

30 years IOM Switzerland - Migration trends, developments, and challenges

IOM Switzerland

1. The foundation of IOM Switzerland

Based on a Memorandum of Understanding between IOM and the Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP) signed in 1994, the IOM Office in Bern supports the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM, then the Federal Office for Refugees) in the voluntary return and reintegration of asylum seekers and, in some cases, foreign nationals, as well as in specific migration projects in individual countries of origin. In 1994 IOM Switzerland was also a member of the Interdepartmental Steering Committee for Return Assistance (ISCR) and played an advisory role.

2. Return and reintegration assistance

The main activity of IOM Bern is return and reintegration assistance. Especially in the early years, following the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, return assistance was characterized by a country-specific approach. IOM implemented programs on a country-by-country basis. Today, the focus is more on individual return assistance.

Since 2002, IOM Switzerland has been implementing the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program. AVRR currently comprises five projects:

- [Swiss Return Information Fund \(RIF\)](#)
- [SwissREPAT-IOM Movements \(SIM\)](#)
- [Reintegration Assistance Switzerland \(RAS\)](#)
- [Return assistance from the Federal Asylum Center \(RAZ\)](#)
- [Return and reintegration assistance for victims of human trafficking](#)

Return assistance includes support for travel and arrival in the home country. Reintegration assistance provides returnees with financial and medical support and helps them find housing, among other things.

3. Country programs

In addition to individual return assistance, the SEM, together with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and IOM, has implemented more comprehensive [return and reintegration programs](#) for certain countries. These programs address the specific needs of returnees and their countries of origin. Country programs are approved for a limited period and are adapted to local conditions and needs. For example, the country program for Nigeria (2005-2016) introduced business training for the first time.

4. Combating human trafficking

[Combating human trafficking](#) is another of IOM's main activities, which has been carried out since 1994. IOM's main objectives are to prevent trafficking and to protect victims by ensuring safe and sustainable reintegration assistance for trafficked persons in their country of origin. In order to achieve these goals, IOM Switzerland launched the project "[Return and Reintegration Assistance for Trafficked Persons](#)". IOM Switzerland also runs projects to raise awareness of human trafficking in Swiss society. To this end, IOM Switzerland organizes action weeks and one action day (on alternate years) around the [European Day Against Human Trafficking](#) on October 18. These activities are carried out in collaboration with the Federal Office of Police (fedpol).

5. Resettlement

The Swiss [resettlement program](#) was launched in 2013 in response to the war in Syria. Through this program, Switzerland accepts particularly vulnerable refugees and promotes their integration. For this UNHCR program, the SEM mandated IOM to organize the journey, obtain the necessary travel documents, conduct medical examinations, and provide a three-day integration course to familiarize the refugees with Switzerland before they enter the country. IOM Switzerland coordinates this task in close cooperation with the IOM offices in the countries of origin.

6. Family reunification

In 2021 IOM Switzerland took over [family reunification](#) and humanitarian visa activities from IOM headquarters in Geneva. Beneficiaries are supported at every stage of the process. In addition, IOM Switzerland ensures that beneficiaries can travel to Switzerland in a safe, regular, and informed manner. Medical needs and other vulnerabilities are considered in the travel arrangements. IOM Switzerland offers the same support services to people who have been granted a humanitarian visa.

7. IOM Strategic Plan (2024-2028) and Liaison

IOM Switzerland participates in the migration dialogue and engages in knowledge sharing on relevant migration policy and operational/humanitarian issues. This includes supporting exchanges between other IOM offices and Swiss partners, thereby promoting cooperation between IOM and Switzerland.

IOM's [Global Strategic Plan 2024-2028](#) is based on the vision of realizing the promise of migration while supporting those who are most disadvantaged. It aims to convey the message that migration can improve the lives of individuals and entire societies. The plan is aligned with the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) and the [Global Compact on Migration](#).

Global and regional policy developments in the area of migration

1. The Berne Initiative (2001-2004) - Development of the International Agenda for Migration Management (IAMM) and the Global Commission on International Migration

The Berne Initiative was an initiative launched by the then Director of the Swiss Federal Office for Refugees, Dr. Jean-Daniel Gerber, hence the name “Berne Initiative”. The idea was to start a state-owned consultative process with the goal of obtaining better management of migration at the national, regional, and global levels through cooperation between states. It assisted governments in identifying their different policy priorities and offered the opportunity to develop a common orientation to migration management, based on notions of cooperation, comprehensiveness, balance, and predictability.

The Berne Initiative complemented international efforts such as the independent Global Commission on International Migration and IOM's International Dialogue on Migration by focusing on promoting inter-state cooperation in the management of migration, and by doing so at the global level through the development of a non-binding policy framework on migration, drawing on the effective practices emanating from regional cooperation mechanisms.

2. The Global Forum on Migration and Development (2007-present)

[The Global Forum on Migration and Development \(GFMD\)](#) is a voluntary, informal, non-binding and government-led process open to all States Members and Observers of the United Nations and selected [observer organizations](#). It was created upon the proposal of the UN Secretary-General at the September 2006 General Assembly High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development. Its main purpose is to address, in a transparent manner, the multidimensional aspects, opportunities and challenges related to international migration and its inter-linkages with development, to bring together government expertise from all regions, to enhance dialogue and cooperation and partnership and to foster practical and action-oriented outcomes at the national, regional, and global levels.

3. SDGs include Migration (2015-2030)

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes that migration is a powerful driver of sustainable development, for migrants and their communities. It brings significant benefits in the form of skills, strengthening the labour force, investment, and cultural diversity, and contributes to improving the lives of communities in their countries of origin through the transfer of skills and financial resources.

The benefits of migration should not be seen only from the perspective of what migrants can bring to any given territory. The relationship between migration and development is much more complex: the political, social, and economic processes of potential destination countries will also determine how, where and when migration occurs. If migration is poorly governed, it can also negatively impact on development. Migrants can be put at risk and communities can come under strain.

As outlined in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, “migration is a multi-dimensional reality that cannot be addressed by one government policy sector alone”. IOM therefore applies a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to migration governance, striving to ensure that migration and migrants’ needs are considered across all policy areas, laws, and regulations from health to education and from fiscal policies to trade.

4. Examples of regional dialogue processes and international agreements

[Puebla Process: Regional Conference on Migration \(1996-present\)](#)

The [Regional Conference on Migration \(RCM\)](#) is a Regional Consultative Process (RCP), that is voluntary, non-binding and operates by consensus. It provides a space for respectful, frank, and honest discussions among Member Countries on regional and international migration, ensuring greater coordination, transparency, and cooperation.

This multilateral forum works to foster regional efforts to strengthen migration governance; protect the human rights of migrants, especially of those in vulnerable situations; promote appropriate linkages between migration and sustainable development; define strategic priorities; and address the main challenges the region faces regarding migration; as well as strengthening, modernizing, and managing borders.

[Colombo Process or Regional Consultative Process on the Management of Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origins in Asia \(2003-present\)](#)

The [Regional Consultative Process on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin in Asia or the Colombo Process](#) aims to provide a forum for Asian labour-sending countries to:

- Share experiences, lessons learned and best practices on overseas employment and contractual labour;
- Consult on issues faced by overseas workers, and labour sending and receiving states, and offers practical solutions for the well-being of overseas workers, particularly the vulnerable overseas workers;
- Optimize development benefits from organized overseas employment, and enhance dialogue with countries of destination; and
- Review and monitor the implementation of the ministerial recommendations and identify further steps for action.

[UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families \(1990, in force since 2003\)](#)

[The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families](#) is a United Nations multilateral treaty governing the protection of migrant workers and families. Signed on 18 December 1990, it entered into force on 1 July 2003 after the threshold of 20 ratifying States was reached in March 2003. The Committee on Migrant Workers (CMW) monitors implementation of the convention and is one of the seven UN-linked human rights treaty bodies. The convention applies as of September 2023 in 59 countries.

UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime (2000, in force since 2003)

[The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) (UNTOC, also called the Palermo Convention) is a 2000 United Nations-sponsored multilateral treaty [against transnational organized crime](#).

The convention was adopted by a [resolution](#) of the United Nations General Assembly on 15 November 2000.

The Convention came into force on 29 September 2003. According to [Leoluca Orlando](#), Mayor of Palermo, the convention was the first international convention to fight transnational organized crime, trafficking of human beings, and terrorism.

The European Union and Switzerland: Asylum and Migration Acquis

1. The bilateral approach - Switzerland's relations with the EU

Switzerland is located in the heart of Europe and is almost exclusively surrounded by member states of the European Union (EU). Because of this geographical and cultural proximity, but also because of their economic and political influence, the EU and its member states are Switzerland's most important partners. Switzerland pursues an interest-based policy towards the EU, which is based on a series of bilateral agreements. Through the bilateral agreements, Switzerland is involved in several EU policy areas that concern the following areas: the internal market, the Schengen Agreement, the Dublin Agreement and the EU's research and mobility programs. Cooperation between Switzerland and the EU in the areas of migration, asylum and border management is of particular importance to IOM Switzerland.

Between 2014 and 2021, Switzerland and the EU negotiated an institutional framework agreement to secure and further develop Switzerland's participation in the EU's internal market. Negotiations have been suspended but are expected to resume.

2. Free Movement - Strong Human and Social Ties

As part of the bilateral agreement, Switzerland and the EU concluded an agreement on the free movement of people. This gives citizens on each side the right to live and work in Switzerland and in the EU, provided they have a job or other source of income.

Around [1.5 million EU citizens](#) live in Switzerland and constitute around 16% of the population. Conversely, around [520'000 Swiss citizens](#) live in the EU. Another [390'000 EU citizens](#) cross the border daily to work in Switzerland. The free movement of people constitutes an important part of EU-Swiss relations. The agreement cannot be separated from other agreements that give Switzerland privileged access to the EU's internal market. In the past, Switzerland was also associated with the EU's student and youth mobility programs.

3. European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)

[Frontex](#), the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, was founded in 2004 with the aim of supporting the member states and Schengen-associated countries in protecting the EU's external borders. As an EU agency, Frontex is financed from the EU budget and by contributions from the associated Schengen countries.

Switzerland contributes to Frontex budget. The Federal Office for Customs and Border Security (FOCBS) has been participating in Frontex operations at the Schengen external borders since 2011. These activities are part of Switzerland's border management strategy. The FOCBS is the national coordination office for Frontex and represents Switzerland on Frontex's Management Board. In addition to operational deployments, Swiss experts participate in training programs and various Frontex working groups. On average, FOCBS employees work around 1,400 days a year for Frontex. Swiss border guard experts are mainly deployed as debriefers (interviewers), document specialists, dog handlers and observers for one to four months. They are not deployed on coast guard vessels.

On Sunday 15th May 2022 Switzerland had a referendum on three issues, one of them related to *the Adoption of the Regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard and repealing Regulations*, as a result of the 2021 decision of the Parliament to increase the annual contribution to Frontex from 24 million (2021) to 61 million (2027).

The outcome was overwhelmingly in support of the initiative (71% in favor), with slightly below 40% national participation. Although not a member of the EU, Switzerland was the first country to vote in a popular vote on Frontex in the aftermath of accusations of fundamental rights violations. The *No* vote would have had direct consequences: the end of the cooperation with Schengen and Dublin EU Member States in security, asylum, return, cross-border traffic, tourism, and the economy. The *yes* was a clear signal from the population for strong cooperation with the EU on the common European migration and asylum policy.

4. The European Union Agency for Asylum

Since the 1990s, the EU has been striving to harmonize its asylum policy. The development of a [Common European Asylum System](#) (CEAS) was therefore driven forward from 1999. Over the years, aspects such as minimum standards for the implementation of asylum procedures and the accommodation and care of asylum seekers have been regulated. The EU member states are now jointly responsible for receiving asylum seekers in a humane manner, treating them fairly and examining their applications according to uniform standards. However, the EU's external border states are mainly affected by refugee flows, and in the absence of a fair distribution mechanism, the majority of asylum seekers arriving in Europe remain the responsibility of the external border states.

In 2022, the former European Asylum Support Office (EASO) became a fully-fledged EU agency, as foreseen in the reform package of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). [The European Union Agency for Asylum \(EUAA\)](#) has been given new powers to improve the implementation and functioning of the CEAS by strengthening practical cooperation and information exchange between Member States. Switzerland's participation in the EUAA enables it to contribute to a more efficient and fairer asylum system in Europe.

Migration and Switzerland

1. Major Migration Movements in Switzerland before 1994

Until the middle of the 19th century, Switzerland was still characterized by strong emigration. Towards the end of the century, this trend reversed, and Switzerland became a country of immigration.

Between 1951 and 1970, at a time of economic crisis and global labour shortages, 2.68 million migrant workers arrived in Switzerland. They were mainly Italians, Spaniards and Portuguese. Many had to leave Switzerland during the economic crisis of 1973-1984. The economic upswing from 1985 onwards led to a renewed increase in labour migration, mainly from Portugal and Yugoslavia.

Overall, the proportion of foreigners in the population fell from 17.2% in 1970 to 14.8% in 1980, then rose again to 16.4% in 1990 and reached 19.5% in 2000.

In addition to labour migration, certain key events of the 20th century (conflicts, state repression, authoritarian regimes, etc.) led to global refugee movements. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines the term "refugee", specifies the rights of uprooted persons and the legal obligations of states to grant them protection. Accordingly, Swiss law also offers protection to refugees. In 1956, following the suppression of the popular uprising in Budapest, Switzerland accepted some 12,000 Hungarian refugees. In 1959, about 1,700 Tibetans found refuge in Switzerland, and by 1980 Switzerland had the largest Tibetan community outside Asia. As a result of the Pinochet regime, more than 1600 Chileans also found refuge in Switzerland (1973). During the Vietnam War (1975-1983), some 8200 South Vietnamese were admitted to Switzerland. Since the 1980s, people from Turkey (1980), Sri Lanka (1983) and the former Yugoslavia (1994), among others, have come to Switzerland in search of international protection.

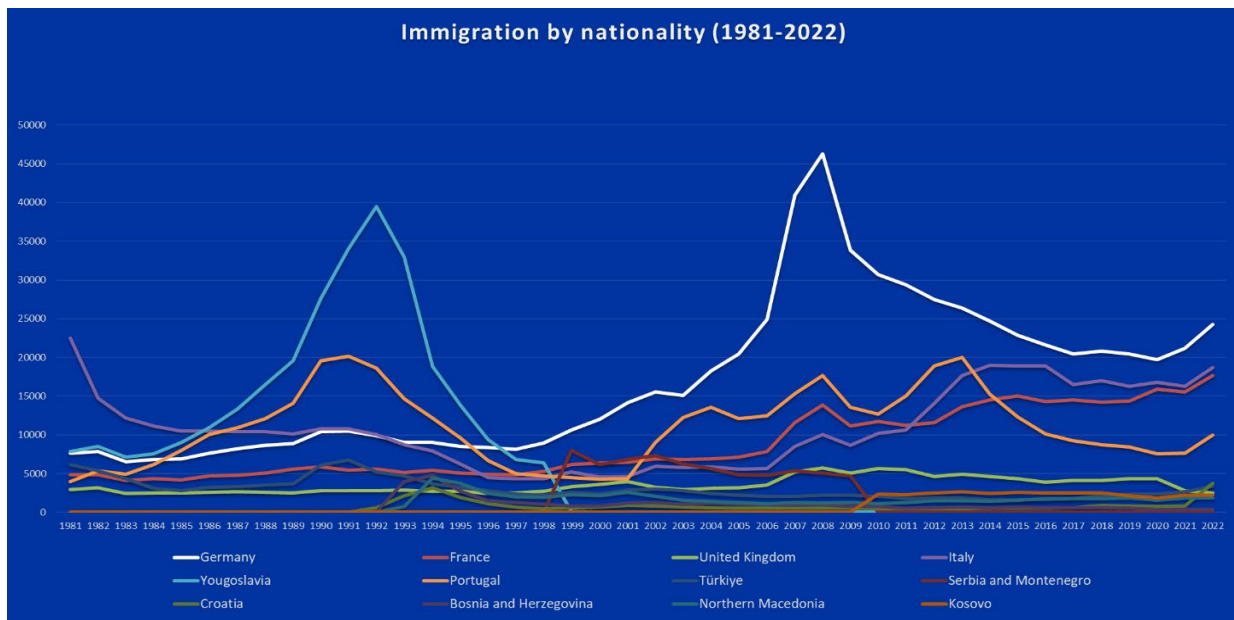


Figure: Immigration by nationality (1981-2022)

<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/migrationintegration/foreign/composition.assetdetail.26645119.html>

2. Demography of Switzerland

The demographic situation in Switzerland is currently characterized by a declining Swiss population and a foreign population that has been growing again since 2018. The majority of [foreign nationals](#) in Switzerland continue to come from neighboring EU countries, particularly Italy, Germany and Portugal.

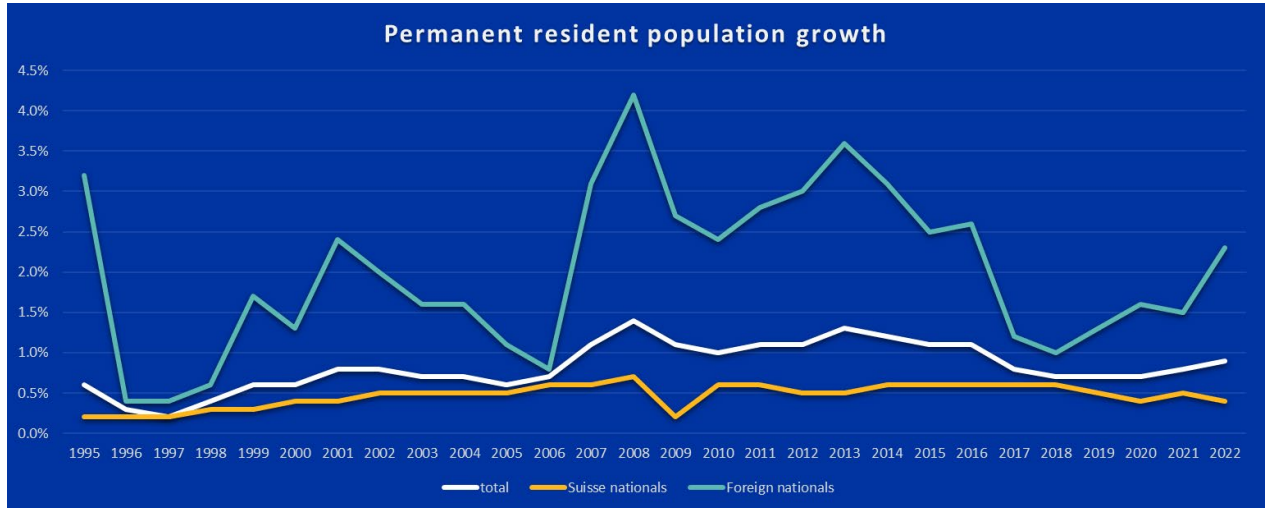


Figure: Growth of the permanent resident population by nationality

<https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/effectif-change.assetdetail.26905451.html>

Moreover, in 2022, the number of people leaving the labour market will exceed the number of people entering it for the first time. According to the [reference forecast](#) of the Federal Statistical Office, this problem will become much more acute in the next 25-30 years.

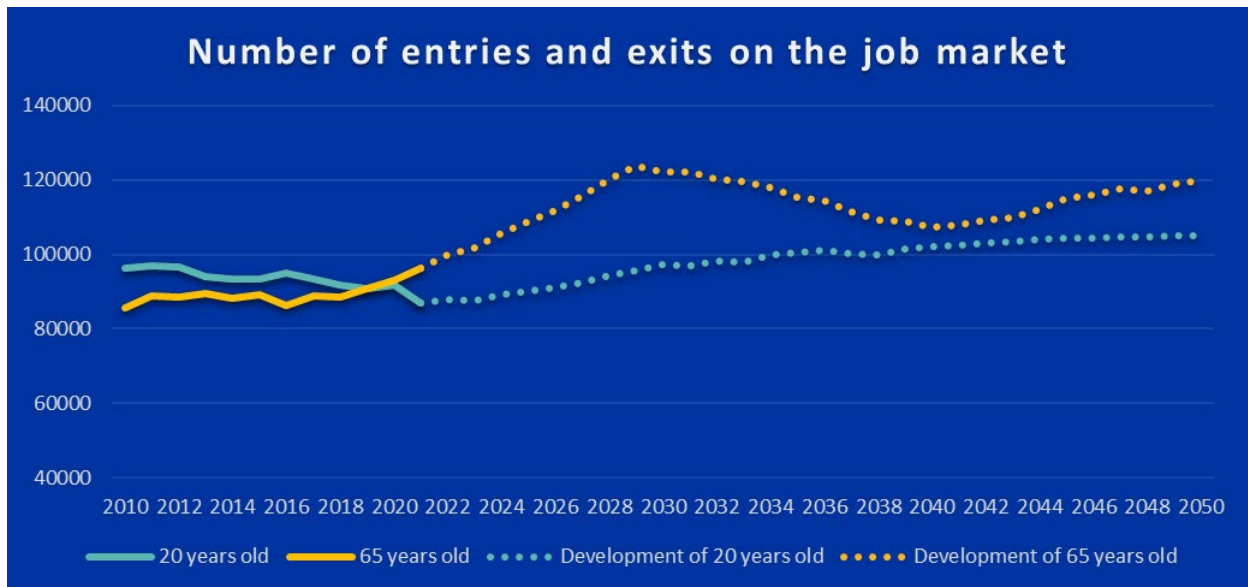


Figure: Number of people aged 20 and 65 in Switzerland (projections according to FSO reference scenario)

<https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/demographic-shifts-cause-swiss-labour-market-crunch/48250862>

The skills shortage is reflected in the Swiss Skills Shortage Index. The Swiss Skills Shortage Index of Adecco Group Switzerland and the Job Market Monitor of the University of Zurich shows in which professions there

is the greatest shortage of skilled workers and in which professions there is the greatest oversupply of skilled workers. It also analyzes the occupational groups in which the number of vacancies is particularly high or low compared to the number of job seekers.

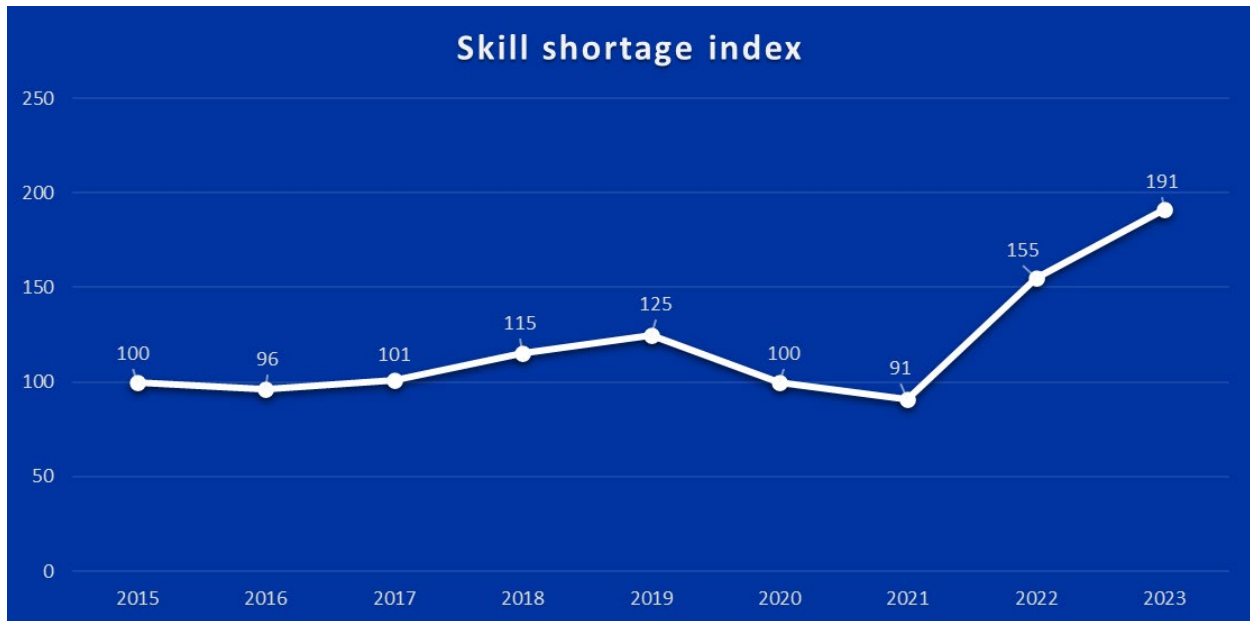


Figure: Skill Shortage Index

<https://www.adecogroup.com/en-ch/future-of-work/swiss-skills-shortage/swiss-skills-shortage-2023/>

The greatest shortage is in healthcare, followed by IT, software, and engineering.

Top 5 professions with a shortage of skilled workers in 2023	
1	Specialists in healthcare professions
2	Developers and analysts of software and IT applications
3	Engineering and comparable specialists
4	Construction managers, foremen and production managers
5	Polymechanics, production mechanics, machine mechanics and locksmiths

Figure: Top 5 occupational groups with a shortage of skilled workers in 2023

<https://www.adecogroup.com/en-ch/future-of-work/swiss-skills-shortage/swiss-skills-shortage-2023/>

3. Political initiatives and civil society engagement in the field of migration

Migration and asylum are highly polarizing issues and are often the subject of debate and popular initiatives in Switzerland. This is due to the steady increase in the foreign resident population since the 1980s, but also to the fact that these issues are increasingly being discussed in public and have gained importance. Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing number of popular initiatives some parties that seek to either restrict immigration,

disadvantage foreigners, or facilitate the deportation of foreigners. Other parties advocate pro-migrant policies and see migration as an opportunity for Switzerland. NGOs are primarily concerned with the human rights of migrants and lobby the federal government in Bern to ensure that these rights are respected. Many NGOs fight for humane asylum practices and organize events on migration and flight to inform and sensitize the Swiss population.

4. History of the State Secretariat for Migration

With the creation of the Office of the Delegate for Refugees (DFW) in 1985, asylum was separated from the police for the first time and recognized as an important domestic policy issue. Although the DFW was intended to be temporary, it was transformed into the Federal Office for Refugees in the 1990s as the number of asylum applications rose sharply and the Confederation realized that asylum and refugee issues were becoming permanent tasks. In 2005, a far-reaching development took place in the area of asylum and foreigners. The Federal Office for Refugees and the Federal Office for Immigration, Integration and Emigration were merged to form the Federal Office for Migration. The merger of the two federal offices was intended to create a coordinated Swiss migration policy covering asylum, immigration, labour market, integration, and foreign policy aspects. The renaming of the Federal Office for Migration to the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) in 2015 reflects the fact that migration has become increasingly important in domestic and foreign policy.

Source: Stephan Parak "Asylpraxis der Schweiz von 1979 bis 2019"

5. Migration as a central aspect of Swiss foreign policy

In the [FDFA's International Cooperation Strategy 2021-2024](#), the reduction of the causes of displacement and irregular migration was defined for the first time as one of four projects. Migration was already one of the focal points of the six global programs in the [International Cooperation Strategy 2017-2020](#). In addition, the Federal Council has strategically linked the IC strategy with migration policy to do justice to the importance of migration in development aid.

6. Bilateral migration agreements and partnerships

[Migration agreements and partnerships](#) with transit countries and countries of origin are important tools for managing migratory movements. These agreements are based on a partnership approach that considers the interests of all parties involved. Switzerland has developed various types of instruments that enable the country to pursue its interests in the area of migration while cooperating with other states at various levels.

7. Resettlement in Switzerland

Since ratifying the Geneva Refugee Convention in 1955, Switzerland has accepted several refugee groups from conflict regions. When large numbers of refugees from the former Yugoslavia entered Switzerland in the 1990s, the practice was suspended. With the war in Syria, the Federal Council decided in 2013 to resume the [resettlement program](#), initially as a pilot project. The aim of the program is to receive and integrate particularly vulnerable refugees in Switzerland. Those selected are granted asylum and supported in their integration in Switzerland. IOM plays a central role in the preparation and implementation of resettlement movements.

8. War refugees from Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 forced millions of Ukrainian citizens to leave their country. An estimated 6 million Ukrainian refugees are registered in Europe. Of these, about [90,000](#) have been granted protection in Switzerland (as of January 2024). In March 2022, the Federal Council activated protection status S for the first time. With this protection status, refugees will be granted a residence permit without having to go through a formal asylum procedure. Like the temporary admission (F permit), the S protection status is also return-oriented and is granted for a limited period of one year; it can, however, be extended. Unlike F status, S status allows people to travel abroad without a travel permit, work, and bring their families home without a waiting period.

Many Ukrainians applied for protection in Switzerland, especially in the first months after the outbreak of the war. However, the average monthly number of protection applications fell significantly in the summer of 2022 and remained constant in 2023.

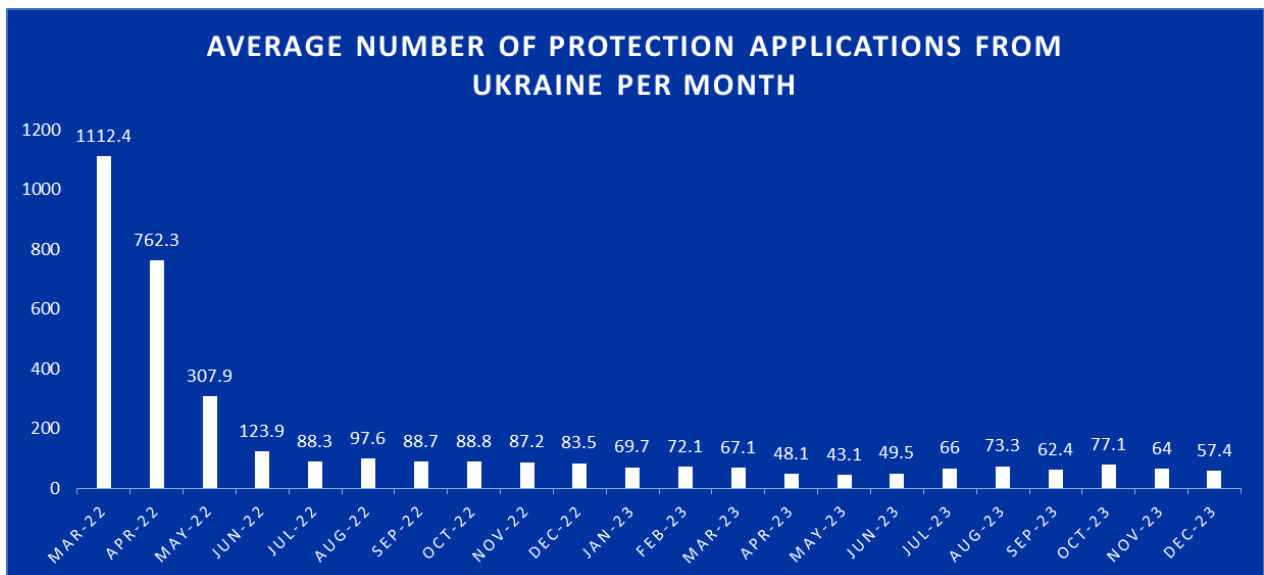


Figure: Average applications for protection from Ukraine per month
<https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/en/home/asyl/ukraine/statistiken.html>

A few key figures in the field of global migration

Peter Sutherland (UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for International Migration 2006-2017)



Peter Sutherland was responsible for the establishment of the GFMD (2006) and the UN High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (2007). He influenced EU migration policy and was President of the International Catholic Migration Commission. He ensured that migrants were represented in the development goals (SDGs) for the first time. The Sutherland Report on Migration provided for better management of migration through international cooperation and made an important contribution to the negotiations for the Global Compact on Migration (Dec. 2018). He organized the first-ever UN Summit on Migrants and Refugees (September 2016), at which IOM was admitted to the UN. Fun fact: As EU Commissioner for Competition Policy and Education, he introduced the Erasmus exchange program in 1986, which enables students from European universities to study in other member states.

Louise Arbor: (UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for International Migration since 2017)



Louise Arbor has a long and successful career in international affairs. She was previously United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. She is a former judge of the Supreme Court of Canada and the Ontario Court of Appeal. From 2009 to 2014, she was President and CEO of the International Crisis Group. In 2017, she was appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, as his Special Representative for International Migration. She worked with Member States and other stakeholders to develop the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and supported the Secretary-General of the Conference in adopting the negotiated Global Compact in 2018.

Gabrielle Rodriguez-Pizarro (first Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants)



The mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants was created by the Commission on Human Rights in 1999 with resolution 1999/44. Since then, the mandate has been extended for three-year periods by resolutions 2002/62 and 2005/47.

The Special Rapporteur does not need to have exhausted domestic legal remedies in order to take action. If a matter falls under more than one mandate given by the Commission, the Special Rapporteur may decide to turn to other thematic mechanisms and country rapporteurs to submit joint communications or request joint missions.