

Migration can work for all

Plan for replacing broken global system



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OPINION

Across the world, a backlash to immigration is remaking politics. In election after election, voters have backed candidates who promise to do whatever is necessary to stop the flow of unauthorized arrivals and, in many cases, send millions back to their countries of origin, no matter how war-torn or desperate. Anti-immigrant politicians and activists spread disinformation to suggest that countries are being invaded by waves of undocumented migrants. Images of migrant caravans, rickety boats at sea, and chaos at borders suggest that authorities have lost control of the migration system as a whole. With these images repeated on social media and anti-immigrant views gaining traction with the general public, even politicians normally sympathetic to immigration have found themselves recalibrating and on the defensive. These politics reflect the reality that, globally, irregular immigration — entering a country without prior authorization — is at historic levels. Americans are familiar with the record number of attempted crossings of the US-Mexican border: nearly 2.5 million in 2023 alone, compared with less than half a million a year at the beginning of the millennium. But that surge is not unique to the United States. In Europe, the number of unauthorized border crossings climbed to 380,000 in 2023, the highest since 2016. In other areas of the world, even where hostility to immigrants is more pronounced and, in some cases, even violent, migrants continue to risk death and abuse to enter a country, often because they know work is available. The fact that the phenomenon is so global also points to the problem with policy responses that aim to crack down on particular borders or in individual countries: today's unprecedented levels of migration make plain that a decrepit, outdated system, built in the wake of World War II, is incapable of contending with today's humanitarian needs, demographic trends, or labor-market demands.

States that focus on border restrictions, mass deportations, or the abrogation of legal protections for asylum seekers will fail to solve the problem. They will simply redirect it while creating a new host of problems that will, in the long term, feed the problem rather than solve it. They will empower criminal networks and black markets while leaving their own economies worse off. The system will continue to decay. Instead of short-term hard-line responses, the better and ultimately more successful route is to build a new system that can replace the old one and effectively address today's challenges. That new system must start from the premise that migration is a permanent feature of human civilization — in fact, border management and standardized passports are relatively new phenomena — and that there is a way to manage the movement of people in a manner that is orderly, dignified, and advantageous to all parties. That would mean both supporting development in migrants' countries of origin and making legal immigration channels accessible and efficient. Failure to immediately begin work on this new system will mean more social unrest, more inequality, and more abuse and exploitation of the most vulnerable. A new system could reduce the sense of disorder and lack of border control that has upended politics, and it would also create more opportunities for migrants, as well as for citizens of destination countries. It could enable the refugee system to work as intended, restoring credibility to the asylum system. Contrary to much of the current public discourse, immigration does not have to be a zero-sum proposition.

Who gets in?

For many high-income countries, the current approach to legal immigration that allows migrants to enter through family reunification and through

labor visas is not only bureaucratic but also untethered to the evolving demands of their labor markets. Job openings that migrants could fill, especially in lower-skilled sectors, are often not filled. There aren't enough labor visas available to meet workforce demand, but the number of people who can seek asylum is not capped. The asylum process is easily accessible for those who make it to the border, so it should come as no surprise, then, that people are using asylum processes as a way to enter the labor force.

the needs of the country welcoming them but, as stipulated in the convention, they also have a right to jobs, housing, education, travel documents, and social protections. Accordingly, even people who cross a border without authorization can avail themselves of these protections if they request asylum and their refugee claims are validated. Likewise, the number of people who move to escape poverty vastly outstrips the number who qualify as refugees. Many migrants face acute, often

The result has been a surge in irregular immigration and an overreliance on seeking asylum. The established systems for resettling refugees in safe countries are woefully inadequate to meet demand. Even the United States — which has the largest program, admitting more than 100,000 refugees in 2024 — does not take in a fraction of the qualifying refugees who apply for asylum. Over the last several years, growing numbers of people have been crossing borders — whether by land, sea, or air

detection than in years past. Instead, they are walking up to the border, presenting themselves to border patrol officials, and requesting asylum. Yet while more people are seeking asylum, less than half will qualify for it. But even if they fail to establish an asylum case, applicants often find a viable route to live and work in the destination country for years before immigration authorities make a final determination on their case. In the United States, the asylum backlog has now reached three million cases. Complicated cases have taken as long as seven years to be resolved.

Some countries, such as France, Germany, and Greece, have shortened asylum processing times. Still, an asylum seeker's right to appeal can add years to the clock. In many countries, applicants can work, find housing, and put down roots while their cases wind their way through the system. Many of those who are not granted work permits simply disappear into their country of destination, finding work in the informal sector, where they are often underpaid and exploited. The success of so many applicants who enter and stay in a country of destination through this irregular pathway incentivizes others to attempt the same route, adding to the overburdened asylum docket and further slowing the adjudication of new applications.

This inefficient system also traps many applicants in limbo, preventing them from returning home for fear they will not be able to come back. Applicants with legitimate asylum claims can wait years before they have the status and stability they need to build a future. For those who start new lives but eventually do not qualify for asylum, deportation can be traumatic and destabilizing. It is also expensive and time-consuming for the deporting governments; as a result, millions stay unlawfully.



A migrant sits on a fence in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, in March 2024.
● DAVID PEINADO/REUTERS

At the same time, nearly all countries grant wide-ranging access and protections for people classified as "refugees" — that is, those who are fleeing persecution because of "race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion," in the words of the 1951 Refugee Convention, which counts 149 states as parties. Not only are refugees admitted to safer countries without any assessment of the skills they have or

life-threatening risks in their home countries but because of the current binary approach to individuals fleeing crises — you either qualify as a "refugee" under current laws or you don't — hundreds of millions of desperate people are either ignored or demonized.

Broken system

For those on the move in search of stability, safety, or better opportunities, the legal channels available to migrate are few.

— and seeking asylum once they arrive in their destination country. Europe witnessed a dramatic surge in 2015 as Syrians fled the war. Although applications decreased sharply in subsequent years, the number of applications is again on the rise. In the last 20 years, asylum applications in the United States have increased from less than 100,000 a year to more than 500,000 a year. Even at the US-Mexican border, far fewer people are seeking to evade



Migrants sail on a dinghy near Wimereux, France, in September 2024.
● BENOIT TESSIER/REUTERS