

IMMIGRATION IN EUROPE AT A TIME OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

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Summary

- The global recession is resetting the context of the immigration debate across Europe.
- Immigration is one of the most visible manifestations of globalization for large numbers of Europeans.
- Globalization is a disruptive process challenging long held social assumptions and beliefs. It creates resistance, and concern over immigration is part of this.
- The recession is amplifying this effect significantly. The costs and benefits of globalization have never been equally shared, either within states or amongst them. Certain social groups fear immigration more than others, particularly in labour competition.
- The recession is leading to national or nationalist priorities becoming more popular and xenophobia can result.
- Political leaders understand this and even those who actively try to explain the advantages of immigration still tend to discuss it unhelpfully as a security issue.
- Immigration is a legally complex set of interrelated but different issues. The public discourse tends to not separate them, leading to all immigration issues being politically loaded.
- The EU plays an important role, but because borders and who can cross them is so closely linked to notions of sovereignty, the Union takes a secondary position to national policies.

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Photo: Gideon

Immigration and recession

The financial crisis of 2008 is leading to a serious and global recession. Around the world, governments are scrambling to shore up financial systems and to provide stimulus to national economies in an effort to avoid the double hit of increased unemployment and lowered tax revenues. Across Europe, as elsewhere around the world, the economic situation is perilous and the recession is creating a new context for all political debates.

Attitudes to immigration are particularly affected by the economic situation. Migration is often the most visible and tangible form of globalization that people experience in their daily lives. Globalization is a disruptive process: it tends to lead to economic growth but by its nature it also changes social life and political communities. Simply looking at wealth and well being, it is clear that Europe has been a winner from globalization. But the benefits it has brought are diverse and diversified whilst its costs are specific and often localized: a factory closing, an industry lost to overseas competition where labour is cheaper. Finnish industry has been heavily effected by these trends in recent years, particularly in electronics and the paper and pulp sectors. The costs mean that globalization is resisted by those who see themselves losing out from change. In a time of recession, that resistance spreads as increasing numbers see themselves on the losing side.

The costs and benefits of immigration are also not spread equally. Benefits brought by migration tend to be diffuse and experienced by whole societies, whilst

costs are disproportionately borne by a minority. Migrants bring changes to neighbourhoods and cities, but generally impact most rapidly and significantly on the already poor and deprived sections of those cities. This is clearly visible in Finland: most of the country is not diverse by European standards, but certain limited areas for instance in eastern Helsinki, Vantaa and Turku have rather large immigrant populations. This clustering can cause competition for limited public resources between new and old communities, creating racial or communal tensions. Again, recession amplifies the problems: firstly jobs become more scarce. Fears that jobs are going to immigrants or other non-locals become sharper. These fears are normally not justified. When paper workers are laid off in Finland their jobs are not taken by immigrants, but free movement of labour within the EU can produce these fears. Indicative of this have been the recent wild-cat strikes across Britain at various energy and power installations. The protests were against the energy company Total bringing constructions workers from Italy and Portugal for a major building project in eastern England, claiming that British workers were being discriminated against.

Secondly, the social democratic compact, that so many European political systems are based upon, is also stressed by immigration during times of economic hardship. The idea that you pay your taxes whilst you work, safe in the knowledge that the government will provide for your welfare if times are hard, through unemployment benefits and the like, is easiest to sustain in limited communities. If the welfare of immigrants is provided for by the

state (particularly if they can not find work, or are not allowed to work) some may feel that immigrants are benefiting from society without having first contributed. Political populism from either the right or left can build on this perception and can become xenophobic during difficult times.

For the European Union this recession may well increase the already high levels of Euro-scepticism across the whole EU. During good economic times, the single market and free movement of labour may have been seen as positives. The huge movement of particularly Poles and people from the Baltic states to the UK and Ireland over the last five years caused some friction in local communities, particularly with local schools having to take large numbers of children with limited English, but overall there have been few problems, with the Eastern Europeans being seen as contributing to the economic boom in those countries prior to the 2008 downturn. But during the recession there is a danger that the EU single market and labour movement become seen as negatives – taking away sovereign control from states: stopping governments from protecting jobs or from restricting foreigners from taking work away from local people. Even during good economic times, all EU member states except Sweden, the UK and Ireland insisted on a transition period before citizens of the new member states could exercise their right to free labour movement. Most economists argue that European single market is a good thing, but as the recession bites, we are already seeing from Greece to the UK that many disagree.

As unemployment increases across the EU we should expect more industrial unrest and possibly social unrest. Populism on the left will focus on the EU taking control away from national governments and imposing ‘neoliberal’ policies on them – stopping them from protecting national economies and jobs. On the right, populism will focus on immigrants either taking jobs from national workers or, alternatively, taking welfare and not working at a time when natives are seen as more deserving of society’s help.

Talking about immigration

Immigration is a complex phenomenon and this makes it difficult for politicians or other leaders

to discuss it in public. For EU member states, immigration comes in many different forms. It can be EU citizens exercising their right of free movement within the Union or refugees taken yearly as a commitment to the United Nations. Work related migration can be legal or illegal: citizens of the EU have an automatic right to work, whilst third country nationals require work permits. In the worst cases people are smuggled into counties to work in illegal jobs, in dismal conditions with no legal rights or protections. Refugees may arrive unannounced at the border and claim asylum, or may have been carefully vetted and selected as part of the UNHCR quota commitments.

The lines between the different forms of migration tend to become blurred in public debate. Concerns at the public level tend to be vague, that immigration is changing “our” society and probably not for the better. It is hard for public debate to engage with the specific issues of the differing types of migrants, instead more general concerns about social change come into play. In Finland there has been much debate around the proposals for a new immigration bill. A number of MPs examining the proposed law said that it would produce the most liberal immigration law in Europe, and there were differences of opinion within the government coalition. Regardless of whether specific aspects of the proposed bill were liberal or not, this type of comments play into a wider sense of people losing control of how their society works.

This opens the door to political entrepreneurship of the populist form. In Finland this was clearly visible in the significant increase in the vote for the True Finns party in the October 2008 municipal elections who ran candidates with strong positions on restricting immigration. It also gives opportunities within mainstream parties for individuals to become more prominent by adopting a more populist stance.

All across Europe, immigration is the central issue for populist rightwing parties, and it is expected that these parties will gain support at the Euro elections in June, where many Europeans feeling disconnected from the European institutions, use the elections to register a protest vote. The difficulties of holding public discussion on immigration play into the hands of populist parties whether of the left or right. If the political mainstream tries to avoid discussing immigration – from the fear of being



Photo: Jon Rawlinson

labelled xenophobic or racist, or from the fear of losing support of voters who would like them to take a harder line against immigration – then it is those on the margins who will dominate the debate.

European integration, allied to the global media and the telecommunication revolution, has led to an increased awareness of events in other parts of Europe and cooperation across national boundaries. Industrial action, protectionist trends or xenophobic comments from political leaders, all quickly become part of an EU, even global, debate. With the upcoming European elections, we are seeing the attempt to form the first pan-European, if Euro-sceptic, political party – Libertas. And just as the mainstream political parties cooperate across Europe and within the European parliament, recent years has seen the same type of cooperation between populist and nationalist rightwing parties as well, including the short-lived Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty group within the European Parliament.

Even those who attempt to explain why immigration has advantages for receiving countries, still often debate the issue within a security context. Immigration is often dealt with in security reports, such as in the recent Finnish White Paper on Defence and Security, even when it is not directly constructed as a threat. Illegal immigration is generally seen as a threat, and this justifies certain security responses to it. It becomes hard to discuss immigration without fear being in the background: borders have to be “controlled”; those crossing without authorization are therefore “illegal”; immigrants – or at least excessive numbers of them

– become a threat even if it is not apparent exactly why. Ultimately, immigration is pre-eminently a product of economics. It becomes a security issue only because people do not have the same rights of free movement that we expect money and our products to have in the global economy.

Why the EU is important for immigration, but its influence limited

Immigration is an important issue for the European Union. The EU has only limited competence within the field, but particularly within the Schengen area, where border controls have been removed, the Union level is becoming ever more important. For example, if Finland no longer controls its border with other Schengen states, it relies on those other states to control the access of third party nationals coming through, say, Italian ports or Polish airports, to Finnish territory. The EU level has therefore become important as it allows members to have some influence over the border practices of fellow member states, particularly via the EU’s border agency Frontex.

Nevertheless, EU policies on immigration follow the political tides of the member states. Immigration from outside the EU, and even within the EU, is often seen as a “security issue”. This tendency will be exacerbated because the economic crisis makes migrant labour less necessary and the idea of economic security becomes more prominent. The increased securitization of migration is noticeable in changes in language between the 2003 European

Security Strategy and the 2008 Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy. In the original European Security Strategy, migration gets mentioned only twice and in passing: firstly noting that climate change will increase “migratory movements” around the world; and secondly that illegal migrants are trafficked by organized criminals. In neither case is migration described as a threat in itself. In the shorter 2008 update to the security strategy, migration is mentioned four times. On the first page of the report, illegal immigration is said to be one of the ways in which state failure affects European security – along with organized crime and, bizarrely, piracy. This change reflects a harder view of immigration now prevalent across Europe.

Immigration is a particular concern in certain EU countries. The French Presidency of the EU in the latter half of 2008 made it one of its priorities, leading to the agreement on the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum in September of last year. Many commentators see the French activism reflecting more the domestic debate in France than the European level. But France is not alone in doing its best to ensure that European policies on immigration fit its national interests as well as possible. Some member-states, particularly those such as Denmark that have enforced stricter laws than other EU members, have ensured that the Union policies will not limit their national decisions.

Despite the increasing need for the EU to think of immigration at the union level, the power to decide who can or can not be within a country remains fundamental to the notion of sovereignty and even the most pro-EU member states are loathed to give it up totally. This reflects a fundamental tensions between the EU notion of pooled sovereignty, and the nature of states where they seek to maintain at least some autonomy and sovereignty. As calls for economic protectionism increase as economies go into recession, such sentiments are only likely to be amplified.

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