

After enlargement: Europe's new migration system

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DIIS Brief

After Enlargement: Europe's New Migration System

Adrian Favell
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Policy makers underestimate the importance of underlying demographics and labour market dynamics on future East-West migration in Europe. Flows have generally been demand driven, and have therefore been drawn by European nations with the most open and informal labour markets – such as Britain, Ireland, Italy and Spain – rather than more highly regulated welfare states such as Denmark. They are also more likely to be circular and temporary than one way immigration. I discuss the desirability of the apparently inevitable trend in Europe towards a more US style international labour market that strongly parallels the migration system between the US and Mexico. The underlying trend in Europe is towards the emergence of a more regionalised system, in which West European societies come to rely on East European movers to fill secondary labour market needs in the service economy, rather than more racially or ethnically distinct non-European immigrants.

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THE ENLARGEMENT of the EU eastwards in May 2004 completed a geo-political shift in post-1989 Europe, that – in terms of the migration and mobility of populations – poses the biggest demographic change in Europe since the end of the second world war. For sure, the freedom of movement of persons from the new Member (and candidate) States remains a contentious issue. West European Member States seem far less keen on the movement of people westwards, while worrying little about the gold rush of Western capital and business east. Yet one by one borders are coming down, and a new East-West migration system is being established in the continent.

Views on this subject across Europe, however, remain very different. Denmark, to some extent, seems to have insulated itself from the wider trends. A recent poster on the Copenhagen metro showed a ‘typical’ plumber or construction worker – in fact being ‘played’ by a rather famous Danish Olympic athlete – and posed the question: *Sort Arbejde: Hvem er det egentlig du snyder?* Commuters were offered the economic incentive to phone in their answer to this question and win an iPod: whether they think it is the ‘Tax ministry’, or ‘Yourself and your neighbours’. One might suppose that no normal, average Danish citizen – *selvfølgelig* – would ever pay someone ‘on the black’ to paint their house, mend their roof, wash their car, look after their children, clean their toilet, or mow their lawn...

The successful moralisation of this issue in Denmark is of course remarkable, but it is even more remarkable in today’s Europe that the face on the poster is patently *etnisk Dansk*. The same poster in France would show a Pole, and probably be part of an anti-EU political campaign. In Britain, the poster might be celebrating the ‘Polish plumber’ as a key part of an economic miracle built in large part on the backs of exploited East (and West) Europeans working informally in the relaxed British labour market. In the USA, the same face would, without a doubt, be Latino and almost certain to be working irregularly. As a recent satirical Mexican film reminds us: in Los Angeles, ‘a day without a Mexican’ and the whole city would grind to a halt. Denmark is unusual in keeping a relatively closed access to informal foreign workers, although it is far from watertight. It is also increasingly unusual in Europe to not actually base its economy on expanding labour markets of this kind. A *Nordjyske* journalist wrote to me recently and asked: “In Denmark most people seem to think that we live in the best country in the world, and that everyone else’s biggest dream is to live here, too. Are we completely wrong? Are there going to be an ‘invasion’ of foreigners in Denmark in the next couple of years?” Well, no. Apparently not, if you believe in the laws of supply and demand.

Nearly all the policy advocacy on East-West migration, as well as all the credible demographic and economic scholarship, suggests that the West has little to fear. Europe as a whole, they say, is only likely to benefit from a greater degree of manageable East-West movement. Not only is Western Europe likely to benefit from a new influx of highly educated, talented or (in any case) ambitious East

Europeans. These migration trends are also quite different from the post-colonial, guest worker and asylum immigration that has proven such a long term political issue in Europe. East European migrants are in fact regional 'free movers' *not* immigrants; and with the borders open, they are much more likely to engage in temporary circular and transnational mobility, governed by the ebb and flow of economic demand, than by long term permanent immigration and asylum seeking.

For all the good arguments to encourage open borders and free movement, the political calculation on these issues seems to point to a different rationality. There is in fact great electoral reward to be had by populist politicians using the 'threat' of open doors eastwards as a tool for berating the impact of the EU, in particular the liberalization of West European labour markets or employment legislation. The ugly French debate about the 'Polish plumber' during the EU constitutional vote of spring 2005 was but the most visible example of this phenomenon. Little matter that the handful of Polish plumbers in France are outnumbered ten to one by their Polish counterparts who dominant this sector in London or Manchester – or apparently that the British economy seems to be doing much better than the French on the back of this informal workforce. It was the failed Bolkestein directive on freedom of movement of services that opened the specter of European nation states no longer being able to control employment legislation on their own territory. France balked at the possibility of the rights of workers or the rules of the working week, in certain sectors now coming under the jurisdiction of say, Polish or British law, both of which are more lax. Critics call this competitive imbalance in the system 'social dumping', and 'a race to the bottom'. In reality, though, what is not harmonised (and thereby regulated) by the EU with planned legislation, may instead simply get accomplished by the free market, which is now able now to freely post workers *within* Europe wherever and whenever in the absence of meaningful border controls.

As regards the members that joined in 2004, West European nations have one by one accepted the inevitable and brought down transitional barriers to freedom of movement for new Member States. As things stand in June 2006, the trend seems to be clear after much lobbying from the European Commission. Initially only three countries opened their borders: Ireland, Sweden, and the UK. From May 2006, Finland, Greece, Portugal, and Spain have now followed suit. Belgium, France, Luxembourg and Italian are reducing barriers. Denmark and the Netherlands have been undecided. Only Austria and Germany – where hostility post 1989 has always been greatest – have confirmed they will maintain them. Numbers of such workers are however high in these countries, whether legal or not. Recently, on the other hand, Britain led the way in announcing that doors were to remain officially shut to Bulgarians and Romanians when these two countries join in January 2007. Spain quickly followed suit, even though in both cases it will simply mean that large numbers of workers already there in the two countries will not be able to regularise their status – or begin to pay taxes.

The slow political acceptance of open East-West borders confirms the underlying fact that Europe in future has an almost desperate structural demographic and labour force need for increased intra-European population movements. These have not been satisfied by the intra-EU movement of West Europeans, with regional disparities between the North and South evening out through development, structural funds and welfare provision. Labour markets instead have looked East. European economies, with some variation as mentioned above, increasingly resemble the USA, in which immigrants fill a vast range of low end service sector, manufacturing and agricultural work that nationals no longer accept. Who better to fill these 3D ('dirty, dangerous and dull') jobs, than neighbors from the East, who are likely to be temporary rather than permanent, and are ethnically 'similar' and/or culturally 'proximate'? There is a strong suspicion here that West Europeans might be quite happy to reduce their reliance on non-white, non-European immigrants by the development of a more internal and regional European labour market. This new migration system in fact might well extend beyond the nominal frontiers of the official Member States, to include candidate countries and other near neighbors. The European Neighbourhood Policy, although noted normally only for its security aspects, is also creating regulated cross-border markets in this way. The EU thus can be seen as a territorial project in regional integration, that has used its external partner agreements to set up new mechanisms of managing regional migration flows, while closing doors to others.

Idealist pro-EU federalists see the economic migration of East European as a win-win-win scenario, in which West European economies benefit from dynamic labour market effects, East European movers cash in on the premium of working in the higher paid West, and East European economies develop through the two way circulation of talent and capital. The EU, they think, can successfully govern and manage this scenario if political action is pooled at the supra-national level. These rosy scenarios have been celebrated especially in the on-going European Year of Mobility (2006), which has – along with influential NGOs in Brussels such as the European Citizenship Action Service (ECAS 2006) – lobbied hard for the breaking down of transitional barriers. Neo-liberal economists share their optimism, but are much happier to let the whole scenario play out in terms of the inter-national 'competition for the brightest and the best', where the more powerful western economies may indeed benefit disproportionately from the 'brain drain' of the most employable talent and skills from the East (Borjas 1999).

A whole new generation of researchers from East and Central Europe are now completing fascinating sociological and anthropological PhDs on this subject – many at prestigious West European academic institutions. They are studying the migration systems of Poles, Hungarians, Romanians or Bulgarians in Britain, Ireland, Germany, Spain or Italy (see Elrick and Favell, forthcoming). They, as well as other more systematic surveys, such as PIONEUR – a major three

year EU funded network, whose results are now available online – suggest a much less happy scenario than the theories above.¹

Both higher and lower end migrants from the East are attracted by the West, and certainly see their movements as temporary, opportunistic and circular. In fact there is little evidence that formal borders or barriers have made a lot of difference between, say, Poles and Romanians, although the latter are more likely to find themselves in precarious situations for want of official papers. But where their experiences are strikingly similar is in their strong sense of exclusion and exploitation. Many of these migrants accept sharp downward mobility in terms of status and qualifications in order to fill some low end niche in the labour market, that is grimly justified in terms of its payoff for family back home. The jobs they take are the ones that West citizens no longer want – those 3D jobs that have become a familiar range of employment ‘opportunities’ in the post-industrial service economy. Where there is conflict with the ‘natives’ over jobs and resources, the reaction gets expressed in populist and xenophobic terms. Where there is not, they slip into the background as an invisible but functional ‘secondary’ part of the economy. In Britain today, it is almost impossible to be served dinner or drinks in a rural pub or get your bathroom fixed in a big city, without encountering an East European worker. Many accept jobs they would have not dreamt of while studying at school back home. These ambitious ‘new Europeans’ are, in short, in danger of becoming a new Victorian servant class for a West European aristocracy of creative class professionals and university educated working mums.

Professional and college level East Europeans attracted West for educational opportunities, meanwhile, also find themselves blocked in their careers. For them, too, the emergent structure is of a discriminatory labour market, that keeps them provisional and precarious, in order the better to extract cheaper labour. The payoffs if any are in terms of their status in relation to their peer group back home. That might be enough to dampen the feeling that they are treated as if they don’t belong in the West, or that their hopeful European mobility might lead to serious long term consequences in terms of social isolation. The sentiment many still express is that West European societies may put on an increasingly open economic face, but the reality is that they still believe the USA one day will offer far more recognition and reward for their talents and entrepreneurship – if they can get there.

The American dream, thus, still sits behind so many of the ideas driving the opening of the European economy. Europeans may well ask whether this is the kind of society they want to see built in the name of economic growth and competitiveness – the mantra of the Lisbon Agenda, that puts mobility at the heart of its strategy. In most major cities in the USA today, the faces likely to be flipping burgers, cleaning cars, tending gardens, or working as *au pairs* for young children are Latino; in Europe today, these same figures speak with Balkan or Slavic accents. There is perhaps one more irony built into to

this apparently inevitable asymmetry between East and West, and the structural inequalities it reinforces. These new migrants may sometimes face hostility, but from the point of view of populist politicians, they are much more desirable than other, more visible, immigrant populations. It might be speculated that, in the long run, West European publics are likely to be more comfortable with the scenario of getting used to Balkan and Slavic accents, rather than seeing black and brown faces in the same jobs, or (especially) hearing them speak the language of Allah.

In an environment in which there are electoral gains to be had from talking tough on immigration, it is no surprise that most discussion on migration focuses on policies of immigration control or security. But, just as in the USA, much of this discussion is in fact a game of political 'smoke and mirrors' (Massey 2003), to mask just how little control governments or the EU have over migration and mobility trends, let alone the globalising international labour market. The underlying political economy of Europe, rather, is one that is not closing but *opening* borders to the East. Debates on immigration policy would therefore benefit from paying more attention first to the demographic trends and labour market dynamics that underwrite the policies that politicians defend.

Note

¹ Framework V project 2003-6, PIONEUR: Pioneers of European Integration 'From Below': Mobility and the Emergence of European Identity Among National and Foreign Citizens in the EU, directed by Ettore Recchi, Università di Firenze: <http://www.obets.ua.es/pioneur>

Further reading

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Tim Elrick and Adrian Favell (forthcoming), *The New Face of East-West Migration in Europe*, special edition of *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.

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Douglas Massey et al (2003) *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Migration in an Era of Economic Integration*. New York: Russell Sage.