POLICY BRIEF

EMERGENCY MECHANISMS FOR MIGRANT INTEGRATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This first Policy Brief of the EPIC-UP project summarizes insights from desk research, expert consultations, and findings and recommendations from the EPIC-UP policy lab on 'emergency mechanisms for migrant integration' where the project exchanged with more than 50 participants from across Europe.

The EPIC-UP project addresses a critical paradox in contemporary European migration governance: Although migration is essential to economic growth and labor stability, emergency responses have turned into routine governance practices instead of temporary crisis measures. This erosion of strategic management capacity creates fragile systems vulnerable to collapse under pressure.

Research across six EU partner countries **(Greece, Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Germany, Poland)** and at the **EU level**, reveals a fundamental mismatch between policy intentions and operational capacity.

Governments declare migration emergencies as standard policy tools, enabling rapid executive action at the expense of democratic scrutiny. Legal frameworks increasingly prioritize border control over human rights protection, while core state responsibilities —reception, housing, and coordination— are outsourced to NGOs lacking formal authority, budget guarantees, or legal standing.

The structural gaps are profound: funding mechanisms lack flexibility, siloed agency operations cause delays, and municipal capacities remain unevenly developed. Emergency frameworks tend to exist outside conventional democratic checks and balances. As a result, their legal mechanisms can diminish procedural protections and contribute to declining public trust.

This policy brief presents collaboratively developed recommendations addressing these interconnected failures. By fostering antifragility in EU-level mechanisms, strengthening political will and coordination at national levels, and empowering local actors as true partners, Europe can transform reactive emergency management into coherent, sustainable integration strategies. These recommendations prioritize flexibility over rigidity, local adaptation over top-down control, and democratic accountability over executive expedience. The aim is to make migration response systems gain resilience rather than collapse under pressure.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

European migration governance has undergone substantial transformation in response to recurring crises, yet significant **structural gaps** persist in the continent's capacity to manage irregular migration effectively[1]. The 2015–2016 crisis was both a **refugee crisis**, driven largely by people fleeing conflict and persecution (primarily from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq), and a broader **migration crisis**, involving other categories of migrants whose movements were shaped by economic, social, and environmental factors. This dual nature matters because refugees are entitled to specific protection under international law (1951 Refugee Convention) and EU asylum law, while other migrants fall under different legal and policy frameworks with distinct rights, procedures, and obligations[2]. The 2015–2016 surge, subsequent pressures including the 2022 displacement crisis from Ukraine, and ongoing Mediterranean arrivals have collectively tested the **resilience and adaptability of EU systems**.

The emergency modalities activated during the 2015 crisis —including ad hoc institutional arrangements and expanded agency mandates— remain partially embedded within contemporary EU migration management[3, 4]. Emergency frameworks such as "hot spots," relocation mechanisms, and the expanded role of Frontex have become institutionalized components of routine operations, suggesting a shift from temporary crisis response to **permanent emergency governance**. Key mechanisms illustrate both the potential and limitations of rapid collective action: the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD), activated for the first time in 2022, enabled swift coordinated responses for over 4 million refugees from Ukraine, while the Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) framework demonstrated value in crisis coordination yet exposed uneven application across member states[5]. Similarly, DG HOME and DG ECHO rapid grants have accelerated emergency responses affecting both refugees and other migrants, though sometimes at the expense of transparency and local ownership[6].

The **challenge remains urgent.** While irregular border crossings dropped 42% in the first nine months of 2024 compared to 2023, the EU issued 484,160 deportation orders in 2023, but fewer than one-quarter of people actually left[7]. This gap, combined with fragmented approaches across member states[8], shows the ongoing **operational problems** that emergency systems must solve —covering both asylum for refugees and management of other migration[9]. **Europe needs to balance competing goals: controlling irregular entry while enabling needed labor migration, protecting refugees and upholding humanitarian values** while addressing security concerns, and sharing responsibilities fairly across economically diverse member states.

KEY FINDINGS FROM EPIC-UP RESEARCH

The research carried out under the EPIC-UP project on emergency mechanisms brought together existing literature, policies, and initiatives from across the partner countries. This desk-based study, complemented by in-depth consultations with five key actors (July–August 2025) and insights from a Policy Lab with external migration experts, aimed to build a **comprehensive and comparative understanding of the national contexts, practices, and narratives that shape migrant integration today.**

CHALLENGE 1: PLANS WITHOUT IMPLEMENTATION

All six partner countries emphasize "rapid response," but funding shortages, unclear laws, and uneven local capacity mean **most plans don't work in practice.** The main failures come from government agencies working on isolation, causing delays, while

local governments lack housing, staff, and resources to implement national policies. Bulgaria's border facilities struggle with sudden arrivals. German and Italian municipalities apply national directives inconsistently.

CHALLENGE 2: OVER-RELIANCE ON NGOS

Rather than fixing capacity problems, governments increasingly depend on external actors to fill gaps. NGOs perform essential functions that should be **government responsibilities**, compensating for limited capacity or political unwillingness to act comprehensively. But NGOs lack formal authority, guaranteed budgets, and legal standing, making their **services vulnerable to political changes and funding cuts**. Governments have essentially outsourced core duties while keeping policy control, creating fragile temporary systems that can collapse under pressure.

CHALLENGE 3: LAWS THAT EXCLUDE RATHER THAN PROTECT

Legal frameworks increasingly **prioritize border control over human rights**. Emergency powers and temporary legislation bypass due process protections. Poland's 2025 asylum suspension for **"instrumentalised migration"** and Italy's emergency decrees that enable rapid policy changes without parliament exemplify this trend. These mechanisms undermine international refugee protections and create inconsistent application with reduced safeguards —**turning law from something that protects people into a tool for exclusion**.

CHALLENGE 4: PERMANENT EMERGENCY GOVERNANCE

At the deepest level, democratic governance is eroding. Governments now routinely declare migration emergencies as a **standard policy tool rather than temporary measures**, **enabling quick executive action without democratic scrutiny or transparency**. Greece and Italy treat repeated migration emergencies as routine. **This normalization weakens parliamentary oversight, limits judicial review, and makes exceptional measures permanent** —cementing policies that prioritize border security over human rights and eroding public trust.

Acknowledging the urgency of these systemic shortcomings, the Policy Lab participants convened to address the identified gaps in a direct and constructive manner. The following section of this report presents the collaboratively developed **policy recommendations**, formulated to disrupt the self-perpetuating cycle of implementation failures, excessive outsourcing, legal degradation, and democratic decline.

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL

The EU's attempt to legislate its way out of crisis through the **Pact on Migration and Asylum** risks creating a system that is optimized for theoretical scenarios but fragile in the face of real-world volatility. The contrast between the structured Ukraine response and the "chronic emergency" in the EU's frontline countries reveals a critical flaw: **a system reliant on rigid conformity cannot adapt to diverse or prolonged crises**. To be effective, the EU must foster **antifragility** -designing mechanisms that gain from shocks and stress- by prioritising **flexibility, local adaptation, and redundancy over top-down, one-size-fits-all control.** The recommendations proposed by the Policy Lab's participants include:

1) Ensuring flexible and rapid funding:

- Simplify procedures for local and national actors to access EU emergency funds (e.g., rapid-deployment grants) swiftly, reducing bureaucratic bottlenecks.
- Align emergency funding (e.g., under the Pact) with long-term integration objectives to create seamless transitions from crisis response to sustainable inclusion, avoiding the looming challenge when temporary protection statuses expire.

2) Promoting effective solidarity to prevent chronic emergencies

- Develop solidarity mechanisms that are triggered proactively and predictably to support frontline member states facing a "permanent state of emergency", ensuring respect for human rights and preventing system saturation.

3) Setting minimum standards, not rigid procedures:

- Establish binding EU-wide minimum standards for protection, reception, and vulnerability triage, but avoid ultra-conformity in their implementation. Allow for local adaptation and experimentation.

4) Mainstreaming protection and victim support:

- Embed status-neutral access to victim support services (shelters, legal aid, mental health) as a mandatory component of all EU-funded emergency frameworks, in line with the EU Victims' Rights Directive.

5) Facilitating knowledge and data sharing:

- Create EU-level platforms for sharing scalable operational models, best practices, and data on migration flows while respecting data protection, helping all levels prepare.

The policy lab participants identified a shared goal: **enabling central, regional, and local actors to operate** under shared mandates that reduce friction and fragmentation, **ensuring national governments sustain integration efforts beyond EU funding cycles**, developing a skilled trauma-informed workforce for dignified migrant reception, transforming crises into well-prepared responses rather than improvised reactions, and demonstrating competence that mitigates polarisation and fear-based politics. Achieving this requires **coordinated responsibility across multiple actors**: the European Commission (DG HOME, DG ECHO) **designing flexible funding instruments and legal frameworks**; the European Parliament and Council legislating **adaptable standards with democratic oversight**; EU agencies (European Union Agency for Asylum, Frontex, Fundamental Rights Agency) providing operational coordination, training, and data-sharing infrastructure; Member States co-creating **antifragile mechanisms** and solidarity triggers; and civil society and expert networks feeding local innovation into EU knowledge platforms.

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NATIONAL LEVEL

National governments are often the critical juncture where political failure occurs. They are often perceived as sights of tensions between regions, unclear responsibilities, and a disconnect between EU planning and local implementation. Conversely, strong political will and coordination are the bedrock of success. To build resilience, national strategies must move beyond ad-hoc crisis management and **create ownership of integration structures**, ensuring the system does not collapse if EU funding or political attention wanes. The recommendations include:

1) Demonstrating political will and lead coordination:

- Foster high-level coordination among ministries, administrations, and social entities. This was a key success factor in Spain's effective responses.
- Actively manage and resolve tensions between central and regional governments to present a unified, effective response.

2) Providing predictable funding and co-financing:

- Actively co-fund EU emergency and integration projects to ensure national ownership and commitment, reducing systemic fragility from over-reliance on Brussels.
- Allocate national funds for long-term integration research and professionalisation of services.

3) Developing inclusive national preparedness plans:

- Create national contingency plans that are developed in consultation with regional and local authorities, NGOs, and migrant-led organisations from the outset. These plans must be scalable to prevent saturation and include specific strategies for vulnerable groups, such as the unaccompanied minors.

4) Establishing clear legal and coordination frameworks:

- Legally mandate and resource multi-stakeholder coordination hubs that bring together regional authorities, municipalities, and civil society.
- Clarify responsibilities between different national ministries and between national and local actors to eliminate ambiguity during a crisis.

5) Building national capacity:

- Invest in national training programs for frontline professionals (police, social workers, case managers) in trauma-informed care, cultural mediation, and identifying vulnerabilities.
- Simplify procedures for the recognition of professional qualifications for migrants and refugees to foster long-term integration.

LOCAL AND MUNICIPAL LEVEL

Local authorities and civil society are the first responders, yet they consistently face a lack of resources, fragmented communication, and insufficient mandates. Empowering this level is essential for identifying vulnerabilities early, fostering community inclusion, and adapting one-size-fits-all policies to human realities, ensuring that emergency response is the first step toward lasting integration. The recommendations include:

1) Developing and activate local contingency plans:

- Establish one-stop centers that can be set up in less than 24 hours to provide coordinated services, managed in a consultative way to ensure efficiency and avoid duplication.
- With support from national/EU levels, every municipality at risk should have a locally grounded contingency plan with pre-agreed roles for all local actors (municipal departments, NGOs, community groups).

2) Leading local coordination and service delivery:

- Establish and lead local coordination hubs to ensure fluid communication and collaboration between municipal departments, social services, local NGOs, and migrant communities.
- Implement early vulnerability triage systems at the point of arrival and create clear local referral pathways to specialised support (e.g., for victims of crime, mental health).

3) Adapting and innovate in service provision:

- Repurpose buildings swiftly for emergency housing to address chronic overcrowding.
- Integrate cultural mediators and interpreters directly into local service centers, schools, and healthcare facilities to overcome language and cultural barriers.
- Provide not just basic needs but also "fun activities" and mental health

support to promote well-being and social connections.

4) Fostering community engagement and ownership:

- Formally involve migrants and refugees in the design and evaluation of local emergency measures and integration programs.
- Build networks with local businesses, community groups, and volunteers to create structured mentorship programs and foster a "whole-of-society" approach.
- Actively work to change negative narratives by showcasing successful local integration and relying on data and lived experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

European migration governance faces a critical paradox: policy frameworks have grown more sophisticated while operational capacity and democratic accountability have eroded. Emergency mechanisms originally designed as temporary measures have become institutionalised, often bypassing democratic oversight and displacing core state responsibilities onto underfunded civil society.

This fragmentation cannot persist. Reversing the trajectory requires **coordinated action across all governance levels.** At the EU level, **antifragile, flexible funding and solidarity mechanisms must replace rigid conformity.** National governments must anchor these efforts through **coordinated planning and sustainable co-financing, ensuring integration persists beyond political cycles**. At the local level, civil society and municipal authorities must transition **from passive implementers to genuine partners** in designing and delivering services. Yet structural reform is insufficient without **democratic renewal.** Restoring legitimacy demands embedding scrutiny, transparency, and **meaningful migrant participation throughout governance.** By demonstrating competence and respect for human dignity, Europe can shift polarized narratives and build social cohesion.

The EPIC-UP project operationalises this vision by embedding **multi-actor collaboration** within the institutional and epistemic frameworks that shape local policy. Through Communities of Practices, the project aims to bridge the enduring gap between EU ambition and municipal capacity by generating contextually grounded knowledge that resists both top-down impositions and siloed fragmentation. By testing and consolidating new services in partnership with migrants, civil society, and public authorities, **EPIC-UP demonstrates that democratic governance and operational effectiveness are not zero-sum but mutually reinforcing.** These interventions move beyond aspiration to furnish replicable models - evidence that Europe can govern migration strategically, humanely, and democratically at scale.

EPIC-UP aims to bridge the enduring gap between EU ambition and municipal capacity by generating contextually grounded knowledge.

END NOTES

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