

Shaping the Future of Europe

Hungary's Vision for the 2024 Presidency



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REGULATING MIGRATION

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As crises continue to emerge around the world, the European Union must be prepared to deal with migration flows from nearby regions, especially since migration flows worldwide are projected to increase in the upcoming decades. Reducing the number of illegal and unregulated entries into the EU through a comprehensive approach targeting the root causes of irregular migration, while also strengthening both external border controls and legal pathways for migration, will be key for managing these flows in a sustainable manner. While the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union offers only modest opportunities to influence EU migration policy, Hungary can use the opportunity to facilitate critical discussions on the topic. The presidency agenda identifies several specific ways to promote progress on better regulating migration.

To an extent, regulated migration may be an asset for improving European competitiveness and cementing Europe's place in the evolving geopolitical landscape. Even in Hungary, government officials have estimated that the country will need half a million foreign workers in the coming years to fill gaps in the workforce (Marsai, 2023). While the EU has underlined the importance of migration for the short-term alleviation of technical inadequacies and demographic challenges within the labor market, migration is not a long-term solution to the problems facing the Union.

Without the power to determine who enters the EU, and effective processes for integrating accepted individuals, there is the potential for disorder and political instability. In Sweden, for example, which took in the highest number of migrants per capita in 2015, the failure to properly integrate migrants fueled gang violence and crime. While the majority of migrants in the country never committed crime, individuals with two non-native parents were still more than three times more likely to be

implicated. The government response required “overhauling policy across the board to restore safety and security in Sweden” (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2023).

Migration also has a geostrategic significance. The threat of the weaponization of migration has been highlighted in recent years, with European leaders accusing Minsk and Moscow of state-sponsored illegal migration. Minsk was accused of enticing thousands of migrants from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan to Belarus and then using armed security forces to escort them to the border for the purpose of political destabilization in EU border states (Council of the European Union, 2021). Now, some have suggested that the weaponization of migrants has become an integral part of Moscow’s current war effort (van Rij, 2024).

RECENT WAVES OF MIGRATION

Migration is certainly not new to Europe, although it seems to be expanding and diversifying. Since the end of the Second World War, key drivers of migration have included the recruitment of cheap labor from abroad to fuel industrialization and fill labor shortages in agriculture, cleaning, and similar sectors; wars of independence in former colonial territories and postcolonial instability; the Yugoslav wars and the disintegration of the Soviet Union; the wars launched in Afghanistan and Iraq; and, most recently, the Arab Spring and the resulting civil wars still enduring in some countries. Initially, the waves were overwhelmingly movements from southern Europe to the northwest, but migration slowly began to increasingly take the form of movements from neighboring regions like North Africa and beyond (Van Mol & de Valk, 2016).

In Hungary, notable waves of migration came from Transylvania and the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany) during regime change and from Yugoslavia during the Yugoslav wars. These waves were relatively small—generally tens of thousands of individuals each—and the migrants came from nearby regions, often with Hungarian backgrounds (Marsai, 2023).

Migration was not one of the priority areas of the first Hungarian presidency in 2011 because migration did not seem to be a widespread issue at the time. The so-called Arab Spring had begun mere days before the presidency, when Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest against the police. The seemingly small incident, however, set in motion a series of events that eventually resulted in regime change in Tunisia and later other countries

including Libya and Egypt. As the protests spread, some were successfully repressed—in Bahrain, for example—while others resulted in civil wars and instability that continues today—Syria, Yemen, and Libya being notable cases.

In Syria alone, 13.8 million individuals were forcibly displaced (The UN Refugee Agency, 2024). While most Syrians who left Syria initially went to Türkiye and other neighboring countries, as the war dragged on, many eventually began making their way to Europe, along with migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea, and other countries. By 2013, migration into Europe started to increase significantly, reaching a peak in 2015.

At the height of the crisis in 2015, a record 1.2 million individuals applied for asylum in the European Union, mainly Syrians fleeing conflict in their country (Eurostat, 2024). Hungary was particularly affected, due to its key position along the Western Balkans route, which became increasingly popular as the migration crisis dragged on. The number of asylum applications submitted in Hungary rose exponentially, from 2,157 in 2012 to 18,900 in 2013, 42,777 in 2014, and 177,000 in just the first eight months of 2015 (Marsai, 2023). The country received the highest number of per capita first-time asylum applications that year, which put a significant strain on its authorities (Pew Research Center, 2016). Understandably, managing migration became a hot topic on the Hungarian agenda. And it remains on the agenda, as irregular migration pressures on Hungary's southern borders have not decreased significantly in the decade since.

In 2022, the war in Ukraine sparked another wave of migration, with more than 4 million Ukrainians registering for temporary protection in the European Union to date. About half of these individuals registered in Germany and Poland (General Secretariat of the Council, 2024). Hungary, too, welcomed Ukrainians fleeing the conflict, as hundreds of thousands crossed the border in the first few months, although many moved on from Hungary to other parts of the EU.

THE CASE FOR REFORM

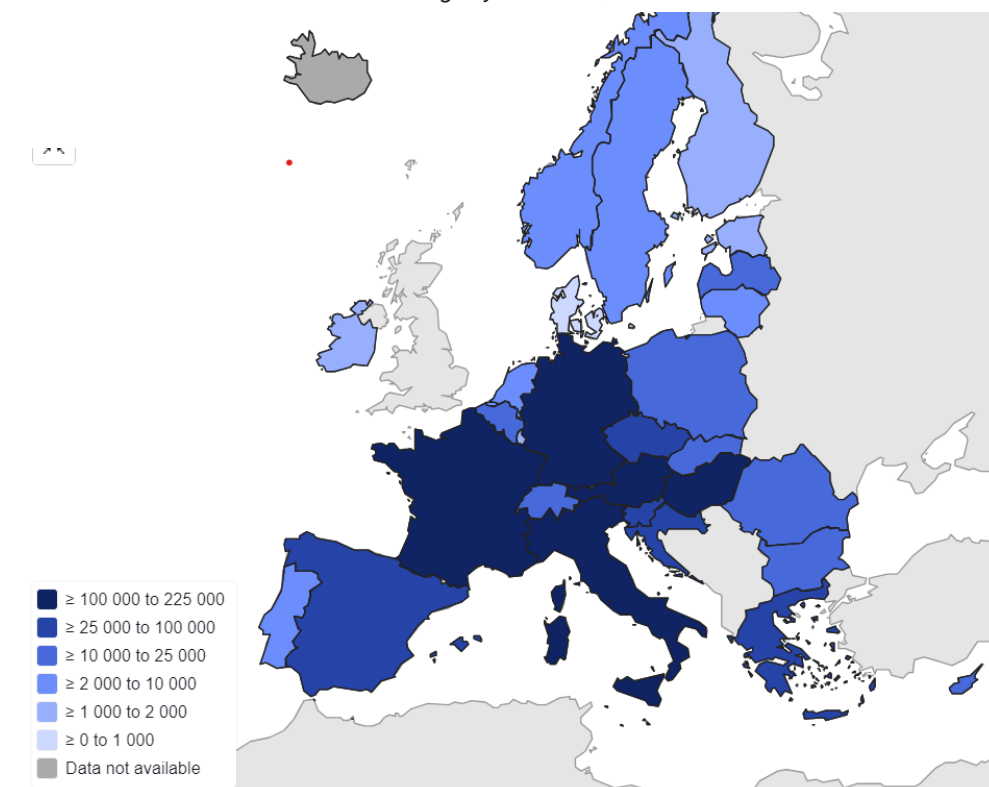
The 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees enshrines asylum as a fundamental right and an international obligation for countries. To regulate the asylum process within the EU, the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) was established in 1999, overseen by the European Union Agency for Asylum since January 2022 (European Commission, n.d.). In 2022 alone, EU countries collectively granted 311,000 asylum seekers refugee status (Eurostat, 2024).

While protecting the right to asylum is important, Hungarian officials have questioned the existing system in the EU. One critique has focused on the fact that migrants, even when fleeing their home countries as genuine refugees, often pass through numerous safe third countries that could have provided them adequate protection. Another major point of contention has been the processing of asylum claims within the borders of the EU, given that it incentivizes illegal entry, and the vast majority of asylum seekers who enter illegally and later have their claims rejected do not leave the EU afterwards.

In 2022, more than one million individuals were found to be illegally present in the European Union. Of all EU members, Hungary reported the largest number of individuals found illegally present—223,000 individuals, representing nearly one-fifth of the EU total (Eurostat, 2024).

Figure 1

Non-EU Citizens Found to be Illegally Present, 2022 (Number of Individuals)



Note. From "Migration and asylum in Europe – 2023 edition," by Eurostat, 2024, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/migration-2023>. CC-BY 4.0.

The rise in irregular migration has spurred human smuggling and created dangerous conditions for asylum seekers and other migrants, with many dying on treacherous journeys into the EU. In 2023, 4,114 individuals died or went missing while trying to enter Europe (Displacement Tracking Matrix, 2024). Even once in the EU, the employment of migrants residing illegally can create conditions enabling exploitation and human rights violations. Without proper oversight and regulation, it is also difficult to support the integration of those in need of protection. Uncontrolled waves of migration can also put significant pressures on receiving states.

The concerns of Hungarians have been frequently dismissed as mere xenophobia. The majority of Hungarian society, however, is willing to accept political refugees if circumstances allow, with no significant distinction between Chinese, Arab, Russian, Turkish, or Nigerian individuals (Janik et al., 2022). There seems to be more to the story.

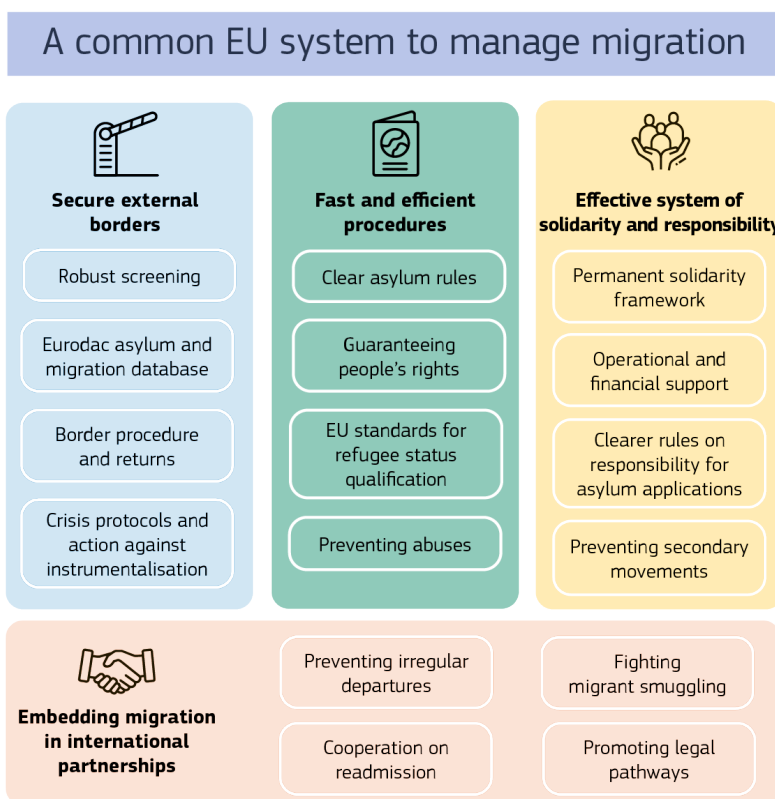
Of course, debates about migration have been happening throughout the EU, not just in Hungary. While there has been agreement on the fact that something must be done, everyone seems to have a different opinion on how to make migration policy effective.

In 2016, the Commission proposed a reception conditions directive, a qualification regulation, and an EU resettlement framework. Four years later, in 2020, the Commission followed up with the proposal of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, consisting of five laws establishing new regulations on the asylum procedure, asylum and migration management, Eurodac, the screening process, and crisis management (European Commission, 2020). The European Parliament and the Council only managed to reach an agreement in December 2023. The Parliament narrowly approving the reforms the following April, followed by the Council's adoption in May, despite Hungary and Poland voting against the entire pact and Austria voting against the crisis regulation (Council of the European Union, 2024). Now, member states have two years to implement the laws that were passed.

The migration pact focuses on four pillars: secure external borders, fast and efficient procedures, an effective system of solidarity and responsibility, and international partnerships. To secure external borders, it introduces a new screening process, upgrades the existing Eurodac database, strengthens the role of Frontex in managing borders, and provides uniform rules for registering irregular migrants. In terms of fast and efficient procedures,

it introduces clearer asylum rules, expands information sharing among countries, introduces new digital tools to speed up the processing system, and updates standards on the living conditions of asylum seekers. The solidarity and responsibility pillar focuses on clearer rules on responsibility, a framework for relocations, some operational and financial support to member states, and measures aimed at preventing secondary movements once asylum seekers have applied in their country of first entry. Finally, the goal with international partnerships is to stop human smuggling into the EU, prevent irregular departures into priority destinations like the UK, cooperate on migrant return and readmission, and promote legal pathways for entering the EU (European Commission, 2024).

Figure 2
Pillars of the Pact on Migration and Asylum



Note. From "Pact on Migration and Asylum," by the European Commission, 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en. CC-BY 4.0.

While the pact may be a step in the right direction, it is insufficient, and there are concerns that it could be used to infringe upon members' sovereignty. Hungary, alongside Poland, voted against the entire migration pact, primarily due to opposition to the mandatory solidarity measures, which it fears will be used to force it to accept illegal migrants against its will, including individuals who do not meet the conditions to receive refugee status and whom Hungary may not have the capacity to accept. While Austria did not vote against the entire pact, it did vote against the pact's crisis regulation, which would trigger these solidary measures. Slovakia and Czechia, meanwhile, chose to abstain from the vote.

In response to the shortcomings of the migration pact, the Hungarian government has implemented its own migration policies, requiring asylum seekers to submit their applications outside of Hungary and wait until they are approved before entering. Its measures, however, were declared unconstitutional by European courts in 2020, and in June 2024 the European Court of Justice fined Hungary €200 million for failing to follow EU law, with an additional penalty of €1 million per day until it changes its policies (Case C-123/22).

THE 2024 HUNGARIAN PRESIDENCY AGENDA

The presidency program published at the end of June highlights illegal migration as a key challenge facing both the European Union as a whole and individual Member States, particularly those along the EU's external borders. While the role of the rotating presidency is limited, the program outlines several measures it intends to promote to tackle both the push and pull factors of illegal migration into the European Union, including measures to both address the root causes of illegal migration and manage it once migrants have reached the border.

The main focus is on cooperation with partners, especially key countries of origin and transit. Among these partners, the program names Türkiye, the members of the Southern Neighbourhood (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine¹, Syria and Tunisia), and the countries of the wider Sahel region, particularly Mauritania, Senegal, and Chad

¹ The European Union uses this designation, but it should not be construed as EU recognition of a State of Palestine, given the variation in the individual positions of Member States on the issue.

(“Programme of the Hungarian Presidency,” 2024). Cooperation with these partners is already ongoing, with the Operational Coordination Mechanism for the External Dimension of Migration (MOCADDEM) set up in 2022 to improve its coordination. Hungary, however, is in an advantageous position to promote expanded cooperation due to its excellent relations with many of the countries in question.

The need to curb human smuggling and illegal entries into the EU is also highlighted. The program calls for innovative solutions for asylum, the need for more EU funding for external border protections, and policies to ensure effective returns (“Programme of the Hungarian Presidency,” 2024). The presidency will chair a number of meetings on these topics. There was already an Informal meeting of the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA) in early July, and the one hundred and first meeting of the Frontex management board in Budapest is coming up soon.

The presidency program does not mention the migration pact specifically. The Hungarian presidency, however, follows the Spanish presidency in the second half of 2023 and the Belgian presidency in the first half of 2024, with these three presidencies making up the current “trio.” In the joint trio program published last year, the need to continue work on reforming the CEAS and the Pact on Migration and Asylum is featured (Council of the European Union, 2023).

Addressing the Root Causes of Irregular Migration

Tackling migration starts with addressing the root causes of illegal entries, so that people do not need to uproot their lives and make the long journey into the EU, often in dangerous ways. Development assistance, for one, can contribute to building economic opportunities locally and lifting individuals out of poverty. The EU is already the largest provider of development assistance in the world (European Commission, 2020). Still, there is room for innovations to make this development aid more effective for the communities it serves.

To expand its own development aid efforts, the Hungarian government established the Hungary Helps program in 2017. Eight years later, Hungary Helps programs now span fifty-five countries in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa and more than two million individuals—no small feat for a

Central European country of less than ten million people (“The Hungary Helps Program,” 2024). Hungary Helps is now the main coordinator of Hungarian international development aid abroad.

There is also a security component to addressing instability in key countries of origin and transit, and, through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU is already working on this. In particular, CSDP missions play an important role in disrupting smuggling networks. As such, the recent end of the European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger) following the coup last year is concerning in that it prevents some of this smuggling network-disrupting work from happening. Other missions, like the EU Border Assistance Mission in Libya (EUBAM) and the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Irini (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI), however, continue to operate in this area (European Commission, 2020).

Hungary, in response to an invitation by the president of Chad and the Hungarian parliament’s approval in November, is currently preparing to station 200 troops in Chad as part of a peacekeeping mission until the end of 2025 (Hungarian Defence Forces, 2023). The troops are meant to perform advisory and support tasks to help in the fight against terrorism and instability in the country, which have become drivers of migration, fueling further instability in the Sahel region and beyond. Within the frameworks of NATO and EU missions, Hungary has also been involved in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, and other missions.

There is also a role for funding for expanding the capacity to host refugees in countries near top countries of origin. In May, the EU pledged a further €7.5 billion to support the integration of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, followed by a pledge of €1 billion for Lebanon in June. The pledges received some criticism, however, as not all pledged aid is always disbursed, and aid organizations are calling for more sustainable, long-term solutions rather than short-term fixes solely designed to keep migrants away from EU borders (Genç & Baroud, 2024). Clearly, there is still room for improvement in the way EU funds are used to tackle the root causes of irregular migration.

Protecting EU Borders

Reducing irregular migration also requires strengthening external EU borders to prevent individuals from entering the EU illegally without proper authorization. In this regard, Hungary has pushed for a strengthened

European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and fortified external borders. For its part, Hungary has erected a border fence, supplemented with thermal and infrared cameras, drones, and regular patrols to further reduce the number of migrants able to illegally enter the EU (Marsai, 2024). Technological advancements and expanded information sharing—such as the recent expansion of Eurodac—can help strengthen external border protections. Strengthening borders, of course, must be coupled with an efficient asylum claims processing system not reliant on illegal entry, and the reinforcement of legal pathways into the EU.

To enhance Member States' control over who enters the EU, one of the stated goals of the Hungarian presidency is to conclude negotiations on the revised visa suspension mechanism. The EU has a visa-free scheme with around sixty non-EU countries, which facilitates business and social and cultural ties between the EU and its partners. The scheme, however, is sometimes a source of irregular arrivals to the EU. In October 2023, the Commission proposed a renewed suspension mechanism expanding the grounds for visa suspension—to include non-EU countries with investor citizenship schemes, for example—and increasing monitoring (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2023). Negotiations are ongoing.

In order to maintain the credibility of EU laws and reduce the abuse of the EU migration system, individuals who do not have the right to stay in the EU must be returned in an effective manner. At present, only about one third of individuals ordered to leave Member States actually leave, further incentivizing irregular migration and undermining EU citizens' trust in the asylum and migration systems (European Commission, 2020). The Commission adopted the first EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration in 2021, which laid out procedures for supporting the voluntary return of irregular migrants through return counseling, financial assistance, and post-return support for sustainable reintegration (European Commission, 2021). Voluntary returns are generally more cost effective than forced returns, despite the services provided to voluntary returnees, and provide a pathway for those residing in the EU illegally to leave. Here, too, cooperation with third countries plays an important role.

Reducing pull factors driving irregular migration also requires cracking down on the illegal employment of third-country nationals unauthorized to stay in the EU. Migrants staying in the EU illegally are at risk of

exploitation not only by criminal networks but also “regular” employers in terms of pay, labor conditions, job security, and lack of protections in the event of injury, for instance. They often receive pay well below the statutory minimum or receive payment for only a fraction of their work, working in dangerous conditions that put their health at risk. Those who find work through third parties may find themselves trapped working for long periods in order to pay back debts incurred through placement, housing, and other fees (Fox-Ruhs & Ruhs, 2022). While the EU has rules in place to prevent the exploitation of workers in irregular situations, it is impossible to sufficiently monitor the conditions of those working illegally.

Migration can only work if there are systems in place to integrate new arrivals into European societies, including housing, employment, and social integration. Integration is important both from the standpoint of ensuring the wellbeing of migrants and in terms of enabling the EU to make the most of the migrants it hosts. The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion for 2021–2027, which focuses on education and training, skills recognition and employment opportunities, healthcare, and housing, is a step in the right direction. Still, many migrant families continue to face difficulties, especially with finding employment. In 2023, only 63 percent of non-EU nationals between the ages of twenty and sixty-four residing within an EU country were employed, compared to 78 percent employment for citizens of other EU countries, and 76 percent for nationals (Eurostat, 2024).

While there has been some progress on regulating migration since the peak of the crisis in 2015, there is still work to be done. Migration is complex, and there will be no overnight solutions for managing it. Member states like Hungary, however, can move the process forward. The presidency agenda for the second half of 2024 highlights the need to address the root causes of migration into the European Union, as well as strengthen border protections and crack down on human smuggling networks. Cooperation with third countries is emphasized as crucial for achieving these goals. Unchecked migration into the EU has the potential to cause turmoil and put a strain on Member States already struggling with their own domestic issues. Making EU migration policy crisis proof will need to be a key part of strengthening the EU’s position on the global stage.



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