

# Exploring the Future of Migration in Europe

What we learn from uncertainty

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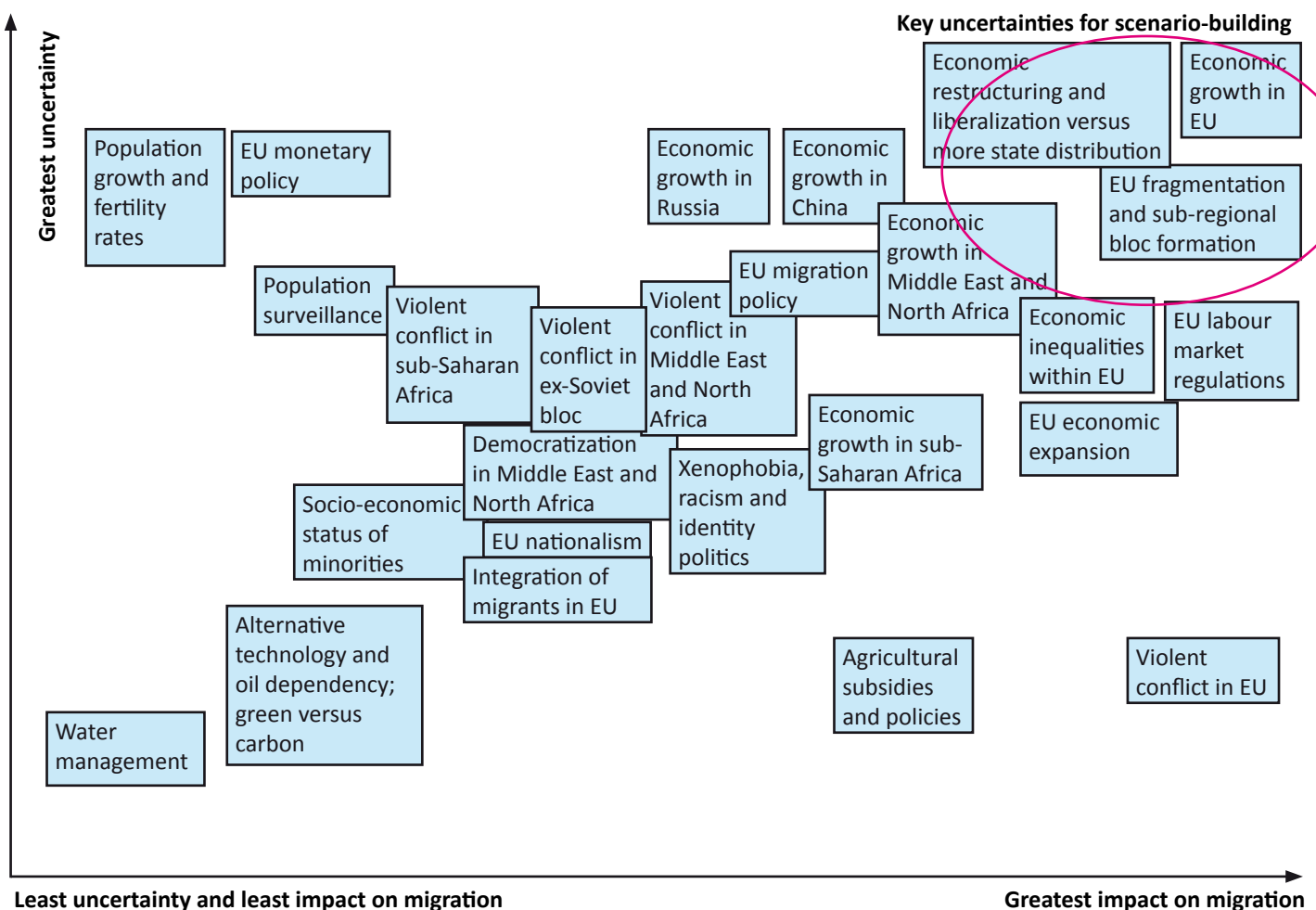
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Which factors are **most uncertain** when thinking about the long-term future of migration? Which of these ‘uncertainties’ are likely to have the **greatest impact on migration**? Answering these questions is central to using the scenario methodology to study future international migration. After exploring these questions in the context of North Africa, the Global Migration Futures (GMF) team applied them to examine future migration in Europe. Existing research on the future of international migration tends to focus on relative ‘certainties’ such as demographic change, and ignores key migration drivers which are more difficult to predict. The very purpose of the scenario methodology is to expand current thinking about future developments by creating scenarios around key uncertainties. Scenario-building exercises identify which factors deserve the most attention when examining potential future migration patterns and trends and appropriate policy responses.

Stakeholders from academia, civil society, governments, the private sector, and international organizations identified the initial list of uncertainties for Europe during the project’s first workshop in June 2010 in The Hague. After the workshop, the GMF team refined these uncertainties and introduced new ones. The stakeholders and the GMF team plotted the uncertainties (see Figure 1), illustrating the relative impact of these factors on future migration in the region as well as their relative degree of uncertainty. This policy briefing outlines four key uncertainties that may significantly affect migration to, within, and/or from Europe.

**Figure 1: Key uncertainties for migration in Europe in 2035: relative impact and knowledge**



## Economic growth in the EU

Joaquín Almunia, the European Union's economic affairs commissioner, called the European recession of the late 2000s the 'deepest and most widespread recession in the post-war era'.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to predict economic growth in the region in 2035, as this depends on a combination of factors, including, but not limited to, the paths taken by various European countries to attempt full recovery from economic recession; the future of the Eurozone; and any future economic restructuring of Europe's main trading partners. What we do know is that there is a strong, positive relationship between economic growth and immigration. In Germany, France, and the Netherlands, annual data on immigration rates and GDP from the early 1970s to the late 2000s reveal that increases and decreases in GDP directly correspond to increases and decreases in immigration rates. Thus, if economic growth is strong in the coming decades, we can expect immigration to increase and to remain a vital factor in meeting expanding European economies' demand for labour. The impact of economic growth on European *emigration* appears smaller than on *immigration*, for during times of economic decline, migrants in Europe tend not to leave the region at rates that significantly correspond to declining labour market demand.<sup>2</sup>

### EU fragmentation and sub-regional bloc formation

Tensions between state policies and disparities in the financial health of European states – in particular, the difficulties facing countries like Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain in managing their primary deficits – reveal challenges to the economic and political cohesion of the European Union. While it is unlikely that the EU and Eurozone will entirely fragment by 2035, the future strength of EU cohesion, the position of the less prosperous members in the Union, and the future of the process of EU expansion remain highly uncertain. Future EU cohesion can impact immigration and intra-regional migration in various ways. If cohesion weakens on an economic level, whether or not states withdraw from the Eurozone, and markets become increasingly depressed in the weakest European states while others remain stable or experience growth, a process of economic divergence will occur and the EU may experience increases in intra-regional migration. If EU cohesion persists or strengthens in the future, the Union may continue to accept new members, which may also become new sources of (free) labour migration.

### EU labour markets

The future of EU labour markets depends on future age distribution within and outside Europe, labour market policies, skills levels, possible rises in the retirement age, the structure and level of pension schemes, employment benefits, foreign workforce policies, and advancements in labour mechanization, to name a few factors. The combination of these factors and their complex interplay makes the future of EU labour markets highly uncertain.

1 R. Atkins and C. Giles (5 May 2009) 'Brussels sees end to European recession', *Financial Times*, Economic Recovery, p 7, Inventories p 13. Available at: [www.ft.com/cms/s/0/58ed1736-390d-11de-8cfe-00144feabdc0.html#ixzz1QYWts4IN](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/58ed1736-390d-11de-8cfe-00144feabdc0.html#ixzz1QYWts4IN).

2 J. Dobson, A. Latham, and J. Salt (2009) 'On the move? Labour migration in times of recession', Policy Network paper, London: Policy Network.

We do know that in 2035, Europe will confront an aged population and a high dependency ratio, which, particularly under conditions of economic growth, are likely to result in an increased labour demand in particular sectors as well as strained or reduced pension and welfare systems. At the same time, we know that, overall, educational attainment and skill levels are increasing. Thus, EU countries may face an increasing scarcity of higher and lower skilled labour in 2035. However, the significance of this shortage will depend on levels of economic growth, changes to production systems, advances in labour mechanization, and the 'off-shoring' of industrial and service-sector operations. EU governments may design new temporary or permanent labour immigration schemes to meet market demands, increase migration quotas, and alter migration policies to increasingly allow the lower skilled to immigrate. EU governments may also respond by increasing minimum wages to attract nationals to lower skilled jobs.

### Xenophobia, racism, and identity politics

If the emergence of nationalist and xenophobic right-wing political parties in Europe is a signal of a larger trend towards increasing xenophobia in the future, it is possible that we may see more restrictive and selective immigration policies. We may see evidence of this trend in the 'culture of denial' existing in asylum processing and bilateral migration agreements with North African states, for such processes and agreements assume migrants are not legally entitled to refugee protection.<sup>3</sup> However, it is highly uncertain whether and to what degree these trends will occur. Future improvements in the integration of immigrant groups might cause a decline in xenophobia or Islamophobia. Moreover, Europe's commitment to international legal norms and principles and multicultural aspirations may suggest a future in which, despite incidences of xenophobia, most migrants will be welcomed and incorporated into society. Consequently, the future of xenophobia, racism and identity politics in Europe remains highly uncertain.

It is often assumed that the level of restrictiveness of immigration policies reflects sentiments towards outsiders. However, past research tells us that a significant gap often exists between the number of migrants European states say they want to admit and the number of migrants who are admitted, because of the real benefits that labour migration brings to European economies.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, past migration research tells us that despite public support for deportation policies, the public often opposes their enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

3 J. Souter (2011) 'A Culture of Disbelief or Denial? Critiquing Refugee Status Determination in the United Kingdom', *Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration*. Available at: <http://oxmofm.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/11-SOUTER-OxMo-vol-1-no-1.pdf>; and J. Brachet (2011) 'The Blind Spot of Repression: Migration Policies and Human Survival in the Central Sahara', in T.-D. Truong and D. Gaspar (eds), *Transnational Migration and Human Security: The Migration-Development-Security Nexus*, Berlin-New York: Springer, pp. 57-66.

4 P. Statham (2003) 'Understanding Anti-Asylum Rhetoric: Restrictive policies or racist publics?' in S. Spencer (ed), *The Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change*, London: Blackwell Publishing.

5 S. Saggart (2003) 'Immigration and the Politics of Public Opinion', in S. Spencer (ed), *The Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change*, London: Blackwell Publishing; and Ellerman (2006) 'Street-level democracy: How immigration bureaucrats manage public opposition', *West European Politics* 29(2):293.