standards—expands.

Another key finding emerging from qualitative research under the PACES project is that migration aspirations are shaped not only by absolute levels of economic opportunity, but also by perceptions of inequality and comparisons with others’ living standards. As people become more exposed to information about lives and opportunities abroad—including through social media and digital platforms—the gap between their own circumstances and those of better-off peers can become

more visible, intensifying feelings of relative deprivation and motivating aspirations to migrate. One PACES Working Paper builds on mobility transition theory to show how modernisation is associated with ‘increasing and diversifying mobility’: as societies develop and people gain greater awareness of alternative lifestyles and opportunities, aspirations for mobility can increase rather than decline (Schewel et al., 2025). This dynamic was evident in the Todgha Valley in Morocco, where exposure to the success and wealth of migrants abroad among young people reinforced migration aspirations and contributed to the emergence of a broader ‘culture of migration’ (Schewel et al., 2025).

For policymakers, this finding cautions against assumptions that development investments will automatically reduce migration aspirations, situated within a broader body of literature that frames the development–migration nexus as an inverted-U driven by changing capabilities and aspirations to migrate (Dao et al., 2018). Relative inequalities and expanding access to information mean that desires for mobility are likely to persist—and in some cases grow—even as communities become more prosperous. At the same time, high aspirations do not automatically translate into movement: PACES research on the volatility of migration aspirations shows that actual migration decisions remain shaped by capabilities, constraints, and life-course factors (Vezzoli & Jolivet, 2026). Moreover, increased aspirations will not necessarily lead to migration to Europe. PACES scenario work underlines that Europe’s future attractiveness as a destination cannot be taken for granted and will depend on economic performance, political stability, and competing opportunities elsewhere (Bonfiglio et al., 2026).

These insights suggest several practical lessons. Development and migration policies need to recognise and manage the ‘migration hump’ effects of rising prosperity, planning for phases in which aspirations and potential mobility increase. Investments that reduce gaps in access to quality education, decent work, and social protection—and that are visibly inclusive—may help temper feelings of exclusion that drive migration aspirations. Finally, European policymakers should treat future inflows as contingent rather than given, and design cooperation and legal pathways with an eye to a changing global landscape in which Europe will compete with other regions to attract—or retain—mobile people.

#7: Physical safety concerns are a central driver of migration decision-making along a migratory journey.

PACES research consistently highlights the central role of physical safety concerns in shaping migration decisions at every stage of the journey. In PACES fieldwork conducted among migrants in Niger, Tunisia, and Italy, ‘violence, insecurity, and conflict’ were cited as a reason for leaving the country of origin far more often than economic factors: among respondents in Italy, 58 per cent mentioned violence and insecurity as departure driver, compared to 23 per cent who highlighted economic reasons.² Safety concerns continue to shape decision-making during transit, where exposure to risks was widespread: 93 per cent of respondents reported feeling at risk at least once during their journey. The importance of safety also extended to destination choices: among respondents who intended to remain in Italy, 73 per cent identified safety as a reason for staying, and for 55 per cent, it was the single most important factor. By comparison, access to

² Fieldwork conducted to inform forthcoming PACES deliverable D5.2.

documentation to live and work was cited by 37 per cent of respondents.³ These findings are further supported by qualitative accounts from interviews:

‘I am suffering here in Tunisia, I don't stay in one city, but I constantly move from one city to another based on the safety situation I face in that city.’ – Interview conducted in Tunisia with a 39-year-old man from Ethiopia.

These findings highlight the dominant role that security and personal safety concerns play in shaping migration aspirations and decision-making. Moreover, these findings suggest that safety considerations do not only influence the decision to leave a country of origin; they continually shape decisions throughout the migration journey, including whether to remain in a transit or destination country. This reinforces an understanding of migration as a dynamic process in which individuals continually reassess their options in response to changing circumstances, risks, and opportunities (Williams et al., 2012; de Haas, 2021; Vezzoli & Jolivet, 2026).

In an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, these findings highlight the importance of addressing the broader conditions of instability that drive migration, rather than focusing exclusively on migration control or border management. Long-term efforts to support peacebuilding and enhance protection in countries and regions affected by insecurity have important long-term implications for migration dynamics. At the same time, the findings underscore the need to ensure adequate protection mechanisms along migration routes and within destination countries, where perceptions of safety can strongly influence decisions to stay or continue the migratory journey.

#8: Social protection shapes mobility in nuanced ways, depending on context, type of support, and accessibility.

Debates about migration and welfare in Europe are often driven by strong assumptions: that generous welfare states act as ‘magnets’ for migrants, and that expanding formal social protection in origin countries will automatically reduce pressures to move. These ideas shape policy choices on welfare reform, access rules, and cooperation with countries of origin, yet they are rarely tested against evidence. Understanding how social protection actually affects mobility is therefore crucial for designing realistic and politically credible strategies.

PACES shows that social protection does not have a single, predictable effect on migration: its impact depends on context, type of support, and whether migrants can really access it. Higher welfare spending in destination countries is associated with more migration inflows from Africa, but also with higher levels of return migration. Rather than ‘locking’ migrants into destination countries, generous welfare systems can increase people’s capacity to move on or go back when circumstances change (Guzi et al., 2025). At the same time, practical, legal, and administrative barriers mean that many non-EU migrants do not fully benefit from formal welfare systems, limiting the direct role of welfare access in shaping aggregate flows (Lafleur et al., 2022; Manfredi, 2025; Müller, 2026). Evidence from PACES fieldwork across six cities in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Algeria revealed that residents viewed state-provided social protection as insufficient and placed more value on informal safety nets—family, community, and social networks—which they risk losing if they migrate. Independence and self-sufficiency were often seen as more important than reliance on formal schemes.

³ Fieldwork conducted to inform forthcoming PACES deliverable D5.2.

These findings challenge two assumptions that often appear in migration policy debates: first, that generous welfare systems act solely as a ‘magnet’ attracting migrants; and second, that expanding formal social protection in countries of origin will necessarily reduce migration. Instead, the PACES results point to a more nuanced relationship in which social protection can both facilitate and shape mobility depending on the context, the type of support, and the extent to which migrants can access support. This is consistent with emerging research on the links between social protection and migration that paint a mixed picture: for instance, a review of 76 empirical studies examining the effects of social protection on migration revealed no clear trend on whether access to social protection leads to an increase or decrease in migration (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023).

The findings indicate therefore the need to move beyond linear or overly simplistic understandings of the relationship between social protection and migration, and to recognise the multiple ways in which formal and informal social protection systems influence mobility decisions across origin and destination settings. Social protection should not be viewed solely through the lens of migration attraction or deterrence. Rather than locking migrants into destination countries, social protection may increase migrants’ capacity to make independent mobility decisions, including the decision to stay or return. The results also highlight the importance of distinguishing between the existence of welfare provisions and migrants’ actual access to them, which varies across European countries and across different migrant groups. Finally, policymakers and researchers should avoid treating the welfare state as a single policy instrument. Different forms of formal social protection—including pensions, healthcare, and social assistance—as well as informal assistance may influence migration decisions in different and sometimes opposing ways. Designing social protection and migration policy together, with attention to these nuances and to the informal safety nets people leave behind, will lead to more grounded strategies than relying on simple ‘welfare magnet’ narratives.

#9: Migration policies are often based on simplified assumptions about migration decision-making.

Migration policies are built on assumptions about how people make decisions, but PACES research shows that these assumptions are often far simpler—and less consistent—than the evidence warrants (Ike & van Assem, 2024). A cross-national analysis of 180 policy documents underpinning major migration reforms in Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands found that policymakers rarely discuss migration decision-making explicitly, yet policies consistently rely on implicit assumptions about migrants’ motivations and behaviour (Natter et al., 2025). Importantly, these assumptions vary significantly across policy domains. In policies targeting irregular migrants in areas like counter-smuggling, migrants are often portrayed as vulnerable, misinformed, or easily manipulated by external actors. By contrast, migration policies seeking to attract highly skilled workers tend to depict migrants as hyper-rational actors who respond predictably to incentives and opportunities. In practice, different parts of the policy system are built on different models of human behaviour and different images of ‘the migrant’, even though the same individual can pass through several legal categories—student, worker, asylum seeker, irregular migrant—over the course of a single trajectory.

This finding stands in stark contrast with the broader body of evidence generated under the PACES project. Across origin, transit, and destination contexts, migrants’ decisions are shaped by a wide variety of factors, including economic opportunities, safety concerns, social networks and norms, family considerations, and available pathways. These factors differ across individuals, but the underlying decision-making process is remarkably similar: people weigh opportunities and

constraints as their circumstances evolve. Treating labour migrants, asylum seekers, students, irregular migrants, or refugees as uniform groups that are mutually exclusive obscures this shared reality and ignores the fact that a single individual could fall under different categories at different points in time.

For policymakers, several implications follow. First, policies are more likely to achieve their objectives when they are grounded in evidence about how decisions are actually made, rather than in simplified behavioural models attached to different ‘types’ of migrants. This means testing assumptions about responsiveness to incentives, information campaigns, and enforcement measures against empirical findings, and revisiting them when they do not hold. Second, recognising the complexity and fluidity of decision-making can help design interventions that better reflect migrants’ lived realities—for example, by anticipating how people may move between legal categories or combine different strategies over time. Third, bringing behavioural assumptions into the open can improve coherence across policy domains: if irregular migration policies treat migrants as passive victims while labour migration policies treat them as perfectly rational agents, the overall system is likely to send contradictory signals and produce unintended outcomes. A more realistic, evidence-informed understanding of decision-making does not make migration governance easy, but it can make policy tools more honest, more predictable, and ultimately more effective.

#10: Evidence shapes migration policymaking unevenly, depending on political context and institutional incentives.

Calls for ‘evidence-based policymaking’ often assume that good research naturally leads to better policy. PACES findings suggest that the reality is more complex: evidence does influence migration policy—but how it is used depends heavily on the political context, the institutions involved, and the policy issue at stake (Natter, 2024). The same comparative analysis of 180 policy documents underpinning major migration reforms in Austria, Italy, and the Netherlands found striking differences in the use of expert knowledge across policy domains, depending on the level of politicisation and the institutional actors in charge of the issue (Natter et al., 2025).

In highly politicised areas such as counter-smuggling, research was often ignored or used selectively to justify decisions that had already been made. In Austria and Italy, for example, anti-smuggling penalties remained a central policy instrument despite limited evidence demonstrating how such measures would achieve their intended objectives (Natter et al., 2025). In refugee reception policies, expert knowledge was more visible but was often used symbolically, serving to legitimise decisions that had already been made rather than shaping them substantively. Contrastingly, policies aimed at attracting essential workers provided more examples of instrumental knowledge use, with labour market data and demographic projections informing policy development. Yet even in this comparatively evidence-oriented domain, research was only partially translated into policy: Italy’s multi-annual Flow Decrees, for instance, drew on evidence of labour shortages, but quotas remained politically constrained and implementation gaps persisted in practice (Natter et al., 2025).

PACES research identifies three interrelated factors for these differences. First, the degree of politicisation matters: in highly contested areas such as irregular migration and asylum, evidence that challenges dominant political narratives is more likely to be sidelined or selectively interpreted than in less politicised policy domains. Second, patterns of knowledge use reflect institutional incentives. Ministries responsible for interior or foreign affairs often derive legitimacy through political

responsiveness and public positioning, encouraging more symbolic uses of evidence, whereas labour and social affairs ministries tend to place greater emphasis on policy effectiveness and socioeconomic outcomes, creating stronger incentives for engagement with research. Finally, migration governance is inherently fragmented across ministries, agencies, and levels of government, making it difficult for evidence to travel coherently through policymaking processes. However, across the three countries and policy documents analysed, instrumental use of knowledge was the exception rather than the norm, and most knowledge use was symbolic or distorted.

Rather than viewing these dynamics simply as barriers to evidence-based policymaking, PACES points to a broader conclusion: knowledge is endogenous to policymaking itself. Evidence is not simply produced by researchers and then either adopted or ignored by policymakers. Instead, it is continually interpreted, negotiated, and mobilised within political and institutional processes, becoming part of how migration problems are defined, policy choices are justified, and decisions are ultimately made. Recognising this helps shift the focus from simply producing more evidence to creating policymaking processes and institutions that enable evidence to inform decisions in meaningful ways.

Discussion – From Ten Takeaways to Impact: Aligning Migration Policy with Real Decision-Making

The ten PACES takeaways point in the same direction: migration decision-making is more complex, dynamic, and context-dependent than many policy frameworks assume, and European migration policies often overestimate their own influence. They show that policies matter most where they create credible, accessible regular pathways; that both migrants and European publics prefer such pathways; and that many migrants lack the information they need about requirements, conditions, and rights at the point of departure. They also highlight how aspirations are fuelled by perceived inequality and relative deprivation, how safety concerns and access to protection shape choices along the journey, and how public attitudes are more nuanced than headline debates suggest. Taken together, these insights challenge simplified behavioural assumptions and rigid categories of ‘migrant types’, while revealing how unevenly evidence enters migration policymaking.

Against this backdrop, migration policymaking in Europe now takes place in an environment that is polarised, emotionally charged, and impatient with complexity. Demographic decline, labour shortages, implementation of the Pact, geopolitical instability, and electoral competition all pull in different directions at once. In this context, research—including the ten PACES takeaways—does not enter a neutral space. It lands in debates that are already framed, politicised, and often driven by strong assumptions about what moves people and what governments can realistically control (Natter, 2024). The central challenge is therefore less about producing evidence than about ensuring that it can meaningfully inform decisions.

That point is especially important because migration policies so often rest on behavioural claims. Policymakers design migration policies on the assumption that such tools will shape whether, when, and how people move. Yet one of PACES’ core contributions has been to show that migration decision-making is not linear, and that policy assumptions about migrant behaviour are often partial, simplified, or simply wrong. Decisions to migrate emerge from the interaction of individual

aspirations, household strategies, social networks, structural constraints, and political contexts—not from a single policy signal (Natter et al., 2025).

When those assumptions are weak, the consequences are not merely technical. Policies that are poorly aligned with how migration decision-making actually works are less likely to deliver the results they promise. That in turn creates a damaging political dynamic: governments claim control, publics expect solutions, outcomes fall short, frustration rises, and migration becomes even more fertile ground for polarisation and symbolic politics. At that point, ineffective migration policy is not only a governance failure; it becomes a democratic risk. Repeated cycles of over-promising and under-delivering weaken public trust and blur political accountability, especially when policymakers press ahead with interventions that available evidence already suggests will have limited effect (Natter, 2024).

This discussion therefore moves beyond the substance of the ten findings to ask a harder question: how does evidence actually enter migration policymaking—and why does it so often fail to do so? That question was central to the PACES policy lab approach—a series of three in-person roundtables, two workshops, and ongoing engagement with policymakers and practitioners—which zoomed in on exactly this issue. It created a structured space where emerging evidence from PACES could be discussed, challenged, and translated, while policy needs, priorities, and practical constraints were fed back into the research process. Through these exchanges, the project was able to test how its findings resonated in real decision-making settings and to adapt its questions and outputs in light of what policymakers said they needed, where they saw gaps, and which institutional realities limited the uptake of new evidence.

A first lesson from the Policy Lab is that the main problem is often not an absence of evidence. Migration policymakers already operate in a crowded knowledge environment, with access to academic publications, evaluations, agency reports, think-tank analysis, and grey literature. As Katharina Natter argues in her PACES working paper, migration knowledge has expanded and diversified dramatically in recent decades, even while concerns about its policy impact have intensified (Natter, 2024). The bottleneck, in other words, often lies less in evidence production than in absorption, interpretation, and use. Time pressure, electoral cycles, institutional silos, turnover in staff, and pressure to align with politically salient narratives all limit how far even well-resourced institutions can engage deeply with complex research (Bijak et al., 2021; Slootjes & Zanzuchi, 2022; Slootjes & Zanzuchi, 2023). In one PACES roundtable, a policymaker openly questioned the need for further work on migration decision-making, explaining that they had already read ‘one report on migration decision-making a few years ago’ and did not see why new findings were necessary. The remark illustrates how easily evidence can be treated as static and ‘already known’, rather than as something that evolves, accumulates, and needs to be revisited as contexts and research advances change.

These insights matter because it shifts the focus from a narrow ‘supply problem’ to a wider institutional one. Evidence-informed policymaking does require researchers to communicate more clearly, more strategically, and in formats policymakers can actually use. But it also requires demand-side capacity inside institutions: officials need time, incentives, and internal structures that allow them to engage with evidence rather than merely acknowledge it rhetorically. Without that, even excellent research will have limited traction (Natter et al., 2024). Natter and Welfens make this point sharply: the limited impact of migration research cannot be explained only by hostile politics or poor communication; it also reflects the interaction between knowledge practices in academia and those in policymaking (Natter et al., 2024).

A second lesson is that researchers themselves operate under incentive structures that often work against sustained policy engagement. Outreach, translation, and relationship-building are frequently encouraged in principle, but they are still unevenly valued in career progression, publication cultures, and research funding. That matters because policy impact rarely comes from a single report. It comes from long-term engagement, trusted relationships, iterative feedback, and repeated presence in the spaces where policy is debated. If those activities remain professionally marginal, they will continue to depend on exceptional individual effort rather than being treated as part of serious research practice (Natter et al., 2024).

A third lesson is that not all non-use of evidence is the same. Sometimes evidence is ignored because it is poorly timed, inaccessible, too technical, or disconnected from the policy question at hand. In those cases, better translation, stronger intermediaries, and more strategic communication can make a real difference. But sometimes evidence is not ignored—it is rejected. Policymakers may understand the evidence perfectly well and still decide against it because it conflicts with political incentives, institutional interests, or symbolic goals (Natter, 2024; Natter et al., 2024). That distinction matters. A failure of translation requires one response; a political choice requires another. Recognising this openly is not cynicism. It is what allows researchers and intermediaries to engage more honestly with the real politics of migration governance.

What follows for future engagement is clear. Research questions should be co-designed early and revisited throughout a project so that they remain relevant without becoming captive to short-term political agendas. Projects should invest in trusted intermediaries—think tanks, agencies, civil society organisations, and municipal actors—that can bridge the researcher–policymaker divide. They should produce layered outputs: not only full reports, but also concise briefs, one-pagers, visuals, and narrative formats tailored to different audiences. They should create structured moments of reflection during the project, not only at the end, to test what is landing and where. And they should treat relationships as long-term assets, because evidence often matters months or years after the moment of publication (Bijak et al., 2021; Slootjes & Zanzuchi, 2022). The same applies on the policy side. If governments and public institutions are serious about evidence-informed migration policymaking, they need to invest in the absorptive capacity that makes evidence usable: analytical time, institutional memory, cross-silo coordination, and openness to different forms of expertise, including practitioner knowledge and migrant perspectives. Evidence use is not a technical add-on to policymaking. It is part of policymaking capacity itself.

The stakes are high. Europe faces demographic pressure, intense labour market demand, a newly operational Pact, and an increasingly polarised migration debate. In that context, effective policy will not solve every political problem—but ineffective policy can deepen them. Migration policy cannot control every factor that shapes movement, and PACES has shown why claims of control should be treated with caution. But evidence remains indispensable precisely because policy reach is limited. It helps identify where policy can make a difference, where it cannot, and where governments risk promising far more than they can deliver.

That is the hopeful note on which this report should end. Evidence is not enough. But without it, migration policymaking becomes more vulnerable to instinct, symbolism, and short-term political theatre. PACES has helped fill important evidence gaps, challenge simplistic assumptions about migration decision-making, and experiment with multiple ways of bringing research into policy conversations—including through dialogue, visual communication, and trust-building across sectors. In a crowded and contested policy space, that does not guarantee uptake. But it does widen the space for more honest, more accountable, and ultimately more effective migration policymaking.

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