



Beyond Control Signalling

Designing Integration Policies for Better
Outcomes and Public Trust

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Executive Summary

Across many high-income countries, public sentiment about migration has swung between compassion and alarm over the past decade. Many citizens have welcomed successive cohorts of refugees, but frustration with how governments manage migration has grown. Radical-right and populist figures have harnessed this disquiet effectively, pushing even mainstream parties to embrace greater restrictions. At times, policy has veered into ‘control theatre’: highly visible measures that signal toughness but do not necessarily improve outcomes for migrants or local communities—and that may not even move the needle on public trust in migration governance. Meanwhile, the febrile nature of the public debate risks crowding out tougher but more impactful reforms that would make immigration work better for societies facing population ageing and labour shortages.

While anxiety about immigration is nothing new, recent trends have made the political landscape especially fragile. Perceived disorder and real pressures, from rising rents to crowded classrooms, are increasingly attributed to newcomers. Cost-of-living shocks, geopolitical tensions, and conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, and the Middle East have created a backdrop of uncertainty and a perception of ‘polycrisis’. Social media and other online platforms have become fertile ground for misinformation, which populist actors have exploited to deepen divides within societies.

The febrile nature of the public debate risks crowding out tougher but more impactful reforms that would make immigration work better for societies facing population ageing and labour shortages.

This situation has put immense pressure on governments to signal that they are in control, through both immigration and integration policies. In the realm of integration policy, three changes stand out: shifting housing and integration costs onto refugees and migrants, watering down family unification entitlements and tightening routes to permanent residency, and introducing tougher values and civics requirements. Although these policies can be a means of signalling a government’s recognition of the costs of migration to an anxious public (and may have some limited effect on deterring irregular migrants), they are likely to worsen longer-term integration outcomes—to the detriment of both immigrants and the societies in which they live. For instance, evidence shows that family separation has negative impacts on refugees’ mental health and can hinder their integration, including a Danish cohort study finding that refugee fathers waiting for family members to arrive faced twice the risk of psychiatric diagnosis. And if the shifting of integration service costs onto migrants and refugees results in fewer newcomers accessing language classes, job training, or stable housing, this will likely delay first employment and prolong reliance on benefits. There is also a risk that these measures may function as window dressing, detracting from efforts to address the real drivers of public mistrust such as stretched public services and inadequate population planning.

Moreover, many of these restrictive policies overshoot what the general public actually wants and cater to an extreme minority, amplified by social media. State-of-the-art polling data indicate that residents of many countries hold more nuanced views than the information landscape suggests. For instance, a 2025

study of five countries conducted by More in Common found that 45–60 per cent of respondents would prefer that their country combine control and compassion rather than adopt enforcement-only approaches. Trade-offs may emerge between immigration and integration policy, as certain groups will support expanding immigration only if policymakers curtail the rights extended to migrants. However, the lesson for mainstream parties is not simply to strip back entitlements and hope for the best. Performative toughness without a coherent policy and values framework is unlikely to outflank the far right on its own terrain, or to solve real-world problems, and it risks alienating existing immigrant communities whose support should not be taken for granted.

Meanwhile, there are underused policy levers that could more effectively relieve pressures, including immigration levels planning and sectoral or labour-force-wide workforce development strategies that include a focus on newcomers' labour market integration. Governments could also consider engaging the public more systematically in immigration and integration policy discussions. But these investments often produce less immediate and less visible gains. Thus, while integration remains one of the most powerful and underappreciated tools for managing demographic decline, policymakers still must make this case credibly to publics losing trust and patience with elected leaders.

Governments could consider:

- ▶ **Being more transparent about costs and trade-offs**, and addressing concrete elements of people's concerns rather than treating all grievances as myths to be debunked. Instead of dismissing the fiscal and social impacts of immigration, for example, governments should talk openly about who bears which costs, over what time frame, and what they are doing to manage pressures on housing, schools, and services. Transparent communication and engagement with local communities and subnational authorities could help national governments identify pain points early (such as overcrowded classrooms) and build buy-in for how to spend resources. However, this approach requires meaningful, organised public engagement with clear ground rules that give residents a genuine say without overpromising.
- ▶ **Presenting control measures as part of a long-term vision** that prioritises quieter system fixes over control theatre. Governments should take seriously people's perceptions of loss of control, but most restrictive measures designed to convey toughness are likely to deliver only a short-lived bump in public opinion and to backfire in terms of their impact on integration outcomes. Instead, governments should invest political and fiscal capital in less visible reforms—such as faster asylum processing, better coordination with local authorities, and improved reception, housing, and school capacity—that most directly shape residents' sense that migration is being governed competently.
- ▶ **Design integration requirements to enable contribution rather than punish failure.** Many people support immigration in principle but object to perceived unfairness when newcomers are seen as receiving support without expectations of reciprocal investments in their new communities. Linking rights and support to clear obligations can reduce resentment and improve outcomes, but only if the requirements themselves are also designed fairly. This means pairing obligations with enabling measures such as subsidised language training, flexible course schedules, and job-readiness

programmes, and ensuring sanctions for noncompliance are limited and proportionate. The objective should be to create real pathways into work and community life, not new grounds for exclusion.

- **Use immigration levels planning and mainstreaming to link control with capacity and long-term needs.** Piecemeal control-focused measures will not rebuild trust without a clear plan for how immigration fits into broader strategies for population ageing and labour market change. Multi-year migration levels plans can set out expected inflows by category and connect them to planned investments in reception, housing, education, health, and employment services, and funding formulas and service planning can better mitigate pressures in particular areas. These governance tools thus hold greater promise for addressing the real challenges behind declining public trust.

Governments should recognise that competence and well-managed migration systems will ultimately alleviate public concerns more effectively than control theatre, especially in areas such as housing, school staffing, and local funding. They will need to make the case that supporting integration promises a robust return on investment by demonstrating its long-term benefits and by designing policies to proactively minimise short-term frictions. In the end, structural reforms and consistent implementation, rather than symbolic crackdowns, are the best recipe for rebuilding public trust.

1 Introduction

In many high-income countries, public opinion has in recent years oscillated between solidarity and anxiety, with people showing remarkable welcome towards certain groups of migrants and refugees while increasingly disapproving of how governments manage migration. Politicians in Europe, North America, and beyond have seized on this discontent, introducing more restrictive policies and adopting control-focused rhetoric. Anti-immigration parties have gained ground, and even centrist parties are signing on to tougher measures to signal control while deprioritising long-term strategic thinking about how immigration can best serve modern societies.

Anti-immigration rhetoric has gained currency partly because it reflects (even if it exaggerates) a sense of disorder that people can see with their own eyes. Communities face pressures that mainstream politicians have not addressed convincingly: rising rents, crowded classrooms, visible homelessness, and urban crime. This governance gap has made the far right's 'quick solutions' more appealing, even to voters who do not otherwise oppose immigration. Radical-right populist politicians have made immigration a scapegoat for a range of societal

ills that in fact stem from complex, multilayered structural issues that cannot be linked entirely to recent arrivals (even if population growth may exacerbate them). In fast-growing cities, for example, people often attribute rent spikes to migration even when housing supply is tight for everyone. In some districts, schools struggle to hire enough teachers, let alone those with the skills to deal with rising numbers of multilingual

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pupils. And examples of asylum seekers committing crimes, while rare, have provoked visceral public backlash, which has spilled into protests, riots, and arson attacks.

In response, governments across the political spectrum are scrambling to prove that they are in control by tightening the rules on who can enter a country and under what conditions they can stay. Measures range from hard-edged border policies, such as asylum seeker turnbacks and offshore processing, to tougher requirements for residence and citizenship applicants. From an integration perspective, policies range from measures that might genuinely help newcomers become well-integrated members of a society (expanding mandatory language or civic values courses) to purely performative ones (such as laws that allow authorities to seize asylum seekers' assets). The challenge lies in ensuring that policy measures are proportionate and do not worsen integration outcomes.

This report sets out practical ways to rebuild public trust through integration policy reforms that go beyond control signalling and balance immediate pressures with a long-term view. It begins by examining the drivers of public anxiety about migration and how everyday concerns have become politicised. It then analyses recent restrictive policies in various high-income destination countries, including whether they are likely to boost public confidence and how they may affect integration outcomes. The analysis concludes by examining alternatives that could alleviate pressures on public services and housing systems that drive public anxiety.

2 The Current Landscape: Public Anxieties and Weaponisation of Fears

Anti-immigration rhetoric and policies are not new in immigrant-destination countries, but they have gained significant traction in recent years, even in countries such as Spain and Portugal that had previously been immune to widespread backlash. Parties espousing such views have secured historic wins on both sides of the Atlantic in large part by linking people's sense of economic precarity, physical insecurity, and cultural erosion to newcomers. In many countries, these wins have been driven by discontent among younger voters, who are not normally associated with anti-immigration attitudes but may appreciate these politicians' blunt rhetorical style.¹ Even members of the public who do not agree with openly xenophobic language may appreciate the opportunity to debate sensitive topics such as the costs of migration, which centrist politicians have long considered taboo and often avoided.

¹ Support for Germany's far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) surged among young voters in the 2024 European Parliament elections, with 16 per cent of voters under the age of 24 casting their vote for AfD—up from only 5 per cent in 2019. See Hans Pfeifer, 'AfD: How Germany's Far Right Won over Young Voters', Deutsche Welle, 6 October 2024. In the same election, France's far-right Rassemblement National (RN) was the most popular party among French voters ages 18 to 34, receiving 32 per cent of the vote among this demographic. See Yasmeen Serhan, 'How Europe's Far-Right Parties Are Winning Over Young Voters', *TIME*, 18 June 2024. A growing body of literature seeks to understand this surge in far-right support among young voters across Europe, especially the role of social media platforms and the function of party-affiliated 'youth wings' in capitalising on disillusionment and winning over young voters. See, for example, Anna-Sophie Heinze, 'Drivers of Radicalisation? The Development and Role of the Far-Right Youth Organisation "Young Alternative" in Germany', *International Political Science Review* 46, no. 1 (2025) 108-124; Christophe Pr  ault, 'How the Rassemblement National Capitalises on the Youth Vote in France' (newsletter, European Economic and Social Committee, Brussels, July 2024).

Another driver is the widespread notion that mainstream governments have lost control, and not just of borders but of the ability to provide adequate public services. Polling across Europe shows that dissatisfaction with elected leaders has skyrocketed, leading many voters to take a chance on nontraditional politicians—even if they disagree with their more extremist rhetoric.² This trend is particularly remarkable because, on balance, polling shows that attitudes towards migration have remained relatively stable over the past two decades.³ Yet anti-immigration politicians and restrictive policies have had unprecedented electoral success. Four shifts, discussed in the subsections that follow, help explain this discrepancy.

A. *An atmosphere of ‘polycrisis’ has predisposed voters to want to disrupt the status quo*

Across high-income countries, a convergence of real (and highly visible) challenges at the local level has created a widespread sense that things are out of control, at the same time as policy frameworks designed to manage these challenges are visibly failing. European publics have watched asylum systems fold under pressure as mixed cross-border movements become more frequent and more complex. They have also seen persistent segregation, with the children and grandchildren of migrants growing up in parallel communities, and local authorities grappling with overcrowded shelters and insufficient funding to open new schools. In the face of pervasive disorder, publics across high-income destination countries have voted in large numbers to disrupt the status quo—ousting mainstream politicians in favour of new faces, even if they do not always subscribe to the latter’s more extreme policy ideas.

In some ways, an organic set of events explains why publics are losing confidence in elites’ ability to design functional, fair societies.⁴ But on the other hand, some politicians are deliberately painting these challenges as existential crises and amplifying public anxiety to scapegoat newcomers, a framing that makes it harder to diagnose and address genuine policy shortcomings. Structural issues such as rising living costs, housing

shortages, and crime do not stem from immigration, but rapid population change often exacerbates them and, if not managed properly, can strain infrastructure and disrupt local housing and labour markets. The result is a perfect storm of real disorder and weaponised perceptions of disorder.

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- 2 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) surveys since 2021 show declining levels of trust in institutions across the OECD (though this varies by country). An average of 43 per cent of respondents reported ‘little or no trust’ in government in 2023, up from 40 per cent in 2021. The lowest levels of trust were towards national parliaments. OECD, *Government at a Glance 2025* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025). Eurofound’s ‘Living, Working, and COVID-19’ survey series also shows a steady decline in trust towards national governments during 2020–23, even as trust in the European Union recovered slightly. Individuals who were unemployed or outside the labour market showed the lowest levels of trust. Massimiliano Mascherini, ‘Trust in Crisis: Europe’s Social Contract under Threat’, Eurofound, Blog, updated 1 May 2024.
- 3 For example, a 2020 study using nine panel surveys from the United States and Europe that together covered the 2008 recession, Brexit, and the refugee crisis found that individual views towards immigration are remarkably stable over time. However, external shocks do change the issue’s salience and the importance of immigration to voters. Alexander Kustov, Dillon Laaker, and Cassidy Reller, ‘The Stability of Immigration Attitudes: Evidence and Implications’, *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 4 (2021): 1478–94.
- 4 Indeed, polling by More in Common shows deep scepticism about longstanding political institutions, particularly among younger generations. Only four in ten Gen Z Americans agreed that democracy is definitely the best form of government, compared with nearly nine in ten baby boomers. More in Common US, ‘Is Gen Z Giving Up on Democracy?’ (newsletter, More in Common, 7 May 2025).

These challenges are particularly tricky for national policymakers because the effects of rapid, migration-driven demographic change are felt unevenly. Many countries experience asymmetrical demographic change: major cities struggle with intense population growth pressures, while smaller towns and rural areas grapple with population decline and widespread labour shortages.⁵ In communities experiencing heightened strain due to concentrated settlement patterns and limited local capacity, underfunded school systems may be stretched even further by rapidly rising enrolment, while migrant housing needs can add pressure to already tight local housing markets. In some cases, these issues have reinforced the perception that governments are not managing immigration to everyone's advantage.

B. Prolonged instability has deepened social divisions

Group dynamics also help explain reactions to immigration: prolonged uncertainty and instability create fertile ground for 'us versus them' and zero-sum thinking. Essentially, feelings of insecurity naturally lead to feelings of distrust and competition between groups,⁶ which primes publics to be highly sensitive to anything that adds to uncertainty or disorder, as well as to any distribution of resources that appears unfair. These feelings can be mitigated by thoughtful policies, or exacerbated by politicians who stand to benefit from fuelling discontent.

The broader atmosphere of polycrisis—marked by demographic decline, economic precarity, soaring living costs, war in Europe, and the lingering effects of a global pandemic—places extraordinary strain on intergroup relations. None of this makes social cohesion impossible, but it does make scapegoating of a society's newest members an all-too-predictable response.

Investments in newcomers have thus come under a microscope both in communities welcoming migration and those trying to restrict it. The United Kingdom's asylum housing policy offers a prime example. The prolonged and costly use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers, sometimes for months or years, has triggered protests and legal challenges.⁷ Disproportionate public attention to these details can strain thoughtful decision-making and make the situation worse in the long run. In Ireland, community opposition to new asylum reception centres has led the government to backtrack on such plans, which has increased reliance on emergency housing.⁸

Reducing investments under public pressure can have perverse consequences. Barriers to employment, language acquisition, and access to essential services can push migrants into residential segregation or living in the shadows, which deepens social exclusion and reinforces perceptions of immigrants as 'others'.

5 This pattern has been documented, for example, in Daniel Hiebert's work on 'fast' and 'slow' regions in Canada. See Daniel Hiebert, *Understanding the Impact of Immigration on Demography: A Canadian Case Study* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2025).

6 Crisis can sometimes promote intergroup cooperation, but dynamics change if one group believes it lacks sufficient resources to weather the challenge. Various experiments have found that perceived resource scarcity, even when resources are objectively adequate, can provoke competition rather than cooperation. See, for example, Xiaoyan Miao et al., 'Unity or Estrangement Under Crises? Perceived Resource Scarcity Moderates the Effect of a Common Threat on Intergroup Cooperation', *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 15, no. 6 (2023): 659–69.

7 The latest reports from the UK Home Office indicate that more than £2 billion were spent on hotel accommodation for asylum seekers between April 2024 and March 2025. Rob England and Jack Fenwick, 'UK's Asylum Hotel Bill Down 30%, Government Says', BBC, 18 July 2025.

8 Tom Ambrose, 'Former Factory in Dublin Intended to House Asylum Seekers Is Set on Fire', *The Guardian*, 20 July 2024.

Perceived integration failures can fuel a vicious cycle: publics are less likely to support expanding benefits or services for people they believe do not contribute or who live parallel lives, which can further increase social divisions and mistrust.

C. *Information ‘tribalism’ makes bad news easier to spread and misinformation harder to overcome*

Amid widespread insecurity, the way people collect and vet information has become less fact-based and more ‘tribal’, shaped more by social signals than data. In just a few decades, societies have transitioned away from a few trusted, top-down sources to an almost infinite information landscape in which people curate what they consume based on what they find comfortable to believe and discard the rest. This shift has created echo chambers that are hard for outsiders to penetrate⁹ and a media environment that rewards shock value over nuanced policy debate. This makes it easier to both manufacture a sense of crisis as well as spread misinformation.

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Several features define this shift. First, social media and messaging apps are built to prioritise speed, novelty, and brevity over factchecking. Misleading narratives spread quickly and often go unchallenged, partly because communication within echo chambers is not conducive to productive engagement, and partly because formats such as memes and short videos leave little room for context and can take over platforms regardless of accuracy.¹⁰ Algorithms compound these effects by politicising

content in ways that users may not recognise. When Elon Musk purchased Twitter (now named X), he promoted algorithmically popular content over personalised choices and reduced content moderation, changes subsequently linked to increased toxicity and hate speech.¹¹ For instance, a video of young girls in Scotland picking up a machete and axe to allegedly defend themselves against harassment by asylum seekers, shared by Elon Musk and far-right commentator Tommy Robinson with their millions of followers, turned out to be unsubstantiated.¹²

Second, the new media landscape can distort the magnitude of a crisis and make distant events feel proximate. Media coverage often treats every small boat crossing the Mediterranean as breaking news, which exaggerates a phenomenon that in reality represents only a small fraction of overall immigrant

9 Social psychology experiments have long shown that people tend to gravitate towards information that upholds their existing views and reject information that does not (confirmation bias). They also show that how people absorb information is motivated less by accuracy than the desire to support a pre-existing conclusion (motivated reasoning). For an overview of how this relates to immigration, see Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *When Facts Don’t Matter: How to Communicate More Effectively about Immigration’s Costs and Benefits* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

10 Lizzie Dearden, ‘British Laws Are Not Fit for Social Media Age, Says Report on U.K. Riots’, *The New York Times*, 13 April 2025.

11 Will Knight, ‘Here’s Proof Hate Speech Is More Viral on Elon Musk’s Twitter’, *WIRED*, 22 November 2022.

12 Marc Horne, ‘Online Rumours about Knife-Wielding Girl are Untrue, Police Say’, *The Times*, 27 August 2025.

arrivals.¹³ A hyperlocal incident in one country can become a rallying point in another because it is no longer perceived as occurring ‘over there’ if posts about it appear on every social media feed. For instance, the claim by U.S. Vice President J. D. Vance and President Donald Trump that Haitian immigrants were ‘eating pets’ in Springfield, Ohio, based on an unsubstantiated Facebook post, quickly spread despite the absence of evidence; people in direct contact with the Haitian community were far more likely to speak of their local contributions, though such narratives did not achieve the same level of attention.¹⁴ The spread of misinformation has thus become unrestricted by geography or even social boundaries.

Third, the combination of information overload and declining trust in elites (including scientists and academics) has resulted in a more tribal approach to collecting and interpreting facts. When people face a constant and overwhelming stream of information, they fall back on mental shortcuts, relying on information that aligns with the beliefs of their social group rather than information that meets objective criteria for accuracy.¹⁵ In some ways, this is perfectly rational behaviour. The proliferation of information platforms and the resulting firehose of contradictory and confusing information encourage people to adopt a social method of vetting information rather than one based on scientific logic.¹⁶ Traditional tools of persuasion—providing more information, refuting claims, or making stronger arguments—are thus much less effective than policymakers tend to assume. Publics are not waiting to be corrected; they are actively choosing beliefs that reinforce their existing views and sense of belonging.

Taken together, this landscape of polycrisis, rapid-fire ‘shock’ communication, and political incentives to magnify small crises can widen the gulf between public perception and reality.

D. Fringe views in politics and media obscure the more balanced views of the ‘moderate middle’

Despite highly polarised public debates on immigration, research consistently shows that public attitudes towards migration are more nuanced than binary (‘pro’ versus ‘anti’) narratives suggest. Comparative research across countries highlights a sizeable ‘movable middle’ that does not identify with the extreme

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- 13 Publics have long struggled to assess the scale of migration in their countries accurately, as decades of research from Jack Citrin and John Sides show, and this ‘innumeracy’ is especially pronounced regarding irregular migration. A 2026 YouGov poll found that 47 per cent of Britons believe that more migrants stay in the United Kingdom illegally than legally, even though legal immigration exceeds illegal immigration by several orders of magnitude (about 10 million people compared with estimates of fewer than 1 million without legal status). See Matthew Smith, ‘Is There Public Support for Large-Scale Removals of Migrants?’, YouGov, 5 August 2025.
- 14 For instance, Ohio governor Mike DeWine, despite supporting Trump, denounced the myth and emphasised the Haitian community’s positive contributions locally. David Cohen, ‘“Not Helpful” for Trump and Others to Talk about Pets Being Eaten, Ohio’s Governor Says’, Politico, 15 September 2024.
- 15 For more insight into the behavioural science of misinformation, see Saul Wodak et al., *Countering Misinformation about Migrants and Refugees: An Evidence-Based Framework* (Sydney: Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, 2025).
- 16 A 2016 experiment showed that individuals were less able to interpret data on highly contested issues such as climate change or immigration than when asked about neutral topics (such as a skin rash), suggesting that the presence of cultural conflict can undermine individuals’ ability to make sense of scientific evidence in line with what would be expected based on their knowledge and abilities. The ‘identity-protective cognition thesis’, developed by Dan M. Kahan, posits that people are highly motivated to avoid beliefs that could alienate them from one of their core social groups, especially if they depend on this group for support in multiple domains of everyday life. Opting for the ‘wrong answer’ in the eyes of their group could have devastating consequences, including loss of social standing and even economic livelihoods. See Dan M. Kahan, Ellen Peters, Erica Cantrell Dawson, and Paul Slovic, ‘Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government’, *Behavioural Public Policy* 1, no. 1 (2017): 54–86.

positions that often dominate public discourse and instead holds mixed, context-dependent views.¹⁷ Political leaders can misjudge the public mood when they focus on the loudest voices.¹⁸

Empirical research conducted in five European countries by More in Common¹⁹ shows that individuals are more nuanced in evaluating policies than commonly believed. Although improving control of migration ranked as a top priority across the countries, publics also supported pragmatic measures such as expanding legal pathways. Essentially, the majority of respondents favoured a balanced approach incorporating *both* control and compassion rather than policies focused only on strengthening border controls. More in Common also found that policy approaches combining control, compassion, community, contribution, and competence have the broadest support across groups.

A 2025 European University Institute study in five European countries on public preferences around managing irregular migration reinforces this finding. Respondents preferred policy solutions that included opportunities for regularisation rather than migration control alone, with inclusion of regularisation opportunities increasing the selection probability by 5 percentage points.²⁰ At the same time, preferences depend on policy design and situational context: for instance, inclusive policies for visa overstayers with a history of legal employment garnered higher levels of support.

However, policy responses in many high-income countries have shifted towards more blanket restrictions than these polls might prescribe. Many recent reforms have prioritised deterring irregular arrivals and returning irregular migrants, while scaling back access to citizenship, permanent residency, and services, effectively overshooting what many in the moderate middle appear to support. Polling in the United States, for instance, shows that even amid substantial support for Trump's deportation agenda, large majorities (78 per cent) support pathways to citizenship for long-term unauthorised immigrant residents who meet certain requirements, though this has not made it onto the political agenda.²¹ Thus, fringe or hard-line positions can dominate both discourse and policy, even when the majority holds more nuanced views. Moreover, it can be easy for mainstream parties to overlook the alienating effect that restrictive policies have on existing immigrant communities. In the recent by-election in the Gorton and Denton seat in the United Kingdom, the Green Party won largely through attracting would-be Labour voters who were frustrated with the party's hard-line immigration policies and position on Gaza.

Growing public disillusionment with migration policy, and with elected leaders more broadly, has increased pressure on policymakers to demonstrate control and win back public trust, creating difficult choices on how to manage ensuing trade-offs.

17 See, for instance, Paul Butcher, Helen Dempster, and Alberto-Horst Neidhardt, 'Making the "Movable" Middle More Open to Immigration', Center for Global Development, Blog, updated 2 March 2021.

18 See, for instance, Sunder Katwala, Steve Ballinger, and Heather Rolfe, *Noise and Nuance: What the Public Really Thinks about Immigration* (London: British Future, 2025).

19 More in Common's Europe Talks Migration project covers France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Spain. For more information, see More in Common, 'Europe Talks Migration: A Cross-Country Study on Changing Public Attitudes', accessed 3 September 2025.

20 Lutz Gschwind, Martin Ruhs, Anton Ahlén, and Joakim Palme, 'Public Preferences for Policies Vis-à-Vis Irregular Migrants in Europe: the Roles of Policy Design and Context' (PRIME Working Paper 7.1, European University Institute, San Domenico di Fiesole, Italy, 2025).

21 Lydia Saad, 'Surge in U.S. Concern about Immigration Has Abated', Gallup, updated 11 July 2025.

3 Integration Governance in an Age of Anxiety: Does ‘Control Theatre’ Work?

High-income destination countries have introduced a mix of restrictive policies, both substantive and symbolic, to signal control, fairness, and, in some cases, a nation-first approach. These policies aim to counter perceptions that governments have prioritised newcomers’ needs over those of longstanding residents and citizens. In some contexts, efforts to demonstrate greater control may be needed in order to rebuild public trust enough to create space for longer-term reforms, including population planning. However, when managed poorly, control signalling can reinforce the very social divisions policymakers are seeking to mitigate.

Restrictive policies do not inherently undermine integration. Outcomes depend on design and implementation. For instance, requiring newcomers to complete more hours of language instruction can be constructive and promote integration if it results in better integration outcomes for individuals and families. However, the same requirement can become punitive if language classes are not subsidised, not scheduled at flexible times to accommodate people with work or child-care responsibilities, and, critically, if there are penalties for noncompliance that leave people in a more vulnerable position than they would have been otherwise.²²

These measures fall into two categories: shifting costs away from host communities and raising the bar for granting newcomers benefits and rights.

A. *Reducing the (real and perceived) fiscal costs of immigration to local communities*

Many countries have recently announced plans to require migrants to cover a larger share of costs, including housing and integration courses, which serves both material and symbolic purposes. In Europe, refugees, asylum seekers, and family migrants have traditionally been eligible for numerous services, but many governments now argue that sharing costs is fairer, encourages self-reliance, and reduces fiscal burdens on host populations. And some governments have explicitly adopted such measures to deter secondary movement and asylum shopping by reducing the pull factor of generous benefits, illustrating the dual migration management and integration rationale that often lies behind such moves.

Public attention to the fiscal burden of migration has intensified, whether spurred by news stories on the costs of housing newcomers for extended periods of time or via cost figures exploited for political messaging. In Spain, for example, the far-right party Vox displayed billboards comparing alleged monthly

22 Denmark’s 2018 ‘ghetto law’ is an example of how factors conducive to promoting integration (such as access to preschool for children under six) can easily become punitive if paired with hefty sanctions for noncompliance, selective application only to people in certain neighbourhoods, and a disproportionate emphasis on cultural assimilation. Ellen Barry and Martin Selsoe Sorensen, ‘In Denmark, Harsh New Laws for Immigrant “Ghettos”’, *The New York Times*, 1 July 2018.

costs for unaccompanied migrant minors with pensions for the elderly.²³ In the United States, Trump signed a 2025 executive order declaring that taxpayer resources will not be used to subsidise sanctuary policies that ‘siphon dollars and essential services from American citizens’, estimating that Medicaid-funded emergency services to unauthorised migrants had cost federal and state taxpayers more than USD 16.2 billion.²⁴ To counter such coverage, some countries have taken steps to show that receiving communities will not bear the full costs, including by requiring asylum seekers to contribute. For example, Belgium requires asylum seekers earning more than 265 euros per month to contribute to their accommodation costs.²⁵ The Netherlands operates a similar system, and since mid-2024, Ukrainian refugees in municipal housing have been required to contribute to housing costs, with higher rates introduced in late 2025.²⁶ Germany deducts income or assets from benefits, including an ‘own share’ for housing.²⁷ Ireland has announced plans to introduce a sliding-scale contribution for working asylum seekers,²⁸ and Czechia requires contributions from those with resources above the subsistence minimum.

Alongside these cost-sharing models, governments have also reduced public investment in integration as part of broader fiscal restraint. In Germany, the federal government has discontinued voluntary integration courses to reduce costs, a decision that critics argue will undermine long-term integration and employment outcomes and will affect an estimated 130,000 migrants.²⁹ In France, state-supported French language classes for newcomers have increasingly moved online and become optional amid ongoing budget cuts, even as language requirements become stricter.³⁰ These financing models are discussed further in Section 4.

Alongside these cost-sharing models, governments have also reduced public investment in integration as part of broader fiscal restraint.

Some countries have gone even further, with measures that critics describe as ‘political theatre’. Denmark’s Jewellery Law allows authorities to confiscate asylum seekers’ valuables, and Switzerland has announced plans to seize assets above 1,000 Swiss francs.³¹ These schemes may be driven more by a desire to curb asylum pull factors than to improve integration outcomes. Courts have also challenged some of these cost-shifting measures. For example, the European Court of Justice ruled against a Dutch policy that required migrants to pay the full cost of integration courses.³²

23 Patricia Peiró, ‘Madrid Court on Far-Right Poster Targeting Migrant Minors: “They Are an Evident Political and Social Problem”’, *El País*, 5 July 2021.

24 The White House, ‘Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Ends Taxpayer Subsidization of Open Borders’, updated 19 February 2025.

25 Fedasil, ‘Paid Work and Contribution for Reception’, accessed 3 September 2025.

26 Government of the Netherlands, ‘Ukrainian Refugees: Personal Contribution’, accessed 3 September 2025.

27 Government of Germany, ‘Asylum Seekers Benefits Act (AsylbLG)’, 30 June 1993.

28 Claire Scott, ‘Working Asylum Seekers Will Chip in for Upkeep, Says Minister’, *The Times*, 4 May 2025.

29 Gabriele Intemann, ‘Freiwillige Integrationskurse eingestellt’, *Tagesschau*, 12 February 2026; Anna Thewalt, ‘Berliner Dozent kritisiert Stopp von Integrationskursen: “Die Politik macht die gleichen Fehler wie in den 60er-Jahren”’, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 17 February 2026.

30 Julia Pascual, ‘Stricter French Requirements, Fewer Resources: Immigrants Face New Hurdles’, *Le Monde*, 13 September 2025.

31 The Guardian, ‘Switzerland Seizing Assets from Refugees to Cover Costs’, *The Guardian*, 15 January 2016.

32 Senay Boztas, ‘Dutch Plan to Get Tough on Migrants Who Don’t Learn the Lingo’, *The Times*, 16 February 2025.

BOX 1**Messaging costs and benefits: The example of Denmark**

The Danish Social Democrats are among the few centrist parties in Europe that have continued to win elections and marginalise the far right. Analysts largely attribute this to their restrictionist turn on immigration. The unique pairing of progressive domestic policies and hard-line immigration positions, including extreme restrictions on asylum and introduction of return centres, has become a model that other centrist governments are trying to emulate. For example, the British home secretary visited Denmark in late 2025 and proposed a package of measures that reflect the Danish approach to refugee protection as temporary by default.

Between 2015 and 2021, Denmark proposed a wide range of immigration reforms, including the Jewellery Law, the Parallel Society Package (so-called 'ghetto laws'), and externalisation laws—proposals that rank among the most extreme in Europe. While the left initially criticised them, the Social Democrats embraced many of these hard-line policies starting in 2018, a shift that observers credited with increased public support for the party and the declining salience of immigration issues. By 2022, only one in five voters chose immigration as one of the three most important topics.

Many of these proposals did not ultimately come to fruition, including a partnership with Rwanda to transfer asylum seekers for external processing, making family unification conditional on employment and learning Danish, and ending territorial asylum. Thus, the party could arguably project a tough stance on immigration without exceeding the red lines they set for themselves in relation to international law.

These policy shifts have been accompanied by a shift in rhetoric. Politicians—even on the left—have more openly acknowledged the benefits of curbing migration, including protecting the welfare state. They have also stopped downplaying the distributional effects: while higher-income urban populations may benefit from low-cost labour for domestic work or transport, for example, other groups may not enjoy similar benefits. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has stated publicly that immigration often imposes larger burdens on the working class, including crowded schools and increased competition for housing and lower-skilled jobs.

Another factor in the success of this messaging is that it is perceived as values-driven rather than purely opportunistic. The Social Democrats could convey internal coherence by embedding a more conservative stance on immigration *within* a values-based progressive framework, rather than an exception. Their platform emphasises a 'fair and realistic' immigration policy, which includes offshore processing and caps for nonlabour migration alongside integration and international responsibilities. Here, the emphasis is on fairness to Danish citizens.

The lesson is perhaps that symbolic policies can work but only if they convey balance, competence, and clearly defined values. Performative cruelty is unlikely to have the same gains.

Sources: Peter Conradi, 'How Denmark's Centre-Left Leaders Got Tough on Migration', *The Times*, 24 May 2025; Matt Dathan, 'Shabana Mahmood's Radical Reforms to Halt "Asylum Shoppers"', *The Times*, 13 November 2025; The Economist, 'Denmark's Left Defied the Consensus on Migration. Has it Worked?', *The Economist*, 10 July 2025; David Leonhardt, 'In an Age of Right-Wing Populism, Why Are Denmark's Liberals Winning?', *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 February 2025; Beth Mann, 'What Were the Issues Dictating Which Party Danes Voted for in the 2022 General Election?', YouGov, 24 November 2022.

In general, the shift towards requiring newcomers to share more of the costs of their reception can be seen as a direct response to voters' legitimate concerns about costs and long-term planning, and a desire to set limits on what burden communities can bear when they themselves are experiencing economic precarity.

However, uncertainty remains about whether these schemes must demonstrate measurable cost savings to reassure anxious publics or if showing that elected officials take their constituents' concerns seriously is enough. Denmark's Jewellery Law, for example, showed limited financial gains but a larger symbolic impact because it applies to a very small group of people who do not typically arrive with significant material resources. Meanwhile, efforts to require asylum seekers who can afford it to contribute to housing will only be as successful as policies to support asylum seekers into work. Thus, efforts to reduce costs through rapid asylum processing and enable early access to work will be more successful in the long run—even if they make worse headlines.

B. Making entitlements earned and conditional rather than automatic

Recent debates on citizenship and settlement reform increasingly emphasise a shift towards contribution-based models, in which access to long-term status is framed as conditional and earned. These models typically extend residency requirements, raise language proficiency thresholds, and tighten so-called 'character' requirements. The shift goes beyond naturalisation rules: governments are also restricting family reunification, increasing conditionality for access to social benefits, and expanding civic integration obligations. The rationale for these changes is rooted in both immigration and integration objectives. First, these policies aim to counter perceptions of unfairness by signalling that legal status and entitlements must be earned rather than granted automatically. And second, governments hope that weakening the overall package of entitlements will reduce the pull factor for irregular migration.

The main developments include:

- **Increasing requirements for acquiring citizenship or permanent residency.** Several countries, including Finland and Portugal, have lengthened the residence period required for naturalisation.³³ Meanwhile, Ireland raised its residency requirement from three to five years for people with international protection and introduced new self-sufficiency and 'good character' criteria.³⁴ And Sweden has added more security, identity, and character checks on citizenship applications.³⁵ Other countries have increased the language requirements for acquiring citizenship or permanent residency. France, for example, now requires the demanding B2 level for French for citizenship, and A2 French for a first multi-year residence permit for refugees; those who do not meet this threshold receive only a one-year status.³⁶ In mid-2025, Belgium increased the fee for acquiring nationality from 150 euros to 1,000 euros, citing the need to strengthen the link between citizenship and personal contribution.³⁷ And the United Kingdom has proposed an 'earned settlement' model that doubles the qualifying

33 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2024* (Paris: OECD, 2024); Euronews, 'Portugal Tightens Citizenship Rules, Doubles Residency Requirement for Most Foreigners', Euronews, 24 June 2025.

34 Irish Department of Justice, Home Affairs, and Migration, 'Minister Jim O'Callaghan Receives Government Approval to Strengthen Migration Legislation and Introduce New Rules on Asylum and Citizenship & Minister Jim O'Callaghan and Minister Colm Brophy Publishes Family Reunification Review' (press release, 26 November 2025).

35 Swedish Migration Agency, 'Skärpta krav för svenskt medborgarskap', 13 March 2026. In a related development, a proposal in Sweden to remove permanent residency retroactively from more than 100,000 people shows how even proposed changes can create insecurity for immigrants. See James Savage, 'Politics in Sweden: "Permanent" has Become Precarious for Immigrants to Sweden', *The Local Sweden*, 1 October 2025.

36 European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), *Asylum Report 2025* (Valletta, Malta: EUAA, 2025).

37 European Migration Network Belgium, 'Acquisition of Belgian Nationality Will Cost €1.000 in Registration Fees', updated 18 July 2025.

period for permanent residency from five years to ten, with options to expedite or slow this timeline depending on applicants' compliance with certain conditions.³⁸

- ▶ **Restricting family unification for refugees and other migrants.** Many countries have increased waiting periods or raised income thresholds for sponsoring family members, and some have even suspended family unification pathways altogether in response to pressure on public services. Germany has suspended family unification for individuals with subsidiary protection,³⁹ while Austria has suspended it for all refugees through September 2026⁴⁰ and proposed an annual processing quota for family members. The United Kingdom also paused the refugee family unification pathway, forcing refugees to use the mainstream pathway, which includes a minimum annual income requirement of £29,000.⁴¹ Other countries have introduced new minimum waiting periods and stricter financial requirements for sponsors, particularly for refugees.⁴² In Ireland, the proposed International Protection Bill would require recognised refugees to wait three years before applying for family reunification and would introduce new financial self-sufficiency requirements.⁴³ Belgium introduced stricter rules in 2025 that raise income requirements, reduce the income test exemption period for refugees, and increase the waiting period for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.⁴⁴
- ▶ **Increasing conditionality for receiving benefits.** Since July 2024, Austria has required newcomers to participate in mandatory work and civic courses to receive benefits.⁴⁵ In Norway, third-country nationals with limited Norwegian language abilities must enrol in language training to qualify for financial support.⁴⁶ Denmark introduced new rules for cash benefits in July 2025, imposing stricter work and legal residence requirements that reduce benefits for immigrants and refugees.⁴⁷ And at the EU level, Article 34 of the Pact on Migration and Asylum allows Member States to make access to social assistance conditional on participation in integration measures.⁴⁸

38 Mihnea Cuibus, 'Changes to Settlement: What do They Mean?', Migration Observatory, 10 February 2026.

39 German Federal Ministry of the Interior, 'Federal Cabinet Decides to Suspend Family Reunification for Beneficiaries of Subsidiary Protection and to End Fast-Track Naturalisation after Legal Residence of Only Three Years' (press release, 28 May 2025).

40 Multiple extensions have been agreed to what was originally seen as an emergency measure. To make the case for the extension to July 2026, Austria's Federal Ministry of the Interior presented an impact analysis, which cautioned that further arrivals would strain schools, social services, and housing supply. Sou-Jie van Brunnersum, 'Austria Limits Refugee Family Reunification under New Quota System', InfoMigrants, 21 May 2026.

41 Rajeev Syal, 'Yvette Cooper Accused of Pushing Children Towards People Smugglers by Halting Refugee Scheme', *The Guardian*, 1 September 2025; UK Home Office, 'Statement of Changes to the Immigration Rules: HC 1298, 4 September 2025' (statement of change, UK Home Office, September 2025).

42 Finland has proposed introducing a two-year residence requirement for sponsors in international protection status (refugee or subsidiary protection but not temporary protection holders) before they can reunite with family members. Finnish Government, 'Legislative Amendments and New Requirements for Family Reunification' (press release, 16 June 2025). Portugal increased residence duration requirements for sponsors to two years before they are eligible for family reunification, although the changes include certain exceptions and are not specific to protection status holders. LVP Advogados, 'Legal Update—Portugal Approves Major Changes to Immigration Law', updated 16 July 2025.

43 Sandra Hurley and Harry Manning, 'Proposed Family Reunification Changes "Troubling", says Opposition', RTÉ, 13 January 2026.

44 European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 'Changes to Integration Support and Migration Policy in Belgium' European Commission, 17 February 2026.

45 Euronews, 'Austrian Government Announces New Obligations for Asylum Seekers', Euronews, 17 July 2024.

46 EUAA, 'National Asylum Developments Database', accessed 3 September 2025.

47 Michala Clante Bendixen, 'New Cash Benefit Reform Hits Refugees in Particular', Refugees Welcome, 9 June 2025.

48 European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 'Legislative Files in a Nutshell: Pact on Migration and Asylum', updated 4 June 2024.

- **Expanding civic integration programmes with a stronger emphasis on identity and shared values.** Belgium has made a civic integration course mandatory for all new non-EU arrivals, including labour migrants who are usually exempt from this type of programme. The Flanders region has raised the pass mark from 50 to 70 per cent, and the Wallonia region has extended the programme from 18 months to three years.⁴⁹ In the Netherlands, the Knowledge of Dutch Society exam, a mandatory civic integration test, was updated in 2025 to place a greater emphasis on women's rights and Holocaust awareness.⁵⁰ And Austria, as part of broader national measures unveiled in early 2026 to implement the European Union's new Common European Asylum System, will require recognised refugees to sign a binding 'charter of values', with potential sanctions for noncompliance.⁵¹

The rationale underpinning these reforms is that benefits such as permanent residency and citizenship should be earned rather than granted automatically. Policymakers argue that higher requirements promote public trust by signalling that processes are robust and that individuals who invest in their new communities are rewarded. But narratives of 'deservingness' that equate belonging with contribution can also have an exclusionary edge, implying that only migrants who are self-sufficient and conform with prevailing social norms can become part of the national community. Relying on symbolic gestures rather than explicit frameworks, such as a formal integration contract that specifies what migrants are expected to contribute and receive, may be counterproductive.⁵² There is some limited evidence that making family reunion more difficult can reduce irregular migration,⁵³ but the deterrent effects of these types of measures are small, and governments often overestimate the degree to which migrants factor such policies into their decision-making.⁵⁴

The trade-offs inherent to restrictive immigration and integration measures are significant. Raising requirements without parallel investment in access to language classes, job readiness support, and affordable housing, for example, may simply penalise those least able to comply, including low-skilled workers and migrant women with unpaid care responsibilities. The European Court of Justice echoed this concern in a ruling that found the Netherlands had placed an 'unreasonable burden' on migrants by requiring them to pay the full cost of integration courses and language exams.⁵⁵ Strong evidence also shows that family separation can result in mental illness.⁵⁶ More broadly, citizenship functions as a facilitator of integration, not merely its reward: evidence shows it produces a measurable wage increase for migrants

49 Colin Clapson, 'Flanders Raises Bar for Newcomers to Pass the Compulsory Social Orientation Course', VRT NWS, 2 February 2026; European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 'Changes to Integration Support'.

50 NL Times, 'Dutch Integration Exam to Focus More on Women's Rights, Holocaust', NL Times, 3 July 2025.

51 Beyza Binnur Donmez, 'Austria to Tighten Airport Asylum Procedures, Expand Sanctions under New EU Rules', Anadolu Ajansı, 16 January 2026.

52 Participants at the Integration Futures meeting in Berlin in 2023 suggesting using a 'social contract' framework, and it was also the topic of a Transatlantic Council on Migration meeting in Austria in 2019 on 'Rebuilding Community after Crisis: An Updated Social Contract for a New Migration Reality'.

53 Anna Diop-Christensen and Lanciné Eric Diop, 'What Do Asylum Seekers Prioritise—Safety or Welfare Benefits? The Influence of Policies on Asylum Flows to the EU15 Countries', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 35, no. 2 (2022): 849–73.

54 Migration Observatory, 'UK Policies to Deter People from Claiming Asylum' (policy note, Migration Observatory, Oxford, UK, 2024).

55 Boztas, 'Dutch Plan to Get Tough'.

56 Michala Clante Bendixen, 'Refugee Fathers Become Mentally Ill While Waiting for Family Reunion', Refugees Welcome, 3 January 2022; Lea-Maria Löbel, 'Family Separation and Refugee Mental Health: A Network Perspective', *Social Networks* 61 (2020): 20–33; Matthias Hans Belau, Heiko Becher, and Alexander Kraemer, 'Impact of Family Separation on Subjective Time Pressure and Mental Health among Refugees from the Middle East and Africa Resettled in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany: A Cross-Sectional Study', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 21 (2021): 11722.

and especially for women (in part because of how it signals stability to employers), and thus brings some modest tax boosts for host communities.⁵⁷ Keeping the most vulnerable in a prolonged state of insecurity—unable to put down roots, access training, or buy a home—risks stunting the integration these requirements are designed to promote.

Finally, policymakers should consider the ‘body language’ of values-based measures. Requiring newcomers to commit to values that receiving-community members do not themselves observe can appear disingenuous: for instance, messages conveying that newcomers’ cultural practices are unwelcome can conflict with expectations to endorse values such as diversity and tolerance. And policies that raise excessive hurdles to family rights or residence may reduce Europe’s attractiveness to mobile, skilled migrants who can choose between destinations, with implications for long-term competitiveness.

C. *Restrictive policies’ effects on public opinion*

There is some evidence to suggest that the language of control *can* be effective in breaking through opposition to migration, under certain conditions. Even strong opponents of immigration may support specific proposals to expand migration pathways if these are framed in alignment with their values and priorities, and if policy details are communicated transparently.

A December 2024 experiment conducted across seven European countries (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, and Italy) found a remarkable jump in support for admitting 50,000 additional immigrants when respondents were told that migrants would need to learn the host-country language, find employment, pay taxes, and pass a background check.⁵⁸ On average, these conditions reduced opposition by half and more than doubled support, with the strongest effects among conservatives most strongly opposed to the initial policy. This is notable because few interventions demonstrate success in budging die-hard beliefs on either extreme.⁵⁹ The effect held even when the proposal specified that immigrants would come from the Middle East instead of Europe, despite respondents expressing a strong negative bias towards Muslim migrants. This finding suggests that at least in some cases, clearly articulated plans for economic and social integration (without needing to show proof of positive *outcomes*) can protect against stigmatisation and xenophobia.

However, the evidence is more mixed on which policy conditions increase public support under different circumstances. So far, it seems that including control language in policy proposals, such as emphasising the requirements immigrants must meet or the robustness of entry procedures, can increase support for expanding specific pathways. But support may reach a limit. The same 2024 study cited above found that

57 Christina Gathmann, ‘Naturalization and Citizenship: Who Benefits?’ *IZA World of Labor* February 2015.

58 Morris Levy and Matthew Wright, ‘Integration Policy Specifics and Public Support for Increasing Immigration’, *SSRN* 3556340 (February 2025).

59 Strongly held beliefs about immigration have proved notoriously resistant to corrections. Several studies conducted between 2020 and 2022 showed that when participants were presented with facts to correct misperceptions about migration, people rarely changed their policy preferences, even if they updated their beliefs on those specific facts. One explanation is that people tend to rationalise new information to fit their existing worldview, rather than having to incur the costs of changing something fundamental to their identity. See, for example, Jan G. Voelkel, Mashail Malik, Chrystal Redekopp, and Robb Willer, ‘Changing Americans’ Attitudes about Immigration: Using Moral Framing to Bolster Factual Arguments’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 700, no. 1 (2022): 73–85.

emphasising civics requirements on top of other integration requirements did not increase support further.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, a 2022 study in Germany found that anti-immigration members of the public are more likely to support policies that increase immigration when paired with additional restrictions, including stricter entry requirements and limits on rights after arrival.⁶¹ Similarly, surveys show that people in the United Kingdom are more likely to support a new humanitarian pathway as part of a broader package that includes stronger control measures and returns of those who arrive without permission.⁶² Critically, support was almost identical among respondents who were most open to immigration and those most opposed to it.

A common thread throughout these studies is that policy preferences are not binary—that is, neither blanket opposition nor unconditional support. Instead, most people favour sensible policy combinations that balance openness with common-sense (rather than punitive) restrictions. Thus, while it is clear that high-profile signals of fairness *can* be helpful in alleviating acute public discontent and creating space for more measured dialogue, publics generally want limits in both directions; there is limited public appetite (except in some quarters) for policies that cause harm or that only serve to scapegoat. The five-country

Most people favour sensible policy combinations that balance openness with common-sense (rather than punitive) restrictions.

study from More in Common found that when given a choice between an enforcement-only approach and one that combines border enforcement measures with expanded legal pathways, the largest share of respondents in all five countries—ranging from 45 to 60 per cent—preferred the combined approach. Polling by British Future shows that even

amid record-high polarisation in the United Kingdom (nearly six in ten respondents said immigration should be reduced in principle), most people do not want ‘crude cuts’ and bristle at the idea of fewer visas for workers such as doctors, information technology experts, care home workers, fruit pickers, and construction workers, who are seen as essential to the economy.⁶³

The task for immigration and integration policymakers is therefore to identify which compromises can unlock the support of sceptical publics and, at the same time, are least harmful to integration outcomes. Integration policy has long required a balance between practical and symbolic considerations when defining entitlements and earned benefits. Making all newcomers eligible for expansive language instruction and training may deliver clear long-term economic benefits, but it also incurs short-term fiscal costs that attract public concern. Perceptions that governments allocate scarce resources unfairly by prioritising some groups over others can quickly trigger resentment and conflict, feeding a cycle of mistrust

60 Levy and Wright, ‘Integration Policy Specifics’.

61 Marc Helbling, Rahsaan Maxwell, and Richard Traunmüller, ‘Numbers, Selectivity, and Rights: The Conditional Nature of Immigration Policy Preferences’, *Comparative Political Studies* 57, no. 2 (2024): 254–86.

62 A 2025 Ipsos poll found that 55 per cent of the public support the following proposal: ‘The UK should agree with France a capped number of people that the UK will admit into the UK each year to claim asylum by authorised routes, in return for France agreeing to take back those who cross the channel without permission’. Only 15 per cent opposed (which a 2025 British Futures report notes is a strikingly low figure, given that 21 per cent of the British public says they do not agree with the principle of refugee protection). The coalition of supporters cut across party lines, with most Labour, Conservative, and Reform voters supporting it. Sunder Katwala and Frank Sharry, *How Can We Actually Stop the Boats: Bringing Control and Compassion Back to the UK Asylum System* (London: British Future, 2025).

63 A British Future report finds that a large portion of the public fall into the ‘balancer middle’, the pragmatic majority who see both pressures and gains from immigration and who prioritise fairness and competence. Katwala, Ballinger, and Rolfe, *Noise and Nuance*.

and misinformation that undermines integration gains. Therefore, policymakers should invest as much in policy innovation as in cultivating enough public trust to enable long-term strategic planning. Without both, many will turn to knee-jerk restrictionist policies that promise immediate wins.

4 Alleviating Pressures through Long-Term Planning

While control signalling may offer a short-term bump in public confidence, it is unlikely to adequately address the underlying drivers of public mistrust, such as housing shortages and pressure on public services. To address these everyday issues, governments need to improve how they anticipate and manage population changes.

Governments face three somewhat competing priorities. First, they must be ready to adapt to population shocks, including conflict-related displacement, such as the Ukraine crisis, as well as pressures from rising numbers of asylum seekers. Second, they need to improve their capacity to anticipate population changes and resource public services accordingly, including projecting medium-term workforce and infrastructure needs that stem from growth in elderly or child populations and larger numbers of pupils learning the host-country language in schools. And third, they need to improve transparency and consultation when communicating decisions and developments to the public.

While the pressures of immediate population change tend to dominate the integration portfolio, governments should not lose sight of longer-term demographic trends. This dual perspective is needed to get ahead of future strains that could erode public trust down the line.⁶⁴ These trends include:

- ▶ **Population growth.** Commentators have often framed immigration as a silver bullet for ageing societies, aimed at increasing the working-age population, but using immigration to rebalance the population's age composition implies year-on-year population growth. Maintaining the same ratio of workers to pensioners would require faster population growth than any destination country would consider comfortable. But even if immigration only counterbalances some amount of population aging, this still implies population growth—so governments need to plan accordingly.
- ▶ **Asymmetrical impacts.** While major metropolitan areas continue to expand (even when immigration slows), smaller cities and rural areas are struggling to attract and retain enough workers and their families to sustain local economies, infrastructure, and services. These gaps are projected to widen, and even small decreases in immigration could double the old-age dependency ratio in the parts of a country that are ageing the fastest. Governments, therefore, are called on to solve two equations at once: accommodating growth in cities while supporting rapidly ageing communities elsewhere.
- ▶ **Social protection pressures.** Demographic change is often treated as a numbers game, but ageing countries and regions need workers with the right skills, not just warm bodies. Immigration can slow

⁶⁴ Adapted from Meghan Benton, Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, and Kate Hooper, *Migration Governance in Unsettled Times: How Policymakers Can Plan for Population Change* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2025), which summarises research and discussions during a meeting of the Migration Policy Institute's Transatlantic Council on Migration focused on immigration governance in the context of rising public anxiety and demographic change. See also Hiebert, *Understanding the Impact of Immigration on Demography*.

the effects of demographic change but will work only if most immigrants successfully enter and remain in the labour force, which depends on effective integration.⁶⁵ If, conversely, new arrivals are unable to find work or are pushed into the informal economy, their presence will worsen rather than mitigate the effects of a shrinking workforce. Moreover, as immigrants themselves age and retire, governments will need to think proactively about the implications for social protection systems to ensure that all workers have a reliable safety net, especially those who have worked precarious jobs.

All told, this points to the need for forward planning that addresses the pressures that concern people the most and anticipates future needs in education, the workforce, and housing before shortages become acute. To give communities members a say in their collective future and alleviate perceptions of unfairness or loss of control, governments can consider consultative population planning, workforce planning that brings together actors to reduce long-term reliance on migration, and broader inclusive policies that serve the whole of society instead of specific groups.

A. *Giving communities agency by improving transparency and consultative planning*

Governments need to be able to demonstrate to their citizens that policies are responsive to evolving community needs. This requires greater transparency and communication to show that governments are working to identify these needs and pain points early, before tensions escalate. The consequences of insufficient consultation and communication with residents were on display, for instance, in the protests that erupted in the town of Roscrea following the Irish government's abrupt decision to convert the town's only hotel—a longstanding community centre and social venue—into accommodation for asylum seekers.⁶⁶

Integration strategies can improve foresight and coordination across ministries. Plans typically define indicators to guide policymaking and establish common metrics across government. The European Union's *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–27* and Iceland's 2024 white paper *A Society for Everyone: Iceland's Future and Policy on Matters of Immigrants* illustrate this approach, with long-term targets for migrant employment, refugee support, and public attitudes.⁶⁷ Yet, action plans often remain disconnected from broader policymaking and debate about the costs and benefits of social change. They tend to focus on short-term individual metrics, such as entry into work, without comparing longer-term fiscal costs and benefits, which could help governments weigh the value of costly upfront education and integration investments. Such plans can also prove rigid: the EU Action Plan has not been updated since the Ukraine crisis began, for example.

By contrast, Canada and Australia use more adaptive migration levels planning models. Canada publishes rolling three-year plans developed through wide consultation, including estimates from provinces on workforce and service needs (such as for new doctors, nurses, and schools). The 2025–27 plan now covers

65 For example, a Joint Research Centre analysis found that across demographic scenarios, integration of migrants had a greater impact on dependency ratios than the actual number of arrivals. Wolfgang Lutz et al., *Demographic Scenarios for the EU* (Brussels: Publication Office of the European Union, 2019).

66 Cathy Halloran, 'How Racket Hall Became a Scene of Violence and Anger', RTÉ, 20 January 2024.

67 Government of Iceland Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, 'A Society for Everyone: Iceland's Future and Policy on Matters of Immigrants' (white paper, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Reykjavík, May 2024).

temporary as well as permanent admissions, after rapid population growth of more than 1.2 million in 2023 raised concerns about a ‘population trap’ in which growth outpaces infrastructure.⁶⁸ Australia publishes multi-year permanent migration plans with a regional focus that feeds information about state-level skills needs into federal planning.⁶⁹ The country also issues separate humanitarian levels plans covering asylum and resettlement.⁷⁰

European governments could learn from these approaches. Creating clear planning frameworks could help depoliticise debates by setting clear targets for migration streams, giving people a more granular picture as an alternative to media fixation on topline migration or asylum numbers, and improve resource allocation and planning to mitigate population pressures felt at the local level. Equally, showing how immigration changes are being addressed through housing and public service investments can encourage an understanding of these as shared challenges to address together instead of an us-versus-them competition for scarce resources.⁷¹

Greater transparency and consultation in immigration planning is an important start. But with major demographic transformations ahead, governments could also consider ways to engage publics in broader conversations about the role that immigration should play. Despite some rare attempts to make the economic and demographic case for bold migration reforms (such as the Spanish regularisation decision described in the next subsection), thus far, no government has attempted to engage the public in a broader conversation about the need for immigration at a time of seismic economic and technological change. Governments tend to assume the public is not equipped to balance complex trade-offs, though the research discussed in Section 2.D. indicates that publics may be more open to nuance and a conversation about balancing different goals than is often thought. And, as highlighted by the UK think tank Demos, immigration and especially integration and settlement policy decisions are rarely technocratic problems with easy solutions but draw on deeply held values related to membership, belonging, and social justice.⁷² As governments weigh governance tools to support broader immigration planning, they could therefore also use this as an opportunity to reach out to publics and engage them in decisions about the nation’s future.

Creating clear planning frameworks could help depoliticise debates by setting clear targets for migration streams, giving people a more granular picture as an alternative to media fixation on topline migration or asylum numbers.

68 Government of Canada, ‘Notice—Supplementary Information for the 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan’, updated 24 October 2024.

69 See, for example, New South Wales Government, ‘NSW State Migration Plan’, accessed 2 April 2025; Australian Department of Home Affairs, ‘Migration Program Planning Levels’, accessed 3 September 2025.

70 Australian Department of Home Affairs, ‘Australia’s Humanitarian Program 2024–25’ (discussion paper, Department of Home Affairs, Canberra, n.d.).

71 Discussion at the Integration Futures Working Group session on ‘Integration Policy in a New Age of Mixed Migration’, Berlin, November 2023.

72 Demos makes the case for a deliberative approach to discussions about immigration that includes options for participants to learn about trade-offs and technical information, facilitated discussion between participants, and identifying areas of consensus. Aidan Garner and Miriam Levin, *Settling Up: A New Deal to Unlock Immigration Reform and Build Trust* (London: Demos, 2026).

B. *Demonstrating fairness by prioritising integration of existing migrant groups*

While some countries depend heavily on immigration to counterbalance population aging and workforce shortages, others are seeking to avoid or reduce this reliance by more fully tapping into domestic talent pools. As part of efforts to bring down net immigration, the United Kingdom's Labour Market Evidence Group brings together government and nongovernment entities such as Skills England, the Migration Advisory Committee, the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council, and the Department for Work and Pensions to align immigration policy with domestic skills development, including by assessing the extent to which labour needs can be met without additional international recruitment. Jobs and Skills Australia, an Australian government statutory body, performs a similar function by first projecting long-term subnational workforce needs and making recommendations on ways to adjust workforce development to counteract sectors' reliance on immigration. Australia is also working to ensure that employers outside of major cities can meet their labour needs through Designated Area Migration Agreements, which allow employers to sponsor skilled workers under more flexible conditions to meet unique labour market conditions in the designated area.

However, even these cutting-edge workforce planning approaches often downplay the role of integration in helping meet labour market needs. Existing immigrant populations will not automatically slot into local labour markets; well-designed, and in some cases costly, workforce development measures may be needed to activate these and other un- and underemployed workers. For instance, fast-track programmes can help skilled migrants with partial gaps meet shortages in sectors such as health care, and they can develop training pipelines into shortage occupations in sectors such as care, construction, and skilled trades for those with lower levels of education.⁷³

The elephant in the room is what to do about irregular migrants and failed asylum seekers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries opened labour market access to irregular migrants. Spain modified its *arraigo* policy to be even more liberal, allowing migrants to regularise their status through employment, education, or social ties after two years of residence.⁷⁴ In May 2026, Spain finalised a new regularisation scheme for people who as of the beginning of the year had been living in the country for more than five months, designed to clear backlogs before the planned June 2026 implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum and meet labour force needs.⁷⁵ Similarly, Germany's 2022 reform offered a one-year residence permit to up to 135,000 people with tolerated status (*Duldung*), including pathways to long-term residence for those who meet integration and financial conditions,⁷⁶ though applications closed at the end of 2025 without reaching this cap and the government has not renewed it.

73 Abigail Goldfarb and Jasmijn Slootjes, 'Integration Policy and the Skills Gap: An Untapped Policy Instrument' (discussion note prepared for Integration Futures Working Group, 2026).

74 In 2025, Spain adjusted its *arraigo* system to reduce the amount of time a migrant was required to have lived in the country before qualifying for regularisation, from three years to two years. Applicants cannot be simultaneously seeking asylum, and time spent as an asylum seeker does not count towards the residency requirement unless the asylum application was already denied. Sterna Abogados, 'Arraigo in Spain: 2025 Regulatory Changes', accessed 3 September 2025.

75 Natasha Mellersh, 'How Spain's 2026 Regularization Works', InfoMigrants, 22 April 2026.

76 Ben Knight, 'Germany to Make Life Easier for Thousands of Immigrants', Deutsche Welle, 7 July 2022.

As populations continue to age, the choice will no longer be between admitting new immigrants, activating existing populations, or having workers delay retirement; countries may need to do all of the above. This strengthens the case for investment in upskilling, retraining, and credential recognition for immigrants and native-born workers alike. Meanwhile, restrictions on new admissions may offer an opportunity for integration policymakers to make the case for funding integration measures for immigrants already present in a country.

C. Signalling the rights and responsibilities of temporary membership

Traditionally, integration policy has assumed permanent settlement: newcomers would arrive, settle, and gradually gain equal access to rights, jobs, and services. But new forms of mobility and transnationalism are destabilising this model. A variety of groups—from digital nomads who do not always invest in their local communities and can sometimes drive up rents, to displaced populations with a temporary status, to circular migrants who move from place to place and fall through the cracks of social safety nets—are blurring the lines between migrant integration and broader social inclusion.

One of the ways governments have responded is by adapting integration policies to ensure that even temporary residents can contribute—while signalling to host populations that temporary refugees and other residents may or should ultimately return. Research by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, highlights the growing use of dual-intent approaches for displaced Ukrainians, in which integration programming combines short-term orientation and support with the option to build pathways for longer-term settlement.⁷⁷ Beyond the response to Ukrainian displacement, several European governments have begun shifting towards temporary models of protection for other groups as well. Denmark has adopted a model of ‘self-support and return’ for beneficiaries of international protection, accompanied by a focus on temporary rather than permanent integration.⁷⁸

Some countries, such as South Korea and Japan, have tried to maintain temporary labour migration schemes that avoid integrating migrant workers into local communities. And as other, traditionally open countries seek to make migration more temporary, they are facing questions about how to balance competing demands and values. One is how to ensure that temporariness (which can be more palatable to a host society) does not usher in greater exploitation of migrants. Another involves weighing the trade-offs of investing in the integration of people who, if granted only a temporary status, are more likely to leave than contribute to the society over the long term. While integration measures can be costly, the flipside holds risk as well: choosing to limit support for people considered temporary, such as refugees awaiting more stable conditions in their countries of origin, could result in greater vulnerability in the short term and hinder the integration of those who do end up staying permanently.

Countries, overall, have been reducing their integration investments. Even Canada, long celebrated for its comprehensive integration model—featuring credential recognition, settlement services, bridging programmes, and labour market supports and a path to permanence for all—is adapting these measures to

⁷⁷ OECD, ‘Working Towards Dual Intent Integration of Ukrainian Refugees’ (policy paper, OECD, Paris, November 2023).

⁷⁸ European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, ‘Migrant Integration in Denmark’, updated 1 April 2025.

allow for a more probationary approach to citizenship.⁷⁹ Germany has likewise been scaling back integration support. After several years of taking a pragmatic but costly approach to integration courses—granting access to groups often excluded from this programming such as asylum seekers, people with tolerated status, Ukrainians with temporary protection, and EU nationals—it has been debating restricting these, which has essentially paused access in some contexts.⁸⁰ In Poland, meanwhile, the government moved in March 2026 to phase out special measures introduced in 2022 for Ukrainians under temporary protection, reducing access to family benefits, health care, and accommodation.⁸¹

While there is a pragmatic case for adapting integration programming for temporary residents, governments will need to reconcile competing public expectations. Some people expect newcomers to accept and take on mainstream norms and practices from day one—rather than maintaining their own values and connections with co-ethnic enclaves—which points to using integration policy as a tool to facilitate incorporation of newcomers as full members of society. Others view citizenship as something to be ‘earned’ and expect newcomers to be tested over time before being accepted as part of the society. These expectations require different integration policy approaches.

D. *Investing in inclusion for the benefit of all*

One of the main challenges of the recent restrictive turn—and the opportunity cost of having integration policymakers focus primarily on implementing new requirements—is that it leaves unfinished the hard work many countries have put into integrating their immigrant residents. A decade ago, the concept of ‘mainstreaming’ immigrant integration swept through European policy circles, carrying with it an ambitious promise: that governments would rigorously audit all public services—from schools to health systems—and adapt them to serve increasingly diverse and mobile populations. At the time, Migration Policy Institute Europe research argued for mobility-proofing services for new arrivals and diversity-proofing them for established minority communities, requiring a whole-of-government approach that went far beyond standalone programmes for newcomers.⁸² Such framing has been all but lost amid the political turbulence of the intervening years—spanning the 2015–16 migrant and refugee crisis, the global pandemic, the arrival of displaced Ukrainians, and most recently the shift towards border control and restrictive policies at the expense of integration.

The unfinished business of mainstreaming is particularly visible in education. Despite commitments in the European Commission’s *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–27*, many teachers lack the resources to effectively manage multilingual and multicultural classrooms, support students who have experienced

79 Canada is increasingly adapting to accommodate temporary residents, including those who arrive under temporary protection or through work pathways. For instance, temporary workers were previously excluded from federal settlement services, but they now have access to certain targeted supports, including language training, job readiness, and bridging resources through selected federal and nonprofit providers. This access enables applicants to hold temporary status while applying for permanent residency, which creates flexibility for mixed intentions, and it allows such migrants to continue working, known as Bridging Open Work Permits. Vimal Sivakumar, ‘Five Free Settlement Resources for Temporary Foreign Workers in Canada’, CIC News, 24 June 2024.

80 Benjamin Bathke, ‘Germany: Government Changes Its Stance on Integration Courses for Some Migrants’, InfoMigrants, 15 May 2026.

81 European Commission Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, ‘Changes to Support for People Displaced from Ukraine in Poland’ (news release, 26 March 2026).

82 Meghan Benton, Helen McCarthy, and Elizabeth Collett, *Into the Mainstream: Rethinking Public Services for Diverse and Mobile Populations* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2015).

trauma, and address high student turnover across the school year.⁸³ And an EU commitment to increasing early childhood education and care for migrant children across all Member States has not been met by commensurate efforts to expand access or introduce mandatory requirements. While evidence is clear that children of migrant parents benefit greatly from preschool, few countries have followed France's lead of making preschool compulsory for all children starting at age 3, a policy designed to close gaps among the most marginalised communities.⁸⁴ Denmark's controversial 2018 'ghetto law' addresses compulsory preschool but with starkly different framing: it makes preschool mandatory from age 1 in highly diverse neighbourhoods, but it singles out children of 'non-Western' descent and makes families' access to benefits contingent on compliance. A December 2025 judgment from the European Court of Justice stated that the law may violate the European Union's race equality directive.⁸⁵

A modernised mainstreaming agenda could engage with the desire for more demanding integration measures by appropriating the language of control to justify investments that in practice benefit both newcomers and long-standing residents, and that bring integration back into the core of education, social protection, and labour market policy. In the current political environment, integration officials may find they can more readily get political buy-in for policies perceived as costly such as expanded access to preschool, language training, or school support staff by framing them as tougher, mandatory participation requirements.

Although cross-government coordination on integration issues has improved dramatically since the 2015–16 migrant and refugee crisis, successive emergencies have consumed integration policymakers, who tend to focus more on new arrivals than longer-standing, systematic challenges. As a result, leadership is missing to drive more strategic thinking or rigorously audit and plug structural gaps that are exacerbating inequalities, which risks reinforcing perceptions of failed integration, to which more restrictive control-signalling policies are hailed as the only response.

Long-term thinking is happening in multiple spheres, ranging from strategies to manage demographic decline to migration to workforce planning, but governments rarely align these activities with integration decisions. For instance, Spain's recent demographic recovery plan lists 130 measures to address ageing and regional decline—including labour market reforms for women and youth—but contains no reference to immigrant integration.⁸⁶ Similarly, the examples of cutting-edge workforce and migration planning from Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom discussed above have paid little attention to these plans' policy and budgetary implications for migrants' labour market integration. Meanwhile, integration governance has been adjusting to the proliferation of temporary statuses, but there has yet to be an open, transparent discussion about the need to adapt to rising diversity as a means of maintaining a society's living standards.

83 Dominique Danau, *In and through Education: Education Trade Unions Support the Inclusion of Refugees and Migrants* (Brussels: European Trade Union Committee for Education, 2025).

84 EU-wide evidence suggests the benefit of having attended preschool is 55 percentage points among the native-born children of immigrants, roughly equivalent to 1.5 school years (and more than twice the benefit seen among native-born children of native parents). OECD, *Making Integration Work: Young People with Migrants Parents* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021).

85 Miranda Bryant, 'Copenhagen's "Ghetto Law" May be Unlawful, EU Court Rules', *The Guardian*, 18 December 2025.

86 Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, *Plan de Recuperación: 130 medidas frente al reto demográfico* (Madrid: Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, 2021).

Going forward, integration planning will need to grapple with these deeper questions about immigration's role in mitigating population ageing and consider the optimal balance between temporary and permanent migration to meet societies' social, economic, and workforce interests. This period of immigration retrenchment offers an opportunity to reassess the potential of integration policy.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The crisis in public trust is both real and manufactured. It is real in the sense that visible signs of disorder—from sea arrivals to homelessness—signal that many of the policies designed to manage migration are failing. But it is also manufactured, in the sense that extreme-right activists and commentators have manipulated political messaging to link many social ills to immigration and argue that curbing migration dramatically is the only solution, rather than proposing a different vision for more effective management.

Governments in high-income destination countries are under acute pressure to assert control in the face of rising irregular migration and overburdened communities. But evidence is limited on whether control-oriented policies truly help restore public trust and solve genuine policy challenges, or whether they are merely performative. While short-term political signalling can sometimes create space for longer-term investments, it is the long-term work of integration that is most critical to community prosperity and cohesion. Governments should draw on the full toolkit of good governance to turn down the temperature on migration issues, focusing instead on concrete reforms such as faster processing of asylum cases and building sufficient surge capacity in reception facilities. And there is much that could be achieved through better multilevel governance planning, particularly in planning for population growth.

Publics are often willing to support immigration, but their support is conditional: people need to believe that the system is fair and orderly, benefits are shared, and costs do not fall disproportionately on those who are already struggling. Public generosity towards newcomers, amply demonstrated over the last decade, has limits—especially if people feel left behind or excluded.

Governments should consider the following recommendations around communications and policy design:

- ▶ **Be transparent about costs and trade-offs.** Elites avoiding discussions of immigration's costs has created a vacuum that has been filled by far-right populists who are seen as being willing to speak the truth. Governments and political parties in the centre should emulate this willingness to discuss difficult topics openly, while avoiding othering language or scapegoating migrants and minorities. While there is a natural limit to what policies and their detail can be discussed in public forums, policymakers need to create opportunities for meaningful public input, be transparent in decision-making, and explain trade-offs and long-term objectives clearly. Effective communication must bridge the emotional and the rational by investing in locally grounded narratives and trusted messengers, not just national data campaigns.
- ▶ **Address concerns rather than debunking them.** Rumours and misinformation often reflect legitimate fears about the pace of change. In many places, migration is more visible than ever. For example, people hear different languages spoken in the streets and see shop advertisements in

different languages, signs of difference that can create short-term friction and instability, even if the long-term effects of newcomers on a society are positive. Dismissing people's concerns as unfounded tends to make people feel ignored. Instead, governments should acknowledge that immigration produces uneven effects and specify concrete measures to alleviate these pressures in ways that appeal to the public's values and self-interests.

- ▶ **Present control measures within a coherent long-term vision—not as a substitute for one.** Many European governments have adopted tougher visa or citizenship eligibility rules, stricter integration requirements, limits on family reunification, border checks, and symbolic proposals to signal 'control', but these measures will underdeliver if they are not part of a broader strategy for immigration reform. Splashy announcements are often more radical than the general public truly wants, and they may alienate some members of society or deliver only a short-lived bump in public opinion. Governments should articulate a clear vision that explains how immigration and integration policy support the national interest while demonstrating coherent and consistent efforts to solve the most difficult challenges.
- ▶ **Prioritise the quieter system fixes alongside—or instead of—control signalling.** Some policy reforms are primarily performative (e.g., punitive and symbolic laws that affect small numbers of immigrants) and risk diverting bandwidth better spent on practical problems such as housing shortages and cost-of-living pressures that contribute to public anxieties about immigration. Although strong control signalling, such as pausing family unification, can ease immediate tensions and buy time to develop more thoughtful reforms, these policies can have negative consequences and detract from system-level changes that improve outcomes. Publics value competent, effective immigration and integration policymaking, which governments often overlook while responding to the perceived crisis of public trust. Thus, governments should invest in quieter system improvements, including digitalisation, data-sharing across services, and public servant training, along with whole-of-government coordination for planning and resourcing for population change.
- ▶ **Design integration requirements to enable contribution rather than punish failure.** Many residents of high-income countries support immigration in principle but object to perceived inequity, especially a sense that newcomers receive support without being expected to contribute. Linking rights and support to participation can reduce resentment, but if policies are designed as punitive rather than enabling, they could entrench vulnerability and weaken community cohesion. Governments should pair new requirements with practical incentives, such as subsidised language training, flexible course schedules, and job-readiness programmes. And sanctions for noncompliance should be limited and proportionate. The goal is to create genuine incentives and pathways for contribution, not new grounds for exclusion.
- ▶ **Distribute resources evenly, and give communities a say in decisions.** Sudden change can be destabilising when long-time residents feel excluded from decision-making. Governments should establish deliberative community engagement mechanisms, such as citizen panels or participatory budgeting linked to defined funding, that allow communities to feed into immigration and integration policymaking and shape resource spending, with clear ground rules and realistic expectations. Community investments in schools, child care, job training, and public spaces may be better framed as

benefitting all residents to avoid pitting existing residents against newcomers. Funding formulas and service planning should explicitly account for areas facing disproportionate strain (neighbourhoods hosting reception centres, for example) to help mitigate pressures on communities.

- ▶ **Use immigration levels planning to regain control and ensure sufficient capacity.** Piecemeal, control-focused measures will not rebuild public trust without a clear strategy for managing demographic change more broadly. Governments should consider multi-year migration levels plans that set out expected inflows by category and use them to plan and resource capacity in reception, housing, education, health, and labour market policy. Governments could also consider recommitting to the unfinished task of mainstreaming, by mobility- and diversity-proofing core public services such as schools, health care, and social protection, so that integration policy is not limited to newcomers' first years. Improved immigrant integration outcomes are among the most powerful levers available for managing population ageing, but this is a message politicians need to convey within government and to communities.

In the end, even as governments respond to immediate public concerns and pressures, they should not lose sight of the long term. Policy responses should be part of a broader framework designed to maintain public confidence, treat newcomers fairly, and focus on a society's long-term economic and social needs.

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