Coordination Breakdown

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Migration in Europe

By Frey Lindsay

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MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped migration and mobility in Europe, and some of the impacts still linger. In many ways, Europe was better prepared than other regions to respond to the pandemic and its effects on cross-border mobility. Europe had strong coordinating institutions, an existing freedom of movement agreement, world-leading scientific and public-health capacities, and stronger social protection systems and economies than most regions. Despite these advantages, cross-border travel shut down, migrant and refugee flows dropped, and migrant worker unemployment spiked across the region in the pandemic's early phase.

The first months of the pandemic saw an unprecedented shutdown in cross-border mobility. Even borders within Europe's Schengen Area of free movement were reinstated, with land border controls and travel bans for nonresidents maintained for several months in 2020. As the virus circulated across Europe, countries began to restart mobility through testing and isolation, exemptions, and a traffic light system to assign travel measures according to a traveler's region of origin or transit, based on different metrics of risk. However, a lack of coordination undermined these early efforts. The real game changer was the EU Digital COVID Certificate, which by mid-2021 allowed countries to verify a traveler's proof of vaccination, testing, or recovery from prior infection. This system was widely adopted and helped Europe move toward targeting travel measures to each person's risk profile rather than restricting travel from entire countries. Thus, the European case offers some hope that regional cooperation can work, while nonetheless underscoring the challenges to cooperation on migration in times of crisis.

The European case offers some hope that regional cooperation can work, while nonetheless underscoring the challenges to cooperation on migration in times of crisis.

The pandemic had a significant and sudden impact on labor mobility, within and into Europe, with implications for employment and labor markets throughout the region. Initially, migrant worker unemployment rose in most sectors, with the gap between migrant and native-born unemployment rates growing across all European countries. But some policy decisions, including regularization policies, mitigated some of the worst impacts. Trends include:

▶ The pandemic's impacts on migrant workers were more severe in countries where migrants often have insecure contracts and work in sectors such as tourism that were devastated by the pandemic (e.g., Spain and Sweden), than in those with more generous job retention programs and social protection (e.g., France and Switzerland). Migrant employment began to recover relatively quickly, but it took until 2021 to begin growing at pre-pandemic rates. Many workers from other EU Member States returned home in the first months of the pandemic, particularly to Eastern Europe, meaning the number of intra-EU workers dropped more than the number of third-country national workers in EU labor markets. This seems to be both because moving home to another European country was comparatively easier and because intra-EU workers were more willing to leave as it appeared easier for them to return than it would be for a third-country national who might have to reapply for visas or save funds for the journey.

▶ Governments also tapped into existing populations to meet labor demand. As migrant workers returned to Eastern Europe and other regions, Italy and Spain gave regular status to many irregular migrants, and France tried to attract unemployed or furloughed native-born workers into agriculture. Governments also exempted essential workers (such as farm workers) from border restrictions or quickly expanded visa routes and recruited new workers for the agricultural harvest, as in Germany and the United Kingdom.

Virtually all types of migration dropped in 2020: first residence permits for third-country nationals decreased by 24 percent in just one year. Governments prioritized restarting labor migration, but most other types of movement recovered far more slowly. The impacts of COVID-19 travel measures on migration were starkest in the first two years of the pandemic, which are the primary focus of this report, and were felt by both irregular and regular mobility, although the former recovered quicker than the latter.

▶ International student flows dropped precipitously, with first residence permits for education dropping more than any other category in 2020. Although easing travel restrictions allowed students to return to Europe in 2021, student arrivals have generally been slow to recover to pre-pandemic levels. The United Kingdom, however, announced a new visa that allows graduate students to work for two years after graduation, prompting a significant increase in issuance of student visas in 2021 that exceeded pre-pandemic levels by 55 percent.

▶ Refugee resettlement remains low, but asylum applications have rebounded. Resettlement to Europe was more resilient than in regions and countries with stricter border controls (e.g., Australia), but refugee resettlements declined 40 percent from 2019 to 2020 and remained less than three-quarters of pre-pandemic levels by 2021. By contrast, asylum applications dropped in March 2020 and stayed low as European countries adjusted to telework and remote asylum proceedings, but application numbers began to recover by June and met pre-pandemic levels in mid-2021.

▶ Irregular migration exceeds pre-pandemic levels, but government policies have contributed to a shift toward more dangerous routes. Stricter border policies in Cyprus and Greece, justified by those governments in part by the pandemic's public-health risks, caused the number of irregular arrivals in those countries to drop and numbers in Italy and Spain to jump. As migrants turned to more dangerous irregular migration routes, recorded deaths in the Mediterranean increased by 41 percent in 2021.

The contrasting recoveries of different forms of migration to and within Europe underscore the importance of effective migration policymaking in times of uncertainty. Three policy trends emerged within Europe and continue to shape migration patterns and policies even as the focus on the pandemic has waned. First, the success of the EU Digital COVID Certificate, despite privacy and equity concerns, represented a shift back to regional cooperation on borders and offers a tool to help countries re-open quickly if a future health crisis shuts down mobility. Second, the enduring shift to digital migration and asylum processing sparked by office closures and social distancing will force policymakers to balance the advantages of streamlined digitalization with the risks to privacy and data protection. Third, COVID-19's shutdown in global labor mobility and related labor shortages accelerated a policy focus on skilled migration programs, which will be

crucial to meeting future labor demand while building human capital and socioeconomic opportunities in Europe. Recognizing these trends and the lessons of the pandemic can equip policymakers in Europe and beyond to prepare contingency plans for the next public-health crisis and strategically move toward a more effective and coordinated plan for migration.

1   Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching consequences for migration in Europe, as it has around the world. It disrupted migration from outside the region, virtually stopped the intra-regional free movement of EU citizens, and impeded the European Union's collective ability to manage migration. European coordination on borders and mobility, notably through the abolition of internal border checks in the Schengen Area, was partially undermined as national sovereignty over borders emerged as the dominant force in the face of an emergent health crisis.

The crisis devastated many industries in which migrant workers are highly represented, destroying labor demand overnight and forcing many migrants into unemployment. The tourism and travel sectors, which rely on migrant workers, all but disappeared in 2020. Other sectors faced massive worker shortages as migrants returned to their home countries and travel restrictions at both foreign and EU borders disrupted labor recruitment. Meanwhile, conditions worsened for asylum seekers as humanitarian protection systems largely ground to a halt and for irregular migrants as the pandemic's effects could be felt in the fields and factories of Europe's informal economies.

European coordination on borders and mobility ... was partially undermined as national sovereignty over borders emerged as the dominant force in the face of an emergent health crisis.

Roughly four years after the pandemic began, migration and mobility have largely returned to their pre-pandemic state, as most countries have moved beyond emergency measures and lifted the last travel measures. But many restrictions on mobility lingered longer than anticipated, such as travel measures imposed by governments in response to the Omicron variant in late 2021 (although by 2022, these were usually requirements to be vaccinated, test negative, or show proof of recovery, rather than outright bans on travel) and as China reopened in late 2022. The impact on migration has also been uneven. Initially, countries that proactively supported migrant jobs and worked to retain and attract migrant workers often saw smaller spikes in migrant unemployment, and migration restarted quicker. Meanwhile, some policies introduced to accommodate pandemic-related impacts are likely to stick, such as digital nomad visas to accommodate the burgeoning numbers of remote workers.

This period has also seen a major displacement crisis in Europe's neighborhood. The Russian war in Ukraine has triggered the largest displacement crisis within Europe since the Second World War,[1] with some 5 million Ukrainians recorded displaced across Europe by August 2023.[2] At the same time, the war has exacerbated

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1   Julian Vierlinger, "UN: Ukraine Refugee Crisis is Europe's Biggest since WWII," Atlantic Council, April 20, 2022.
2   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Operational Data Portal—Ukraine Refugee Situation," updated August 8, 2023.

pandemic-induced disruptions in commodity markets around the world, notably food[3] and energy,[4] which has prompted cost-of-living crises across Europe that challenge communities' capacity and willingness to host and integrate displaced Ukrainians.

Given the pandemic's unprecedented shock to mobility and border regimes across the globe, the Migration Policy Institute's Task Force on Mobility and Borders during and after COVID-19 is exploring opportunities to improve international coordination regarding border management during this public-health crisis and looking ahead to future emergencies. This report is part of a series of regional case studies that cover Asia and the Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and South America. Each offers in-depth analysis of regional trends and policy developments.

This report traces the story of the pandemic in Europe, from the early lockdowns to the initial efforts to restart some forms of travel. It then reviews the pandemic's impacts on different kinds of migration, with some (e.g., student mobility) recovering quicker than others (e.g., refugee resettlement). It also reviews the impact on labor migrants, with some sectors facing a precipitous drop in demand for them, while others survived the pandemic with fewer losses. Finally, the report describes some of the key policy innovations in Europe and makes recommendations for preparing migration systems to be more sustainable and resilient in the future. It focuses on the EU-27[5] and the United Kingdom but discusses issues facing the region at large where relevant.

2   The COVID-19 Pandemic and Mobility Restrictions in Europe

Europe's internal and external borders began to close in March 2020 after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic. The Schengen mobility regime, which normally allows free movement without border checks, was thrown into disarray. Italy—one of the first countries to be affected by COVID-19—was the first to implement strict lockdown procedures and restrict mobility.[6] Spain, Belgium, and France soon followed suit. Cross-border mobility restrictions became a blunt measure to restrict the spread of the virus, against WHO recommendations and despite doubts that such border controls would be able to contain the virus.[7]

By late March, borders were shutting across Europe. The European Council announced temporary restrictions on nonessential travel to the European Union, effectively closing it to third-country nationals

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3   John Baffes and Peter Nagle, "How to Mitigate the Impact of the War in Ukraine on Commodity Markets," Brookings Institution, July 1, 2022.

4   Jakob Feveile Adolfsen, Friderike Kuik, Eliza Magdalena Lis, and Tobias Schuler, "The Impact of the War in Ukraine on Euro Area Energy Markets," *European Central Bank Economic Bulletin* 4 (2022).

5   The EU-27 countries are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden.

6   Jason Horowitz, "Italy Announces Restrictions over Entire Country in Attempt to Halt Coronavirus," *The New York Times,* updated March 11, 2020.

7   Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, Meghan Benton, and Susan Fratzke, "Coronavirus Is Spreading across Borders, but It Is Not a Migration Problem" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, March 2020).

(TCNs).[8] Internal movement within the Schengen Area also shut down. Member States imposed 32 unilateral border controls on internal movement in March and ultimately imposed COVID-19-related internal border controls 179 times in 2020 and 2021.[9] These border controls varied in severity, from banning all travel or all nonessential travel to imposing border checks, quarantine, and testing requirements. These controls, though similar to those applied in other regions, had particular consequence in Europe because many Europeans were accustomed to moving without visas or border controls in the Schengen Area.

TABLE 1

Border Controls on Travel from Other European Countries Imposed by European Union and European Free Trade Area Member States, March 2020–December 31, 2020

Type of Border Controls	Countries
Border controls on all Member States	Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Slovakia, Spain
Border controls on some Member States	Austria, Czechia, Germany, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland
Few or no formal border controls on Member States	Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden

Notes: Some Member States did not impose or notify the European Commission of formal internal border controls, but they may have imposed specific regional closures and general restrictions on movement within territories, which de facto affected border crossings. Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Ireland, and Romania are not members of the Schengen Area. Greece already had border controls in place with Bulgaria.
Sources: Jean Peyrony, Jean Rubiom, and Raffaele Viaggi, *The Effects of COVID-19-Induced Border Closures on Cross-Border Regions: An Empirical Report Covering the Period March to June 2020* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021); European Commission, "Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control," accessed December 23, 2022.

The pandemic's impact on mobility in Europe was immediate and substantial. Travel restrictions created confusion for cross-border workers and long queues at crossing points. While some Member States coordinated to minimize these disruptions, this was just as often not the case.[10] The European Commission said it would send a letter of concern to Germany in February 2021, for instance, about its tight controls on its southern border, causing traffic jams and supply chain disruptions in neighboring states.[11] The commission also warned Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, and Sweden.[12]

By mid-2020, as the first wave of the pandemic appeared to be easing, the European Commission recommended that Member States lift internal border controls to restore free movement within the European Union and begin planning to lift restrictions on travel from third countries, emphasizing the need for a highly coordinated approach.[13] Though many Member States lifted restrictions on intra-EU travel by

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8   European Council, "Conclusions by the President of the European Council Following the Video Conference with Members of the European Council on COVID-19" (press release, March 17, 2020).

9   European Commission, "Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control," accessed December 23, 2022. Many of these border controls were temporary but were renewed multiple times.

10   Jean Peyrony, Jean Rubio, and Raffaele Viaggi, *The Effects of COVID-19 Induced Border Closures on Cross-Border Regions: An Empirical Report Covering the Period March to June 2020* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021), 6–148.

11   Joshua Posaner and Hanne Cokelaere, "Berlin Bats Away EU Concern over 'Painful' Coronavirus Border Curbs," PoliticoPro, February 15, 2021.

12   Euractiv and Agence France-Presse, "Six EU Countries Warned over Border Restrictions," Euractiv, February 23, 2021.

13   European Council, "COVID-19: Council Adopts a Recommendation to Coordinate Measures Affecting Free Movement" (press release, October 13, 2020).

the end of June 2020, many others continued to restrict travel, and others later reintroduced restrictions.[14] The specific border controls also varied significantly: Member States implemented (and often lifted) different kinds of restrictions and different conditions for entry, which also differed for EU citizens versus TCNs.

The region experimented with several tools to reopen travel:

► **Third country safe list.** In June 2020, the European Council announced a list of third countries considered epidemiologically safe, recommending that Member States lift travel restrictions for residents of these countries.[15] This safe list was updated regularly, beginning with 15 countries, narrowing to just 7 by the beginning of 2021,[16] and expanding again to 14 countries in early 2022.[17] Member States, however, did not always abide by this list. By February 2021, 8 Member States followed the safe list,[18] and 7 followed the safe list while still imposing testing, quarantine requirements, or both.[19] But 3 Member States banned virtually all TCNs,[20] and 4 were open to all TCNs (including those not coming from countries on the safe list) with testing and/or quarantine requirements.[21] By late 2022, most Member States had lifted restrictions on travel from all third countries.

► **Traffic light system**. To enhance coordination among Member States, the European Commission introduced a traffic light system in September 2020 that color-coded EU and European Economic Area Member States, as well as the United Kingdom (during the transition period after its exit from the European Union), based on the severity of the local epidemiological situation.[22] No restrictions were to be placed on travel from low-risk green areas, and restrictions such as predeparture testing and quarantining would be placed on travel from higher-risk orange and red regions. This system was one of the most successful examples of regional coordination over cross-border travel in the first year of the pandemic, but there was some pushback.[23] The traffic light system did not require Member States to apply the same restrictions on orange and red regions,[24] and in fact, several Member States did not follow the system at all. France, for instance, adopted its own system for assessing health risks,[25] while

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14 The extent of these measures is beyond the scope of this report. For a detailed look into the range and extent of measures invoked in 2020, see Eric Neumayer, Thomas Plümper, and Matthew Shaikh, "The Logics of COVID-19 Travel Restrictions between European Countries," *Social Science Quarterly* 102, no. 5 (2021): 2134–54.

15 European Council, "Council Agrees to Start Lifting Travel Restrictions for Residents of Some Third Countries" (press release, June 30, 2020).

16 Schengen Visa, "EU's List of Epidemiologically Safe Countries amid COVID-19," accessed December 23, 2022. New Zealand and South Korea are the only countries that were consistently on the safe list.

17 European Council, "COVID-19: Travel Measures," accessed December 23, 2022.

18 Member States that followed the safe list are Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Finland, Latvia, Poland, and Sweden.

19 Member States that followed the safe list but imposed testing or quarantine requirements are Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania, Portugal, and Spain.

20 Member States that banned all third-country nationals (TCNs) are France, Hungary, and the Netherlands.

21 Member States that were open to all TCNs but with testing or quarantine requirements are Ireland, Malta, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

22 Elena Sánchez Nicolás, "EU Unveils COVID-19 'Colour-Code' Travel Zones," EUobserver, September 7, 2020.

23 Austria and Luxembourg, for example, were concerned about the risk assessment criteria used to formulate the map, differences in testing systems in different Member States, and how each country would implement the recommendations. See Bernd Riegert, "Coronavirus: The EU's New Traffic Light System Explained," Deutsche Welle, October 14, 2020.

24 Matina Stevis-Gridneff, "EU Members to Adopt Travel Guidelines as Coronavirus Spreads," *The New York Times,* October 9, 2020.

25 Meghan Benton, Jeanne Batalova, Samuel Davidoff-Gore, and Timo Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020* (Washington, DC, and Geneva: Migration Policy Institute and International Organization for Migration).

Hungary continued to shut itself off from EU countries except for the politically and culturally aligned countries of the Visegrad Group (Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, in addition to Hungary).[26] In early 2022, the European Council agreed to use the traffic light map for advisory purposes but to allow all travelers with proof of vaccination, recovery from prior infection, or a negative test to travel within the European Union.[27]

► **Testing and quarantine.** As accurate and cheap COVID-19 tests became available, Member States began relying on isolation and testing to facilitate mobility while managing public-health risks. Member States differed widely on how they implemented testing and quarantining requirements.[28] Some required isolation for TCNs but not EU travelers, and some accepted certain kinds of tests but not others.[29] Member States also continued to change and reintroduce testing requirements. In response to the Omicron variant's emergence in December 2021, for instance, Portugal[30] and Norway[31] introduced testing requirements for all travelers, while France and the Netherlands imposed testing requirements for TCNs.[32] European countries largely dropped these measures in 2022, but as China reopened in late 2022, Italy, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden reintroduced either testing or vaccination requirements, against advice from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.[33]

► **Exemptions from travel restrictions.** EU Member States, though quick to close their borders, also recognized the need to allow entry to certain groups of workers—including those in health care, other care sectors, transport, and food and agriculture—to maintain key sectors in domestic economies.[34] Some Member States identified additional essential sectors for exemptions, including energy supply, construction, and manufacturing.[35] Again, the disconnect between EU and Member State policy was evident, with some Member States (Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Greece, Latvia, and Slovenia) adopting European Commission-issued guidelines on which sectors should be exempt and most others adopting their own rules according to national needs.[36] Cross-border commuters and those living in border regions also received exemptions, for instance, between border regions in France and Switzerland.[37]

26 Shkurta Januzi, "Hungary Amends Travel Restrictions for V4 Countries," Schengen Visa, October 7, 2020.

27 European Commission, "A Common Approach to Travel Measures in the EU," accessed January 25, 2022.

28 For a more detailed outline of the complexity of Member State testing and isolation regimes at the end of 2020, see European Migration Network (EMN) and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "The Impact of COVID-19 in the Migration Area in EU and OECD Countries" (EMN OECD Umbrella Inform, April 2021).

29 By the end of 2020, for instance, most Member States (including Czechia, Estonia, Germany, and Hungary) accepted only polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, while Cyprus, France, and Italy accepted other kinds. Moreover, France required arrivals to self-isolate for seven days and then test again, while Ireland advised 14-day isolation but allowed shortening the period with a negative PCR test taken after five days. Latvia allowed entry without a test, but travelers from high-risk countries had to self-isolate for ten days while checking their temperature twice a day.

30 Shkurta Januzi, "Portugal Announces New COVID-19 Measures—Imposes Testing Rules Even for Vaccinated Travellers," Schengen Visa, November 26, 2021.

31 Shkurta Januzi, "Norway Introduces Mandatory Testing Requirement for All Travellers," Schengen Visa, December 3, 2021.

32 Shkurta Januzi, "Netherlands Imposes Testing Requirement for Third-Country Travellers Starting from Tomorrow, December 22," Schengen Visa, December 21, 2021.

33 EuroNews Travel and Reuters, "China Resumes International Travel: Which Countries Are Introducing New COVID Restrictions?" EuroNews Travel, updated January 9, 2023.

34 European Commission, "Guidelines Concerning the Exercise of the Free Movement of Workers during COVID-19 Outbreak," *Official Journal of the European Union* (C 102 I/03, March 30, 2020).

35 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2021* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021).

36 EMN and OECD, "Maintaining Labour Migration in Essential Sectors in Times of Pandemic" (EMN OECD Inform 3, October 21, 2020).

37 Swiss Federal Council, "Coronavirus: No Quarantine for Persons Entering from Border Regions" (press release, September 11, 2020).

BOX 1
Main Sectors Granted Travel Exemptions

Exemptions from travel restrictions were generally granted to sectors essential to the functioning of economies and the pandemic response. Seasonal agricultural work was the first sector granted exemption because EU governments recognized the crippling impact the pandemic could have on harvests and food supply. Countries such as Germany, Italy, and Spain, which rely on seasonal agricultural labor, quickly adopted measures to mitigate the impact of border closures. Germany and the United Kingdom arranged for Eastern European workers to be flown into the country to work on the harvest, while Italy and Spain pursued regularization programs for third-country nationals already within their territories (see Section 4 of this report).

Health care was another heavily affected sector. Needing to maintain health systems, Member States prioritized visa processing for medical professionals, granted temporary recognition of foreign qualifications and training, and in some cases eliminated visa requirements for medical workers altogether. By March 2020, the United Kingdom automatically extended visas for doctors, nurses, and paramedics if they were set to expire before October 2020.

Finally, accommodations were granted to frontier workers (those who live in one country and work in another). Austria, which relies on Hungarian workers particularly in the health-care sector, allowed people to commute across the border. Denmark and Sweden made accommodations for the tax statuses of cross-border workers who began teleworking. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania created a travel bubble permitting movement between their territories, though the bubble collapsed as cases increased in September 2020.

Sources: Elena Sánchez Nicolás, "Coronavirus Threat to EU Farm Seasonal Workers," EUobserver, March 26, 2020; Letizia Palumbo and Alessandra Corrado, eds., *COVID-19, Agri-food Systems, and Migrant Labour: The Situation in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden* (N.p.: Open Society Foundation and European Policy Institute, 2020); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *International Migration Outlook 2021* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021); Peyrony, Rubio, and Viaggi, *The Effects of COVID-19-Induced Border Closures*; BBC, "Coronavirus: Baltic States Open a Pandemic 'Travel Bubble,'" BBC News, May 15, 2020; Reuters, "First European 'Travel Bubble' Ends as Coronavirus Cases Rise in Estonia," Reuters, September 11, 2020.

The pandemic's shutdown of migration flows, combined with many TCNs leaving Europe for their home countries in early 2020, raised key questions about Europe's reliance on migrant workers and the resilience of European economies. Efforts to restart cross-border mobility, especially for certain essential workers, reflected the importance of migrants to European economies and societies. Such measures were essential in the first years of the pandemic, before travel had recovered substantively. However, as the following section explains, the pandemic's drastic disruption often overrode these efforts.

3   Labor and Other Forms of Regular Migration

The pandemic had significant consequences for migration flows, with some countries and types of migration recovering much quicker than others. Countries issued more than 700,000 fewer first residence permits (covering all types of permits for TCNs) in 2020 than in 2019, a decline of about 24 percent (see Figure 1). However, the numbers recovered markedly in 2021, effectively reaching pre-pandemic levels—and work permits climbed to their highest number in years. Nonetheless, this recovery has been

geographically uneven. Permits issued in Germany remained 60 percent down in 2021 from pre-pandemic levels. By contrast, levels in France and the Netherlands returned almost exactly to 2019 levels, while Spain's increased by 16 percent and Italy's by 56 percent. The decline in regular mobility was dramatic, but shortlived.

FIGURE 1

Residence Permits Issued by Reason in the EU-27, 2015–22
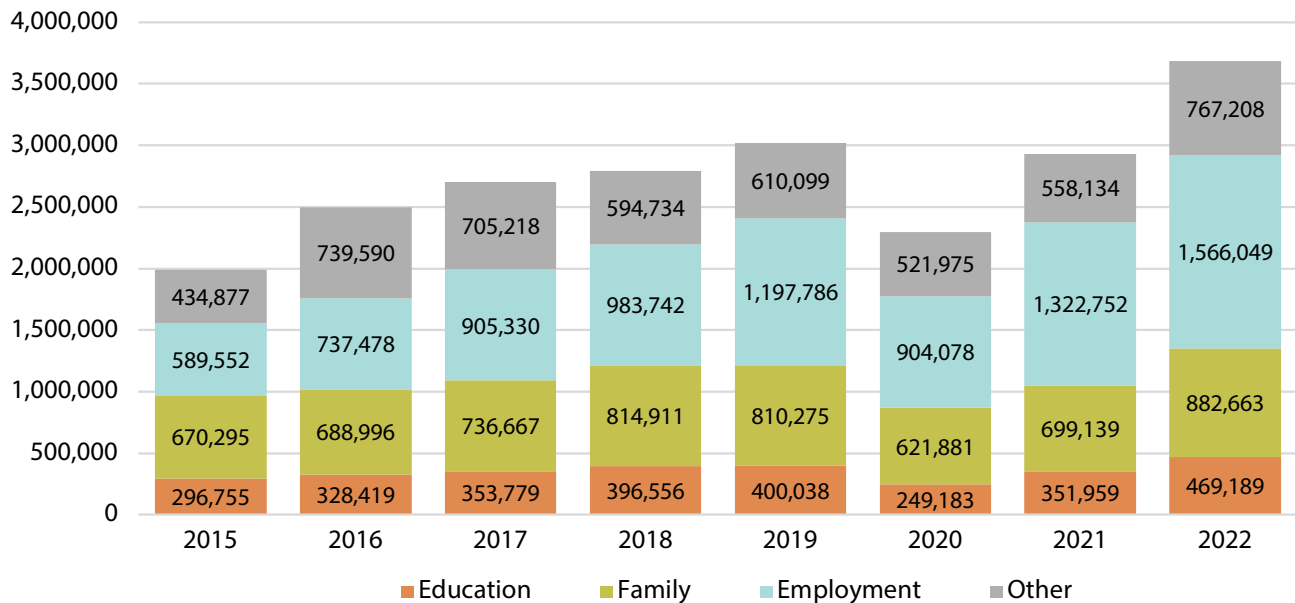
Notes: Figures for 2022 inlude estimates from Croatia and Poland based on 2021 figures. "Other" reasons include international protection (excluding people fleeing Ukraine), residence without the right to work (e.g., pensioners), and various other reasons within each Member State's administrative system.
Source: Eurostat, "Residence Permits—Statistics on First Permits Issued during the Year," updated August 4, 2023.

Labor migration in Europe, the largest type of regular migration, declined considerably during the pandemic. Most Member States issued fewer work permits to TCNs in 2020, with nine issuing more than 40 percent less than in 2019. Germany had the steepest decline (nearly 80 percent), followed by Czechia, Slovenia, and Greece. Just two countries, Lithuania and Spain, issued more work permits, with Spain's increasing by more than 25 percent, which could partially be explained by the country's decision to issue additional work permits to cover agricultural shortfalls.[38] Poland, though registering a nearly 20 percent decline, still issued more than half of all first work permits in the European Union (almost 500,000 permits in 2020), mostly for Ukrainian workers under a bilateral arrangement that simplified visa processes.

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38   Agroberichten Buitenland, "Spain Approves Hiring 80,000 Unemployed and Immigrants to Cover Farm Shortfall" (news release, April 8, 2020).

Change in Number of Labor Permits Issued to Third-Country Nationals in 2020 and 2021, Compared with 2019 Levels
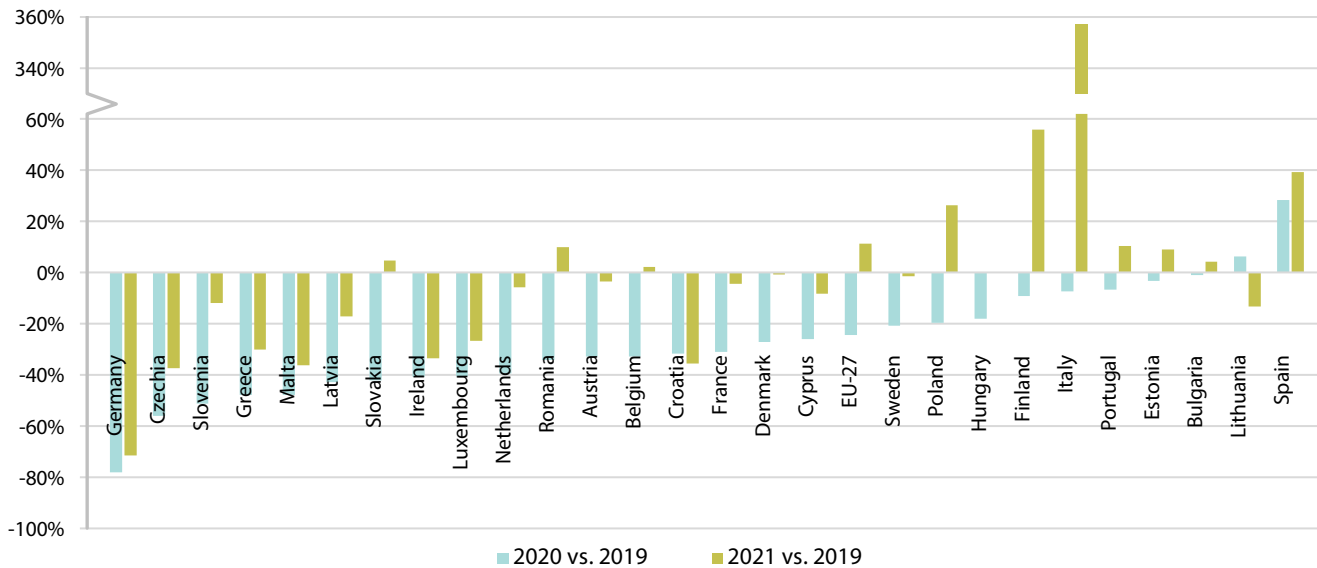
Notes: The EU-27 average is shown in this figure for comparison.
Source: Eurostat, "First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity, and Citizenship [migr_resfirst]," accessed February 10, 2023.

By 2021, work permits issued in the EU-27 overall had recovered, exceeding 2019 levels by 11 percent. But the quick recovery was largely due to the disproportionate resilience of labor recruitment in Poland, which issued the most work permits in 2021. Besides Poland, Spain issued 40 percent more labor permits, while permits in Italy increased more than fourfold. Both these outlying examples are likely explained by programs implemented to grant irregular migrant workers temporary work permits.[39] However, three of the countries that issued the most work permits in 2019 had yet to recover in 2021 (Croatia, Czechia, and Germany).[40] Overall, despite considerable drops in the first year of the pandemic, foreign labor migration had broadly recovered by 2021, with a few notable exceptions.

Labor migration to the United Kingdom was affected both by the pandemic and the country's departure from the European Union in January 2020, which resulted in a stop to freedom of movement for EU citizens to the United Kingdom and for UK citizens to the remaining EU countries at the end of year. The combined impact of these events led to a steep decline in applications for work permits from EU citizens and non-EU foreign workers in 2020. However, labor migration appears to have recovered in 2021, with almost 240,000

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39   Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, "Italy: The 2020 Regularisation Scheme Leaves Many Behind," updated December 14, 2021; Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA) and InfoMigrants, "Migrants in Spain: 15,000 Youths to Benefit from Stay Permit Reform," InfoMigrants, October 21, 2021.

40   After Poland, countries that issued the most permits for employment in 2019 (in descending order) were Czechia, Germany, Spain, and Croatia. First residence permits for employment do not necessarily represent the number of visas issued to labor migrants. In Germany, for example, the numbers of visas issued under the German Skilled Workers Immigration Act may have been higher because many of these workers were not entering under their first permits (for example, they were already in Germany on training or education visas). See Shkurta Januzi, "Germany Has Issued over 60,000 Visas for Skilled Workers in 2021," Schengen Visa, February 7, 2022.

work-related visas granted in 2021 (25 percent higher than 2019).[41] Labor migration from non-EU countries recovered strongly in 2021, but labor migration from EU countries was low in the first year after the end of free movement.[42]

Labor migration had largely recovered from the pandemic by 2022. Shifts in mobility patterns that year were shaped more fundamentally by the arrival of Ukrainians following Russia's invasion in February 2022. Some 5 million Ukrainians were displaced across Europe by August 2023—a massive inflow of potential workers, even though some later returned to Ukraine.[43] The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimated that this inflow could increase the

Shifts in mobility patterns that year were shaped more fundamentally by the arrival of Ukrainians following Russia's invasion in February 2022.

labor force in Europe by about 0.5 percent, depending on the length of the war and how many people choose to stay in their host countries, with the primary receiving countries being Czechia, Poland, and Estonia.[44] Ukrainian refugees have had the right to work in most cases, after the European Union adopted the Temporary Protection Directive in March 2022, and they generally have high levels of education.[45] But their skills have not always matched up neatly to local labor market needs, and because they are primarily women and children, widespread difficulties accessing child care have kept many from working.[46] Nonetheless, this large-scale inflow was an important force shaping European labor markets in 2022 and holds the potential to continue to do so.

Unlike labor migration, some other types of migration did not fully rebound to pre-pandemic levels by 2021. These include:

► **International students.** Student mobility dropped severely but recovered somewhat in 2021. First residence permits granted for educational reasons dropped 38 percent in 2020 compared to 2019 (a larger percentage decrease than employment or family permits).[47] Poland was the only EU country with an appreciable increase in student visas in 2020, driven by students from neighboring Ukraine and Belarus.[48] By 2021, when many travel restrictions had eased, most countries reported that student visa applications and processing had increased, given the widespread return to in-class teaching.[49] The number of permits issued for education in the European Union neared pre-pandemic levels, but did

41   UK Home Office, "National Statistics: Summary of Latest Statistics," updated March 3, 2022.

42   Madeleine Sumption and Zachary Strain-Fajth, "Work Visas and Migrant Workers in the UK" (Briefing, University of Oxford, Migration Observatory, August 3, 2022).

43   UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal—Ukraine Refugee Situation"; Vasco Botelho and Hannah Hägele, "Integrating Ukrainian Refugees into the Euro Area Labour Market," European Central Bank, March 1, 2023.

44   OECD, "The Potential Contribution of Ukrainian Refugees to the Labour Force in European Host Countries" (OECD Policy Response, OECD Publishing, Paris, July 27, 2022).

45   OECD, "The Potential Contribution of Ukrainian Refugees."

46   Maria Vincenza Desiderio and Kate Hooper, *Displaced Ukrainians in European Labor Markets: Leveraging Innovations for More Inclusive Integration* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2023).

47   Eurostat, "First Permits by Reason, Length of Validity, and Citizenship [migr_resfirst]," accessed August 10, 2023.

48   Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange, "Ever More Foreign Students at Polish Universities," updated November 17, 2020. Instead, some Member States worked to retain existing international student populations, by allowing students to defer or extend visas or continue studies online from abroad. See EMN and OECD, "The Impact of COVID-19 in the Migration Area."

49   Florin Zubaşcu, "After Long Months of Disruption, Universities Get Ready to Start 'Normal' Academic Year," Science Business, August 31, 2021.

not quite reach them. Unlike in EU countries, student visa issuance in the United Kingdom rebounded to a record high of 428,000 in 2021, after dropping from 276,000 in 2019 to 176,000 in 2020.[50] Mirroring the trend for labor migration to the country, this increase was due to students from outside the European Union (primarily China, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan) instead of an increase in EU students requiring visas post-Brexit. The massive increase in 2021 may be explained partly by tight border closures in other common destinations for international students (such as Australia and New Zealand) and by the United Kingdom's new Graduate visa in 2021, which allows graduate students to remain in the country for two years after graduation to find work.

▶ **Family reunification.** Visa office closures affected family reunification visas, historically a major avenue for TCN immigration to EU countries.[51] Some governments resumed consular visa services for family reunification earlier than others,[52] but these processes were generally deprioritized over other kinds of migration. Family-related residence permits issued in the European Union declined about 23 percent in 2020. Just four countries (France, Germany, Italy, and Spain) accounted for almost two-thirds of all family-related permits, and about one-third of all family-related permits issued were to children under age 15.[53] Germany continued to grant far fewer family visas than before the pandemic, not reaching even half of the quota for 2021,[54] and across Europe, first residence permits for family purposes did not fully recover that year.

▶ **Resettlement.** Refugee resettlement had yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels by 2021. On March 17, 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration announced a temporary suspension of refugee resettlement programs, but both restarted operations a few months later.[55] Refugee resettlements to Europe dropped nearly 40 percent in 2020 and remained 28 percent below 2019 levels in 2021.[56] However, Europe still made up 55 percent of resettlement submissions in 2020 (up from 41 percent in 2019) because resettlement in other countries (e.g., Australia) had shut down even more dramatically. EU Member States and institutions have made ambitious pledges to step up resettlements, including additional funding to resettle Afghan refugees.[57] At the same time, protection needs around the world have grown because of continuing and emergent conflicts and conditions exacerbated by the pandemic.[58]

50   UK Home Office, "National Statistics: Why Do People Come to the UK? To Study," updated November 25, 2021.

51   European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, "Report from the Commission to the Parliament and the Council on the Implementation of Directive 2003/86/EC on the Right to Family Reunification" (COM [2019] 165 final, March 29, 2019).

52   Sarah Burns, "Visa Rules Relaxed to Allow for Some Family Reunions and Additional Workers," *The Irish Times,* May 20, 2021.

53   Eurostat, "First Permits by Reason, Age, Sex, and Citizenship [migr_resfas]," accessed August 10, 2023.

54   Benjamin Bathke, "Family Reunions in Germany in 2021 Again Fall Short of Maximum Quota," InfoMigrants, January 7, 2022.

55   UNHCR, "IOM, UNHCR Announce Temporary Suspension of Resettlement Travel for Refugees" (press release, March 17, 2020).

56   UNHCR, *Global Report 2019* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2020); UNHCR, *Global Report 2020* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2021); UNHCR, *Global Report 2021* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2022).

57   Al Jazeera, "EU Countries Agree to Take in 40,000 Afghan Refugees," Al Jazeera, December 9, 2021.

58   UNHCR, *Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2021* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2021).

4 Irregular Migration, Asylum, and Return

The pandemic had a much more short-lived impact on the movement of irregular migrants and asylum seekers to European countries, which recovered more quickly than regular forms of migration such as labor migration. By contrast, the ability of European states to return irregular migrants to their countries of origin was curtailed drastically during the pandemic, because of resistance from partner countries and the pandemic's impacts on travel, such as a lack of flights or the introduction of testing requirements.

In the years following the onset of the pandemic, the overall volume and routes of irregular migration to Europe changed dramatically. In 2020, irregular arrivals to the European Union were the lowest since 2013, due to a sudden and massive drop in arrivals in the first half of the year.[59] But irregular arrivals had rebounded by late 2020, and they exceeded pre-pandemic levels by 50 percent in 2021.

The most used irregular migration routes also changed (see Figure 3). Traffic along the Eastern Mediterranean route (from Turkey to Greece) decreased more than 75 percent from 2019 to 2020, while traffic along the more dangerous Central Mediterranean route (North Africa to Italy) more than doubled.The pandemic and related changes in the border policies of Greece and neighboring countries contributed to this shift, though other factors played a role as well (including increased patrolling of Turkey-Greece border crossing points in the years after the 2016 EU-Turkey deal and increased instability in African countries of origin). Since 2019, Greece has increasingly engaged in pushbacks of irregular migrants back to Turkey (see Box 2), and while the government denies these accusations, it has justified its approach as a response to the pandemic.[60] These combined border restrictions caused irregular arrivals in Greece to decline precipitously,[61] leading to a rise in arrivals from other more dangerous routes, such as the Central Mediterranean route and the so-called Calabrian route, wherein migrants attempt to reach Italy from Turkey, bypassing safer, shorter routes to the Greek mainland. This shift toward the Central Mediterranean route was only amplified as irregular migration increased in mid-2022.

These combined border restrictions caused irregular arrivals in Greece to decline precipitously, leading to a rise in arrivals from other more dangerous routes.

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59   Frontex, "Irregular Migration into EU Last Year Lowest since 2013 Due to COVID-19" (news release, January 8, 2021).
60   European Council on Refugees and Exiles, "Greece: 10,000 People Prevented Access, Lockdown Extended, Recognition Rate Increases," ECRE Weekly Bulletin, September 4, 2020.
61   UNHCR, "Operational Data Portal – Greece," accessed August 10, 2023. Greek border restrictions likely combined with other factors such as increased violence and economic crises in sections of North and sub-Saharan Africa to cause this increase. See Irene Schöfberger and Marzia Rango, *COVID-19 and Migration in West and North Africa and across the Mediterranean* (Grand-Saconnex, Switzerland: International Organization for Migration, 2021).

FIGURE 3
Irregular Arrivals in Europe, by Mediterranean Route, 2019 through the First Quarter of 2023
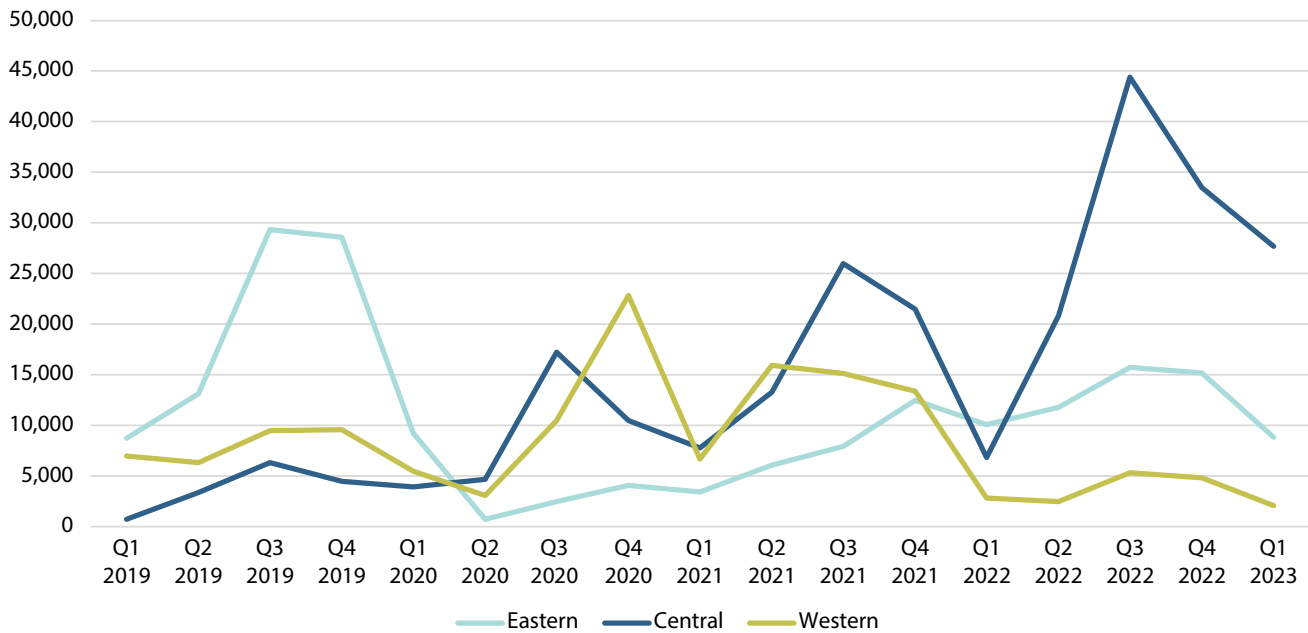
Source: Author analysis of data reports from International Organization for Migration, "Europe—Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Overviews," accessed August 10, 2023.

The resurgence in crossings over the Central Mediterranean route led to an increase in maritime deaths. At least 2,048 people perished while attempting to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe in 2021, a 41 percent increase from 2020.[62] Of these, three-quarters were recorded on the Central Mediterranean route. At the same time, the Western African route accounted for 384 deaths in 2021, as people attempted to reach Spain's Canary Islands from West Africa.[63] These numbers continued to grow the following year and may underrepresent the true number of deaths because many are unrecorded.

Asylum applications were also highly resilient against the impact of the pandemic. Despite a sharp drop in March and April 2020, asylum applications rebounded rapidly in June. Applications reached a relatively stable level by July 2020 before increasing to pre-pandemic levels by September 2021 (see Figure 4). In the first months of the pandemic, 17 European countries suspended some asylum procedures, such as personal interviews or even asylum hearings,[64] but these processes restarted by mid-2020, albeit often slowly as authorities adjusted to social distancing, telework, and other pandemic measures.[65] Germany remains the largest destination for asylum seekers in Europe, followed by Spain and France. As in previous years, people from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq made up notable shares of asylum seekers in this period, and the number of Afghans grew in late 2021 after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

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62 The number of migrants recorded as missing was also higher in 2022 (2,411 missing as of December 6). See International Organization for Migration, "Migration within the Mediterranean," accessed December 9, 2022.
63 International Organization for Migration, "Missing Migrants Project – Migration within the Mediterranean," accessed August 10, 2023.
64 EMN and OECD, "The Impact of COVID-19 in the Migration Area."
65 Hanne Beirens, *Rebooting the Asylum System? The Role of Digital Tools in International Protection* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

FIGURE 4
First-Time Asylum Applications in the European Union, 2020–February 2023
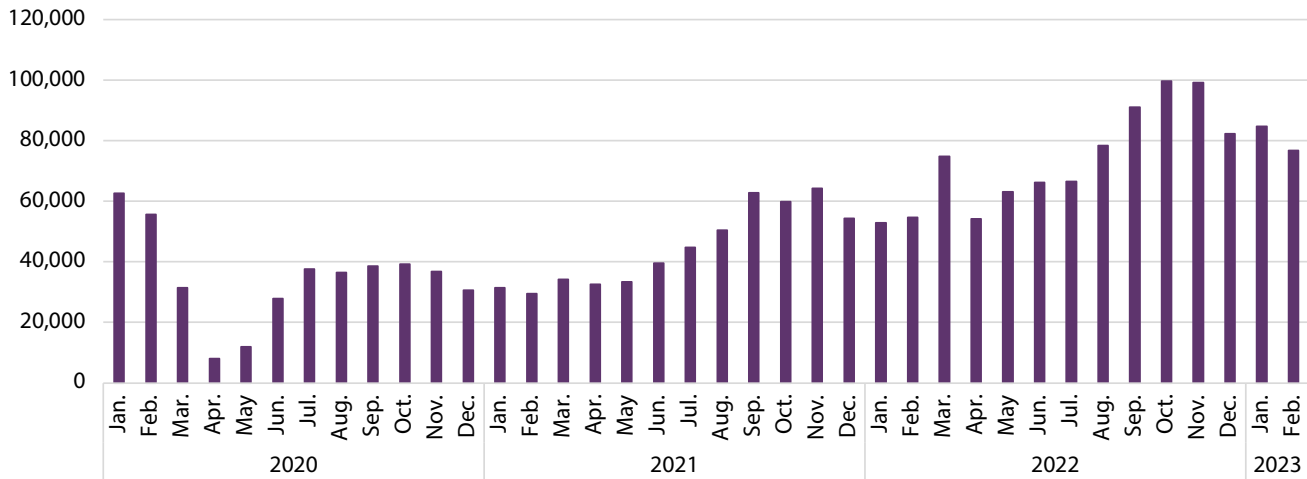
Source: Eurostat, "Asylum Applicants by Type of Applicant, Citizenship, Age, and Sex—Monthly Data [migr_asyappctzm]," updated August 10 2023.

By contrast, the pandemic dramatically curbed European states' ability to return migrants denied asylum or other humanitarian protections to their countries of origin. In 2020, the number of return decisions European governments issued increased, but the number of people who were actually returned was cut in half.[66] Travel restrictions and the lack of available flights caused a steep decline in both forced and voluntary returns at the beginning of the pandemic. Even though governments worked to resume returns once flights restarted in mid-2020, not all countries of origin were immediately willing to cooperate to facilitate returns.[67] In 2021, the number of return decisions continued to grow, but there was only a small recovery in the number of returns carried out.[68] This pattern continued in 2022. Despite some progress made on coordinating returns, persistent challenges to implementing return programs with external partners and other administrative issues saw less than one-quarter of return decisions followed by an actual return.[69]

Returns to all regions declined significantly, but the scale of the impacts varied by migrants' region of origin. The number of return decisions involving migrants from different parts of Africa, in particular Algeria and Tunisia, increased substantially, while decisions involving migrants from Eastern Europe dropped. Eastern and North African countries such as Algeria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Morrocco also saw a steep drop in the number of people returned.

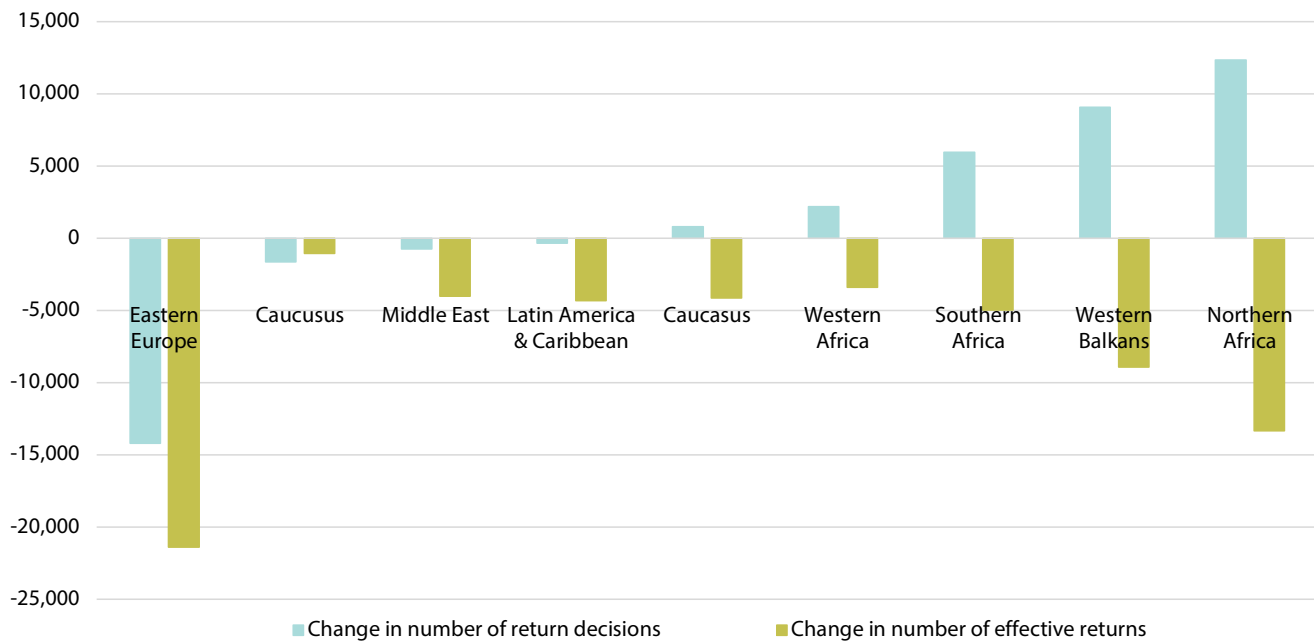66   Frontex, *Risk Analysis for 2021* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2021).
67   Camille Le Coz and Kathleen Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration after the COVID-19 Shock* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).
68   Frontex, *Risk Analysis for 2022/2023* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2022).
69   European Parliament, "Repatriation: How Many Migrants in the EU Are Sent Back?," European Parliament News, August 8, 2023.

FIGURE 5
Change in Number of Return Decisions and Number of Effective Returns, by Migrant Region of Origin, 2019 versus 2020

Note: One person can receive multiple return decisions, so the number of return decisions does not necessarily represent the number of unique individuals with return decisions.
Source: Frontex, *Risk Analysis for 2021* (Warsaw: Frontex, 2021).

The pandemic affected all forms of migration to Europe, but certain policy approaches shaped the nature and extent of these impacts. Labor migration recovered quicker than other regular forms of movement, although countries with stricter border controls, such as Germany, had larger declines in the number of new workers than other European countries. Family reunification, which received little policy attention compared with more "essential" forms of migration, plummeted and did not rebound as quickly or substantially. Stricter border policies on Europe's southern borders, while they did not decrease irregular migrant arrivals substantially, did alter their trajectory. But the pandemic's impact on migrant returns and refugee resettlement proved more enduring, despite policy efforts to restart them. These divergent impacts underline the importance of effective migration policymaking in times of uncertainty and imply that better preparation could have lessened the pandemic's devastating effects. Indeed, one particularly significant pandemic-era challenge was managing labor migrants and labor markets.

BOX 2
Pushbacks as De Facto Policy during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

A controversial development during the pandemic was the reported increase in pushbacks against irregular migrants attempting to enter EU territory. Though a broad term, "pushback" typically refers to denying asylum seekers access to territory or summarily expelling them back to the country from which they crossed. Such practices typically violate international and EU human rights law.

Human rights groups and other organizations reported a significant increase in pushbacks during the pandemic, particularly in the Aegean Sea between Greece and Turkey as well as along the Balkans route. Some human rights groups and nongovernmental organizations argue that authorities used pandemic-era health measures as an excuse to step up pushbacks and other summary expulsions.

Evidence suggests that at least one pushback across the Mediterranean occurred on the pretext of public-health measures. In April 2020, the Maltese government deployed a private fishing vessel to intercept a boat that was in distress in the Maltese search and rescue zone and carrying about 52 people. Italian and Maltese authorities refused to allow the boat to dock and then disembark on their territory, and the people onboard were taken to Libya by the fishing vessel. In a case brought against the Maltese government by a Maltese lawyer representing the boat's passengers, Maltese Prime Minister Robert Abela cited Malta's blanket closure of ports for public-health concerns as the reason for instructing the private fishing boat to intervene, while denying this constituted a pushback.

Although many such reports remain to be fully investigated, they suggest that European governments at times used public-health policies to pursue immigration policy goals. The issue highlights the need to pay attention to how public-health, migration, and human rights policies intersect, particularly in times of crisis, and to be aware of the intended or unintended consequences of using border measures for public-health objectives.

Sources: "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union—Part Three: Union Policies and Internal Actions—Title V: Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice—Chapter 2: Policies on Border Checks, Asylum, and Immigration—Article 78," *Official Journal of the European Union* (C 115, May 9, 2008); Henrique Valadares, "UN, Rights Groups Accuse Greece of Using Pandemic to 'Step Up' Migration Restrictions," France24, August 23, 2020; EuroMed Rights, "World Refugee Day 2021: 20 Years Later, Pushbacks Everywhere," EuroMed Rights, June 18, 2021; Emma Musty, *Pushbacks, Homelessness, and Human Rights Abuses: Greece during Covid-19* (Greece: Europe Must Act, Forge for Humanity, Khora, Refugee Rights Europe, Syrian and Greek Youth Forum, 2021); Edwina Brincat and Bertrand Borg, "'We Could Have Done Nothing': PM Testifies in Easter Sunday Migrant Return Case," *Times of Malta*, September 29, 2021; Eric Reidy, "The COVID-19 Excuse? How Migration Policies Are Hardening Around the Globe," The New Humanitarian, April 17, 2020; Joel Hernàndez, "Greece Struggles to Balance Competing Migration Demands," *Migration Information Source*, September 25, 2020.

5   Pandemic Impacts on Labor Markets and Migrant Workers

The pandemic, aside from interrupting flows of new labor migrants, also affected employment and labor conditions for migrants already in Europe. Migrant workers were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic's socioeconomic impacts because they tend to work in low-wage service sectors and are at times excluded from social safety nets. Across the European Union, the gap between native and migrant unemployment increased in 2020.[70] This effect was higher in countries such as Spain and Sweden, where migrants typically hold more short-term contracts with less job security, while the impact on migrant workers' unemployment relative to native-born workers' was smaller in countries with more comprehensive job retention programs such as Czechia, Denmark, France, and Switzerland.[71] Migrant employment rates began to recover in late 2020, but it took until the third quarter of 2021 for migrant employment rates to grow beyond pre-pandemic levels.[72]

The socioeconomic consequences of this disruption were more severe for migrants in certain sectors devastated by the pandemic. Migrants in typically higher-skilled professions that were less affected by the pandemic (such as communications, technology, professional services, infrastructure management, and public administration) tended to retain their jobs at a rate higher than migrant workers overall. And in many sectors that grew during the pandemic, migrant employment actually grew more than native-born employment. By contrast, migrants in more contact-oriented and manual work such as retail, construction, hospitality, and domestic work lost their jobs at a rate far higher than native-born workers in the same sector (see Table 2).

Migrant workers were particularly vulnerable to the pandemic's socioeconomic impacts because they tend to work in low-wage service sectors and are at times excluded from social safety nets.

70   OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2021*.
71   OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2021*.
72   Eurostat, "Employment Rates by Sex, Age, and Country of Birth (%)," accessed August 4, 2023.

TABLE 2
Change in the Native- and Foreign-Born Population in Employment in the EU-27, by Sector, 2019–20

Sector	Native Born	Foreign Born
Accommodation and food services	−12.8%	−16.2%
Households as employers*	−9.6%	−15.2%
Administrative and support services	−9.4%	−11.3%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	−5.0%	−8.9%
Transportation and storage	−4.3%	−8.7%
Wholesale and retail trade	−3.9%	−4.8%
Construction	−3.9%	−9.9%
Human health and social work	−1.7%	−3.0%
Manufacturing	−0.8%	−2.3%
Water supply, sewerage, and waste	−0.8%	−1.3%
Professional and scientific activities	−0.1%	9.3%
Mining and quarrying	0.7%	25.7%
Education	1.0%	1.1%
Financial and insurance activities	2.0%	4.7%
Public administration and defense	3.4%	12.2%
Electricity, gas, steam, and air	6.5%	15.3%
Real estate activities	7.1%	18.7%
Other service activities	7.4%	12.4%
Information and communication	8.7%	16.8%
Total	**−1.5%**	**−4.2%**

* This category includes domestic workers such as maids, butlers, cooks, private secretaries, and gardeners.
Source: OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2021*.

## A.   *Third-Country National Workforce*

The number of TCNs in the labor force (those people in or actively seeking work) remained relatively stable throughout the pandemic. Pandemic-era border measures and travel requirements severely constrained new labor migrants' entry into European countries, but they had much less impact on the size of the migrant workforce already in Europe. Although new work permits declined considerably, the volume of the pre-existing foreign workforce in Europe is considerably larger than the number of new TCNs arriving each year. Overall, the size of the TCN workforce in the European Union stayed virtually the same in 2020, largely because the countries with the largest foreign workforces registered very modest declines, if not slight increases.[73] In 2020, the number of TCNs in the labor force actually grew in 16 of the 25 countries with available data (see Figure 6).

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73   Of the four EU countries with the most TCN workers in 2019 (Germany, Spain, Italy, and France), only Italy had a decline in the number of TCN workers in the labor force in 2020 (see Figure 6).

Still, the size of the TCN workforce did drop significantly in some EU countries in both 2020 and 2021. For example, despite only a modest decline in new work permits issued to foreigners, the size of the TCN workforce in Portugal dropped slightly in 2020 before plummeting in 2021 and then partially recovering in 2022.[74] This could be partially attributed to the pandemic's great toll on migrant-heavy sectors such as tourism and manufacturing,[75] which took some time to affect employment opportunities for migrant workers. Nonetheless, European governments were able to retain their TCN workforces at relatively high levels, even as the number of new permits issued to TCNs dropped throughout the pandemic, indicating that efforts to extend visas and include migrants in social protection programs were successful.

FIGURE 6

Change in the Size of the Third-Country National Workforce in European Labor Markets, 2020–22 Compared with 2019 Levels
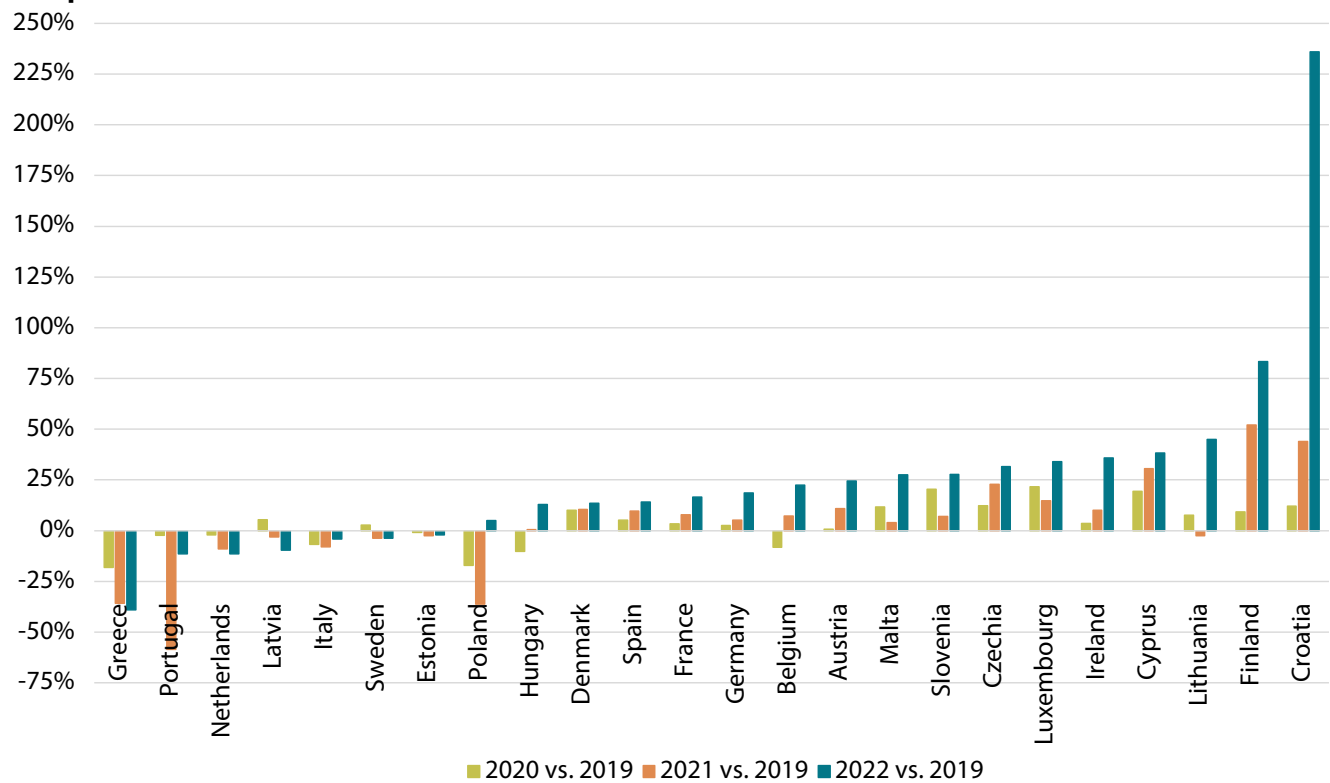
Source: Eurostat, "Population by Sex, Age, Citizenship, and Labour Status [lfsa_pganws]," updated April 27, 2023.

B.   *Intra-EU Workforce*

The number of EU labor migrants in another EU country (the intra-EU workforce) dropped more significantly and for longer than was the case for the TCN workforce. The size of the intra-EU workforce dropped by 4 percent in 2020, while the size of the TCN workforce remained stable (even as the number of first residence permits for new TCNs dropped more than the 24 percent). The size of the intra-EU workforce declined in the

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74   By 2021, the number of TCN workers in Portugal was 59 percent below 2019 levels (see Figure 6).

75   Vânia Duarte, "The Portuguese Labour Market in Times of the Pandemic," CaixaBank Research, September 8, 2020.

four countries with the most intra-EU workers (Germany, Spain, Italy, and France) but increased by 1 percent in the fifth (Austria). In Germany (by far the largest host of both groups of migrant workers), the size of the intra-EU workforce decreased by 7 percent, compared with a 3 percent increase in the TCN workforce.

The bigger drop in the intra-EU workforce compared with TCN workforce could be at least partially explained by the sizeable number of Eastern Europeans who returned from Western Europe to their countries of origin during the pandemic,[76] as countries such as Spain and France are traditional destinations for Eastern Europeans and especially Romanians.[77] However, from 2019 to 2021, there was considerable growth in the intra-EU workforce in many Eastern European economies, such as Czechia and Slovakia, although they host far fewer intra-EU workers than Western European countries. Coupled with observations of mass return migration to other Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, this suggests that the pandemic may have sped up a process of return West-East migration already observed in Europe as economies and wages converge between the western and eastern parts of the bloc.[78] In addition, EU Member States imposed tighter COVID-19 restrictions on travel into Europe than on travel between European countries, which may have led more intra-EU workers than TCNs to consider returning home partly because it would be easier for them to re-migrate once the initial crisis wore off.

FIGURE 7

Change in Number of Intra-EU Workers in European Labor Markets, 2020–22 Compared with 2019 Levels
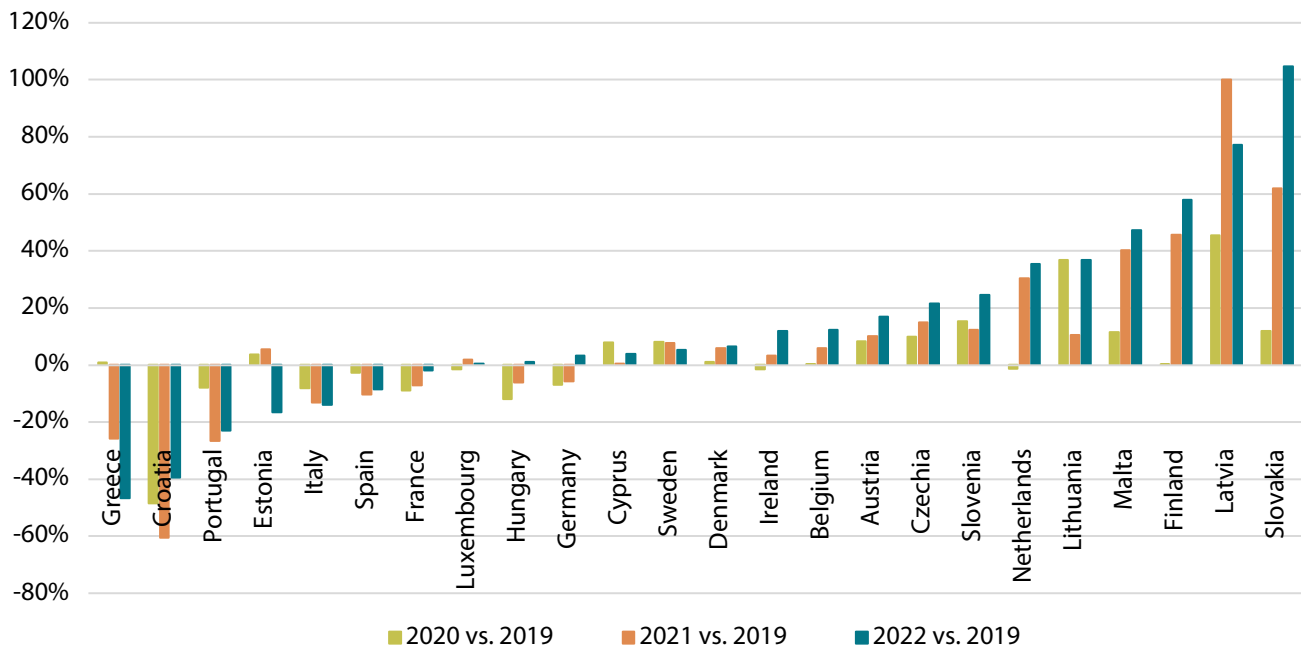
Note: Intra-EU workers are those with citizenship in another EU-27 country.
Source: Eurostat, "Population by Sex, Age, Citizenship, and Labour Status."

76   APAT/FORSAL, "Coronavirus Has Flipped Mass Migration around for Eastern Europe as Millions Return Home," Remix News, May 14, 2020.
77   European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion and ICF International, *Study on the Movement of Skilled Labour: Final Report* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).
78   *The Economist*, "How the Pandemic Reversed Old Migration Patterns in Europe," *The Economist*, January 28, 2021.

C.   The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom, since leaving the European Union in 2020, has collected workforce participation and population statistics differently to the European Union, making direct comparisons of overall workforce changes difficult in this period. However, what is clear is that in the United Kingdom, the share of non-EU migrant workers increased throughout the pandemic,[79] while the share of EU workers dropped slightly because of both the pandemic and Brexit. In that sense, the trends in Britain largely followed those in Europe, despite the country's exit from the European Union and the associated end of free movement in December 2020. The size of the non-EU workforce was more resilient than that of the (formerly intra-) EU workforce in the UK. Between the third quarter of 2019 and the third quarter of 2020, the proportion of employed people born in the European Union declined from 7.3 percent to 6.8 percent before slightly recovering by the third quarter of 2021, only up to 6.9 percent. By contrast, the share of people in employment who were born outside the European Union and the United Kingdom increased from 10.3 percent in 2019 to 11.1 percent in 2020 and to 11.2 percent in 2021.[80] This difference between EU and foreign workers could be explained in part by the take-up of the EU Settlement Scheme, through which nearly 5 million EU citizens had received longer-stay visas in the United Kingdom as of March 2021.[81]

D.   Seasonal Workers

The pandemic had a particularly severe impact on seasonal workers, many of whom work in economically essential sectors such as agriculture or in sectors hit hard by the public-health crisis such as tourism. Permits for TCN seasonal workers plummeted in 2020 in some countries (by 75 percent in Bulgaria), while the number of new permits expanded in others (such as Poland and Spain) as migrant workers, including those who left early in the pandemic, returned in mid- and late 2020.[82] As COVID-19 travel restrictions shut down inflows of new seasonal workers, European governments and agricultural industries worked, often in concert, to fill labor shortages by implementing various programs to attract seasonal workers, regularize irregular migrants,[83] and recruit unemployed or furloughed native workers, so these shortages were often short-term. These strategies included:

▶ **Setting up programs to attract seasonal workers.** Germany set a target of 80,000 seasonal workers to be flown into the country to make up for agricultural labor shortfalls, but the program struggled to recruit workers; only half of the quota was filled before the government relaxed travel restrictions. Seasonal worker flows largely recovered with the easing of border restrictions, though farmers faced the greater costs associated with maintaining health standards for workers amid the ongoing

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79   Mariña Fernández-Reino and Cinzia Rienzo, "Migrants in the UK Labor Market: An Overview" (briefing, University of Oxford, Migration Observatory, 2022).

80   Fernández-Reino and Rienzo, "Migrants in the UK Labor Market."

81   Fernández-Reino and Rienzo, "Migrants in the UK Labor Market."

82   Eurostat, "Authorisations for the Purpose of Seasonal Work by Status, Length of Validity, Economic Sector, and Citizenship," accessed August 10, 2023.

83   Travel restrictions and visa office closures prevented migrants from returning to their countries or renewing their residency permits, so many states also implemented limited regularizations, suspended renewal deadlines, issued automatic extensions, or applied leniency policies for people unable to leave or renew permits. Such efforts went beyond filling labor shortages and were often temporary and smaller in scale. See EMN and OECD, "The Impact of COVID-19 in the Migration Area."

public-health crisis.[84] The United Kingdom also relied on emergency flights and exemptions to border restrictions to recruit workers for the 2020 harvest.[85] From 2021, it expanded the Seasonal Work visa route to meet labor demands, but it hoped to reduce reliance on foreign labor by 2024.[86]

► **Looking to a country's existing stock of migrant workers.** To make up for the hundreds of thousands of mostly Eastern European and North African workers who left Italy and Spain,[87] those governments made it easier for migrants already in the country to take up work. Italy hoped to regularize 300,000 irregular migrants to help shore up the agricultural workforce, yet by July 2020, less than one-third of that number had applied, mostly for work in fields other than agriculture.[88] Seasonal worker flows to both countries returned to normal in 2021, but growing attention to migrant exploitation in agriculture is prompting calls for reform[89]—for example, as Moroccan farm workers in Spain were subjected to more demanding work to make up for the lack of new workers.[90]

► **Channeling native-born workers into sectors facing shortages.** In France, where migrant workers made up a growing proportion of the seasonal agricultural workforce before the pandemic,[91] the government called on a so-called "shadow army" of furloughed native workers to make up for the lack of foreign workers. It is not clear whether this effort led to more French workers taking up jobs in agriculture, but after June 2020, foreign workers reportedly were flying in again.[92]

These programs had mixed success, but they were early and active efforts to meet labor needs in essential sectors. By attracting new migrants and tapping existing (migrant and nonmigrant) populations, European governments demonstrated that they could keep essential movement flowing, even at the height of early pandemic travel restrictions. Aside from the pandemic, the war in Ukraine has had a considerable impact on seasonal agricultural work in Europe. With many men obliged to stay in Ukraine under martial law, many agricultural regions of Western Europe have been forced to recruit new workers from regions further afield, which can increase recruitment and training costs.[93]

6   Three New Policy Trends during the Pandemic

The pandemic placed pressure on the Schengen system of free movement without border checks and revealed the continued vulnerabilities inherent in EU coordination and planning on border management.

84   Sabine Kinkartz, "Harvest Time and COVID Restrictions," Deutsche Welle, March 18, 2021.
85   Lisa O'Carroll, "Romanian Fruit Pickers Flown to UK amid Crisis in Farming Sector," *The Guardian,* April 15, 2020.
86   UK Government, "Industry Given Certainty around Seasonal Workers but Told to Focus on Domestic Workforce," updated December 24, 2021.
87   InfoMigrants, "Spain to Hire Foreign Workers to Cover Agriculture Shortfall," InfoMigrants, April 8, 2020.
88   Lorenzo Tondo and Marta Bellingreri, "Italy: Migrant Worker Deaths Expose Poor Conditions as New Visa Scheme Fails to Address Problems," Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, July 13, 2020.
89   Valentina Di Donato, "Italy: Agricultural Migrant Workers Are Increasingly Vulnerable to Exploitation and Abuse amidst Pandemic," Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, April 2, 2021.
90   Ofelia de Pablo, Javier Zurita, Annie Kelly, and Clare Carlile, "'We Pick Your Food': Migrant Workers Speak Out from Spain's 'Plastic Sea,'" *The Guardian,* September 20, 2020.
91   Cristina Mitaritonna and Lionel Ragot, "After COVID-19, Will Seasonal Migrant Agricultural Workers in Europe Be Replaced by Robots?" (policy brief 2020-33, Centre d'Études Prospectives et d'Informations Internationales, Paris, 2020).
92   *The North Africa Post*, "Moroccan Seasonal Workers Finally Arrive in France to Save Corsican Clementine Crop," *The North Africa Post,* November 28, 2020.
93   Julia Dahm, "Germany Fears Seasonal Labour Shortages as Ukraine War Rages On," Euractiv, April 4, 2022.

While European countries made some efforts to restart cross-border migration and mobility in 2020, those efforts were often small-scale and short-term (see Section 2). Throughout 2021 and into 2022, however, Europe faced the reality of living with the virus for years to come, so governments worked to fully reopen borders, restart skilled labor migration programs, and build public trust in their pandemic responses, among other policy tools. These emerging policies helped Europe to navigate out of the pandemic's mobility shutdown and may help to strengthen future migration systems, but they also carry risks and implementation challenges.

A.   Reopening the European Union: The EU Digital COVID Certificate

Early EU efforts to restart travel faced limitations and coordination challenges (see Section 2). For example, the European Union tried to coordinate contact-tracing apps between countries to allow travelers from one EU country to use their app in neighboring countries, but this initiative stalled because of significant data privacy, security, and legal concerns.[94] Ad hoc border restrictions were still the norm in response to new COVID-19 outbreaks and variants, despite serious doubts about their ability to hinder the spread of the virus.[95] But by mid-2021, the European Union had settled on a game-changing solution to restart mobility: the EU Digital COVID Certificate (EUDCC).

The EUDCC offered a relatively low-cost system for restoring mobility that allowed Member States to permit those with verified proof of vaccination, a negative test result, or recovery from prior infection to enter without, or with fewer, restrictions.[96] The EUDCC was free of charge and was available in both digital and physical formats, in the national language of

By mid-2021, the European Union had settled on a game-changing solution to restart mobility: the EU Digital COVID Certificate.

the issuing country, and was recognized across the European Union.[97] In some ways, adopting the EUDCC required less consensus than efforts to agree on quarantine guidelines or regional risk assessments because each Member State was still allowed to impose its preferred requirements on travelers, regardless of their EUDCC status. By giving countries a tool to verify the health status of travelers from across the European Union (and beyond, as the EUDCC was compatible with about 51 third-country systems), it allowed countries to minimize risk while reopening in the short term, and it laid the groundwork for a regional agreement to reopen to anybody with a valid EUDCC.

Despite the EUDCC's success, it still faced concerns during its rollout. The EUDCC was not interoperable with all digital health pass systems introduced in other countries,[98] which could exclude migrants who lacked access to a compatible system. As vaccination programs rolled out unevenly around the world, systems such as the EUDCC allowed vaccinated citizens—disproportionately those in high-income countries—to move

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94   Dahm, "Germany Fears Seasonal Labour Shortages."

95   Meghan Benton, "Can Omicron Finally Get the World to Cooperate on Pandemic Mobility Management?" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, December 2021).

96   Gianluca Montanari Vergallo et al., "Does the EU COVID Digital Certificate Strike a Reasonable Balance between Mobility Needs and Public Health?" *Medicina* 57, no. 10 (2021): 1077.

97   European Commission, "EU Digital COVID Certificate," accessed December 27, 2022.

98   European Council, "European Council Conclusions, 21–22 October 2021" (press release, October 22, 2021).

sooner and with fewer restrictions, while those still waiting for vaccines or boosters could not.[99] Moreover, even though the EUDCC regulation had significant safeguards to protect data privacy, much of the daily data management remained under control of individual Member States, which raised concerns about how they would process and use highly sensitive user data. The EUDCC's reliance on national systems to manage health data could also have been exploited to include false vaccine certification, thereby undermining the program's public-health effects. By requiring people to share personal health information in order to travel, the EUDCC risked opening the door to even more expansive data sharing requirements for travelers.[100]

The EUDCC was crucial to restarting travel in 2021. By late that year, the EUDCC had helped Europe to move from blanket border closures on travelers from certain countries toward a person-based system of travel,[101] in which vaccinations, testing, or recovery allowed people to move. Concerns remained about privacy and the exclusion of people without access to approved vaccines or compatible digital health pass systems, but the EUDCC is an important success story from the European COVID-19 response. While the EUDCC regulation expired on June 30, 2023, the European Commission and WHO have since launched a partnership to build on the EUDCC and establish a global digital health credential tool that could help to restart mobility sooner in future public-health crises.

B.   *Digitalization of Immigration Processes*

When lockdowns forced immigration offices to close temporarily, all EU Member States put measures in place to continue access to various immigration services. Some in-person services were still available though with limited hours and capacity, but many immigration services shifted from in-person processing to processing online or by mail.[102] This shift took a variety of forms, including the creation of digital chat boxes to help users navigate websites and forms, use of online rather than paper forms for visa applications, and conducting video interviewing for asylum seekers. COVID-19 also sparked greater experimentation with digital tools such as machine learning and artificial intelligence, which simultaneously reduce the arbitrariness and risk of human error when people make refugee status determinations and other decisions, although at least for now, these tools can often replicate existing biases in human decision-making and make such processes less transparent (and therefore harder to appeal), among other rirks.[103] In some cases, the move to digital systems appears to have had a tangible impact on the efficiency of migration systems, particularly asylum systems. From July 2020 to June 2021, for instance, the number of pending asylum applications in Europe declined significantly, even as the number of new applications returned to near pre-pandemic levels,[104] indicating that digital tools may have led to quicker processing times—a lesson that could apply to various kinds of immigration processes.

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99   Max Fisher, "Vaccine Passports, COVID's Next Political Flash Point," *The New York Times,* March 2, 2021; Lawrence Huang, *Digital Health Credentials and COVID-19: Can Vaccine and Testing Requirements Restart Global Mobility?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

100   Oskar Josef Gstrein, "The EU Digital COVID Certificate: A Preliminary Data Protection Impact Assessment," *European Journal of Risk Regulation* 12, no. 2 (2021): 370–81.

101   European Commission, "Coronavirus: Commission Proposes to Strengthen Coordination of Safe Travel in the EU" (press release, November 25, 2021).

102   EMN and OECD, "The Impact of COVID-19 in the Migration Area."

103   Beirens, *Rebooting the Asylum System?*

104   European Commission, "Statistics on Migration to Europe," accessed December 19, 2022.

Digital and online processing are likely to continue after the pandemic, even if only partly.[105] Countries may need to balance the benefits of streamlined systems against potential adverse outcomes for migrants. Digital tools can increase efficiency, lead to more consistent case outcomes, and provide safer options for protection, such as by allowing people to apply for asylum remotely rather than requiring unsafe journeys to apply at a destination country's border. Digital systems can also help all kinds of migrants as they integrate into their receiving society. But digitalization can also exacerbate already growing pressures to weaken the territorial asylum system, potentially encouraging governments to use these tools to prioritize security and expediency over (rather than alongside) meeting protection needs. Sensitive asylum interview and assessment procedures especially will require face-to-face interactions to ensure both the well-being of the applicant and to avoid discrimination in the process.[106] As with the EUDCC, new systems should have robust privacy and data safeguards in place.

C.   *Skilled Labor Programs*

The pandemic forced a significant, if often short-term, shutdown in labor migration (see Section 3). As the initial shock of the crisis wore off, attention turned to how the pandemic may affect labor demand, given Europe's aging traditional workforce, and the fact that its younger native-born workers tend to be more highly educated and less willing to work in lower-skilled sectors. Labor market shortages emerged across multiple sectors, feeding into high inflation also driven by the war in Ukraine. Sectors such as personal care (particularly care for the elderly and people with disabilities) are likely to grow even more reliant on foreign labor over the next decade,[107] as will many other service sectors. Given these trends, EU Member States have recognized the need for more migrant workers to continue economic growth,[108] and many were already taking steps to attract and retain skilled professionals from abroad.

In 2021, more than half of Member States reported having skilled mobility partnerships with third countries (bilateral or multilateral agreements to provide training and regular migration opportunities for TCNs).[109] That same year, the European Commission announced the Talent Partnerships initiative, which aims to combine mobility programs from third countries with support for those countries' own development.[110] This initiative presents an opportunity to make long-term arrangements with partner countries to address Europe's increasing labor needs over the coming decades while opening legal pathways for more migrants and supporting development in sending countries. The initiative offers the possibility to focus on

> *EU Member States have recognized the need for more migrant workers to continue economic growth, and many were already taking steps to attract and retain skilled professionals from abroad.*

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105 European Commission, Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, "Digitalisation of Visa Procedures: Have Your Say!" updated March 11, 2021.

106 Beirens, *Rebooting the Asylum System?*

107 European Commission, "Europe's Ageing Society: More Labour Mobility Could Help EU Meet Demand for Health and Long-Term Care Workers" (news release, EU Science Hub, February 25, 2021).

108 Terence Hogarth, *COVID-19 and the Demand for Labour and Skills in Europe: Early Evidence and Implications for Migration Policy* (Brussels: Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2021).

109 EMN and OECD, "Skills Mobility Partnerships—Exploring Innovative Approaches to Labour Migration" (EMN OECD Inform, February 2022).

110 Kate Hooper, *How Can Europe Deliver on the Potential of Talent Partnerships?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

partnerships that recruit talent from third countries and put programs in place to develop such talent, to the benefit of both sending and receiving countries. Such a program could also be an incentive to improve data collection on labor needs in Europe and labor supply abroad to develop more effective matching. A more holistic view of Europe's labor needs could place more emphasis on sectors not typically considered high-skilled but which nonetheless proved essential during the pandemic, such as domestic care and other personal services.

The EU-wide Blue Card program, a decades-old attempt to create a supraregional high-skilled migration program, has long suffered from little buy-in from Member States (except for Germany) and poor take-up because of confusing application and qualification systems. However, one innovation introduced in 2021 may hold some promise, at least as a guide for other programs. In 2021, the European Parliament brought in new rules for Blue Card applications that give skilled TCNs more freedom to move around the European Union, something that nationally bounded programs are far less able to accommodate.[111] In an economy as integrated as the EU single market, allowing prospective labor migrants greater freedom of movement makes sense to address regional skills shortages.

7   Conclusion

The story of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe is chiefly one of challenges to solidarity and coordination between Member States. National governments often disregarded or only partially implemented European Commission guidelines. Even direct warnings from the Commission about the impacts of unilateral action on neighboring countries failed to dissuade states such as Belgium, Denmark, and Germany from imposing strict border measures. This breakdown reflects the dissonance between some forms of supraregional migration management and individual Member States' responsibility for public health in their territories,[112] mirroring the lessons of the migration crisis of 2015 and 2016.

Yet the impacts of these largely unilateral policy decisions varied across Europe. Germany took stricter approaches to borders and had the largest drop in labor migration in the European Union, while Poland allowed more porousness in its eastern borders, thereby retaining access to the hundreds of thousands of workers the country needed. Similarly, governments prioritized the movement of seasonal workers and other labor migrants, especially in vital sectors such as agriculture and transportation, leaving other forms of mobility (notably refugee resettlement and family migration) well below pre-pandemic levels. In times of crisis, such sacrifices and trade-offs might be necessary, and the policy flexibility observed from some countries may have helped avoid more severe impacts.

The story of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe is chiefly one of challenges to solidarity and coordination between Member States.

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111 European Commission, "EU Blue Card: Commission Welcomes Political Agreement on New Rules for Highly Skilled Migrant Workers" (press release, May 17, 2021).

112 Christian Kurrer, "Public Health" (fact sheet, European Union, December 2022).

Despite suffering a large decline in labor migrants, some countries were successful in tapping existing labor supply among already-resident immigrants, for example through regularization campaigns. This strategy seems to have helped alleviate agricultural labor shortages in Italy and Spain in particular. Such developments provide part of the road map for addressing future skills shortages, along with programs to attract more foreign workers. The success found in digitalizing aspects of immigration processing could also enhance efforts to attract foreign workers.

Perhaps the biggest mobility-related success story of the pandemic is the EU Digital COVID Certificate. The struggles seen with early efforts to restart mobility by standardizing border measures across countries underscored the tension between Member State sovereignty and EU-wide governance. But the EUDCC suggests that coordination on such issues can be successful. By providing the technical infrastructure for Member States to easily verify a traveler's health status while still allowing them to decide on certain key elements of their border health regime, the EUDCC fostered significant coordination on and progress toward reopening borders.

Migration policy priorities in Europe have since early 2022 pivoted toward managing the arrival of millions of displaced Ukrainians, but policymakers should not neglect the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. This period exemplified the value of coordinated, thoughtful, and forward-thinking migration policymaking as well as its many challenges. But it also revealed that European migration and mobility systems were sorely underprepared for crisis, as were those across the world. Moving ahead, European governments and regional institutions should take this opportunity to make their migration systems more effective and resilient ahead of the next crisis. Approaches to doing so include:

► **Enhance preparedness for the next public-health crisis.** Stronger planning and investment in pandemic response tools related to borders and mobility could help mitigate some of the harms of the next crisis. EU policymakers, alongside the WHO and other partners, should continue to invest in the infrastructure of the EUDCC and digital health credential systems, while enhancing privacy safeguards implemented at the national level to protect EU citizens' data from misuse and to limit the possibility of fraud. In a similar global public-health crisis, policymakers could also provide more support to third countries to roll out vaccines and work toward greater recognition of foreign vaccines and digital health credentials.

► **Improve pre-crisis contingency planning.** The pandemic has shown the disruptive impact of insufficient contingency planning on labor flows, supply chains, and cross-border mobility of other kinds, affecting European economies significantly. In the first months of the pandemic, governments worked to exempt essential workers from border restrictions or recruit foreign workers to fill labor demand, but these efforts often had mixed results. There is a clear need for better pre-crisis contingency planning at the EU level to coordinate responses and thereby avoid needless disruption to mobility.

► **Build on digitalization efforts to streamline the immigration system.** The pandemic caused backlogs and delays in visa and asylum processing and prompted the development of innovations to address these problems. Countries should expand the digitalization of visa processes to encourage faster processing times, greater accessibility, and reduced cost. Particular attention should be paid

at the EU level, however, to ensure that safeguards are in place to protect user data and that digital systems do not, by removing human oversight, lead to unfair or discriminatory outcomes due to poor implementation.

▶ **Improve cross-border coordination of labor mobility programs.** Post-pandemic economic recovery needs and continuing demographic shifts make high-skilled immigration to Europe a priority. At the same time, the pandemic has revealed the importance of jobs considered "low- skilled" but nonetheless essential to the functioning of European economies and societies. Along with national programs and the Talent Partnerships initiative, policymakers could take the opportunity afforded by the revised Blue Card system (which gives migrants greater freedom to move around the European Union) to improve cross-border coordination of national labor mobility programs that address changing labor needs around Europe.

▶ **Build and protect resilient resettlement programs.** The pandemic had drastic consequences for refugee resettlement in Europe. The short-term pause on all resettlement in the first months of the pandemic was exacerbated by delays in resettlement processes as agencies switched to remote work, adjusted to social distancing, and worked to get refugees access to COVID-19 testing and vaccination. European policymakers should prioritize accelerating resettlement programs as they navigate out of COVID-19 and ensure that in future crises, they enable resettlement to recover just as quickly as other form of mobility.

COVID-19 continues to circulate across Europe and the globe, but the pandemic's grip on European mobility regimes has slackened considerably and movement of all kinds has recovered. Yet Europe is also preoccupied with other crises—from the mass displacement of Ukrainian refugees to continued concerns about energy prices—and there is no reason to think that another global pandemic will not occur in the future. The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the benefits of close cooperation between Member States and the vital need for clear communication to EU citizens during times of crisis. European governments should invest in adequate pre-crisis planning now so that the next global health crisis is not as disruptive as the last.

European governments should invest in adequate pre-crisis planning now so that the next global health crisis is not as disruptive as the last.

About the Author

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Frey Lindsay is a journalist and researcher specializing in migration, asylum, and labor issues. His work has appeared extensively on the BBC World Service and Radio 4, as well as Thompson Reuters, InfoMigrants, and openDemocracy. During the pandemic, he covered the impact of border closures and lockdowns on labor migrants and their families. He also regularly reports on barriers to mobility for young people, students, and workers around the world.

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