# What If Europe Faced a Lack-of-Migration Crisis?

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#WHATIF

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By Alia Fakhry

In 2030, Geras GmbH – a privately held giant in the German market for senior care homes – is forced to close over 500 of its facilities, leading to headlines about staffing gaps in the care sector. But Germany is not the only country where critical sectors are under pressure. Finding ways to alleviate workforce deficits has become the top priority for national governments everywhere in Europe. While advanced economies in other parts of the world reap benefits from the skilled laborers coming out of North and West Africa, Europeans are left to agree to ambiguous labor migration deals that expose their vulnerabilities. This imagined scenario shows how protectionist migration policies can become a real threat to European autonomy.

## EUROPE SCRAMBLES FOR IMMIGRANTS

"Are there any other suggestions? Any at all?", asks Maltese Prime Minister Roberta Metsola on November 10, 2030, at the extraordinary meeting of the Council of the European Union on the Fight Against Ageing. The recent closure of over 500 German nursing homes has underlined Europe's lack of staffing in the care sector and spawned heated debates in the metaverse. One thing is clear: the EU needs more immigrants to work not only in nursing homes, but also in other critical sectors. Across Europe, migration has become a comprehensive security issue. Age-related public expenditure makes up more than 35 percent of national GDP in France, Italy, Greece, Austria, and Portugal, ending a decade of defense spending and the economic dividend it sparked.

Fifteen years after the 2015 Valletta Summit on Migration where EU heads of state pressed their African counterparts to prevent irregular movements across the Mediterranean, Europeans are scrambling for immigrants. But where to turn? North Africa's autocratic rulers have turned away from the EU. Beijing is squeezing Brussels out of what it once considered *its* neighborhood. Algeria, for example, has edged closer to China to fund its ambitions to become Africa's digital leader; Algerian cities now serve as a testing ground for Chinese smart technologies and offer win-win opportunities for tech specialists from Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Nigeria. In Eastern Africa, Chinese mega infrastructure projects attract Western and Central African migrant workers from Libya to Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti.

Despite the apparent agreement at the council meeting in favor of action, the EU still lacks a cohesive plan that all member states can get behind. Politicians backtracked on the joint 2026 EU Ageing Roadmap, which was meant to nudge them to reform pension systems and delay the retirement age. Some member states are still hoping to see an impact from two projects that were meant to reduce dependency on migration. The Silver Economy Plan aims to use robots for key health care functions, and the Communication from Working from Home Countries seeks to outsource menial tasks in the EU to workers based in the same time zone.

## IMMIGRATION REDUCTION: A PYRRHIC VICTORY

Since 2019, Europe has seen a decline in almost all forms of migration. Until recently, national policy-makers considered this a success. They had set a target of bringing the number of immigrants to the EU below the one-million mark by 2025 and were surprised when it was met. While they attributed this to the success of border partnerships with neighbors, the real reason was the emergence of new destinations – both global and local. During the COVID crisis, neighbors in Africa and Asia had realized the importance of keeping their borders open to one another, spawning rudimentary regional labor markets. China had begun attracting immigrants to overcome its own demographic deficit. Autocratic governments had started to use the exit controls that the EU informally encouraged them to introduce to divert migrants to more amenable environments.

If the governments of EU member states achieved something of a Pyrrhic victory in reducing migration, the European Commission played a Cassandra role. It had been projecting the path of Europe's demographic decline and its dire effects for so long that its warnings started to ring hollow. Moreover, it delivered these warnings alongside a range of other ominous predictions about the future such as the impact of climate change on arable and habitable land in Africa. These projections were designed to mobilize Europeans into joint action. But the result was growing skepticism in Europe about the future and society's capacity to handle it, as well as a backlash against ambitious EU plans of all kinds.

The European Commission did launch immigration initiatives, but potential partner countries showed little appetite for them – not least because they targeted job sectors such as health care, engineering, and information and communications technology where they themselves struggled to train and recruit. Chinese companies at least recognized this fact and covered tuition fees, language courses, and relocation to attract thousands of fresh graduates to their head offices in Guangzhou. The EU belatedly recognized such competition for "the brightest and best" and started to target potential workers with low to medium skill levels. Yet its entry requirements excluded people over 40 years of age and restricted family reunification out of fear that older workers and families would weigh on national health systems. Importantly, the EU failed to see that caring for seniors could constitute skilled work.

## EU AUTONOMY NEEDED A RETHINK IN 2022

"Well, there is still one option," suggests the German chancellor as the 2030 council meeting is about to draw to an unsatisfactory close. "We could try increasing Europe's attractiveness." Metsola gratefully picks up the idea, saying that this would finally be the way to achieve a degree of European autonomy – a political goal since the early 2020s. After all, the EU's neighbors are increasingly "weaponizing cross-border mobility," exploiting the EU's need for workers to leverage political and economic concessions for opening pathways to supply them. The best way for the EU to reduce this dependency would be to increase its own attractiveness. Until now, its patchy and tailored solutions meant more flexibility but also greater dependency on governments that can exploit such deals to pursue their own interests.

Denmark reversed its 2022 asylum externalization deal with Rwanda to recruit Rwandese health and construction workers on temporary contracts; it followed a 1:100 ratio negotiated by Rwanda, meaning that for each asylum seeker sent to Rwanda, 100 Rwandese received a visa. Spain, which had seen both the mass depopulation of its farmland and increased demand for workers in liquified natural gas to supply the EU's energy needs, worked out a special temporary visa for critical workers from Morocco in return for recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Germany sought to better integrate a decade of asylum seekers even as diaspora organizations – which became hugely influential in the German foreign policy debate – drew Berlin into disputes worldwide. France reached bilateral agreements with Morocco and Tunisia to incite pensioners to move there by helping modernize their health services, but it failed to scale up the deal.

Many nodded in agreement around the table even as they thought how difficult reversing decades-old protective policies was going to be.

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*In its "What If" series, the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) envisions the state-of-play in different policy fields in around 2030 and highlights the drivers behind them. The series aims to create awareness of opportunities and risks on issues that may not be top of mind for today's decision-makers but could turn out to be highly impactful. The stories are meant to trigger reflection about Germany's and the EU's strengths and weaknesses and to draw attention toward possibilities for desirable change in a forward-looking manner. For more information, please visit:* ***www.dgap.org/whatif***

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