European Migration: The Bigger Picture

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Migration has been a key issue in many debates over Brexit. Polling evidence suggests that "control of borders" was a major motivating factor for many 'Leave' voters[1] and academic evidence suggests that it could have been the single biggest factor in the referendum[2]. It has certainly been the case that the UK has seen significant inward migration since around 1997, although only rarely has the rate of EU immigration exceeded that of non-EU immigration. However, the UK is not unique in Europe: elevated immigration levels have become a pan-European concern.

Indeed, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands has been every bit as much of a vociferous opponent of Eastern European immigration as UKIP. Migration is a concern for many across Europe – from the 'Front nationale' in France (whose candidate, Marine Le Pen, garnered one-third of second-round votes in the most recent presidential elections) to Viktor Orban in Hungary. Indeed, it is ironic that many of the countries that have provided a substantial source of immigrants for Western Europe since their accession to the EU are so hostile to immigration themselves.

The purpose of this brief article is to consider the general overview of migration within Europe in recent years. In general, the flow has been of East-to-West migration since the accession of several Eastern European states to the EU in 2004. This was later followed by significant South-to-North migration as a result of the Eurozone crisis in the early part of this decade. There are notable specific flows, with particularly large numbers moving to the UK and Ireland in the early post-accession years and later flows growing to Germany as that country's labour market opened up. The UK and Ireland have continued to be popular destinations, perhaps partly due to their use of English and relatively accessible labour markets, although the Netherlands has also received very large numbers in total. The popularity of Germany particularly increased during the Eurozone crisis, with significant numbers of migrants moving northwards. France has seen somewhat lower levels of immigration from much of Eastern Europe with the notable exception of Romania, perhaps due to linguistic similarities.

Migration is significant across Europe and has grown very significantly over the past 2 decades, particularly since 2004, although for many countries like the UK the process began earlier and has involved substantial migration from outside the EU (which is due to domestic policy and not regulated by the EU). Immigration rates vary substantially by country, with the highest rates generally seen in extremely small states (Luxembourg and Malta, for example, saw immigration of 3.92 and 3.81 people per 100 inhabitants in 2016).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Ireland and Sweden also see large inflows with immigration rates of 1.79% and 1.64% respectively in 2016 alone. Naturally, net migration is considerably lower as a large number of immigrants choose to leave the countries subsequently. Austria (1.48% of population) and Germany (1.29% of population) also saw relatively elevated levels of immigration in 2016, which may be partly linked to refugee flows, although a comparatively strong economic performance has also attracted migrants from elsewhere in Europe in recent years. This has been particularly notable since the Eurozone crisis.

The UK and Spain sit mid-table, which is a sharp turnaround from the years prior to the financial crisis when Spain saw large numbers of immigrants (including notable numbers from South America – hinting

at the importance of language for accessing labour markets). Much lower rates are seen in many Southern and Eastern EU states (Portugal and Slovakia seeing immigration rates of just 0.29% and 0.14% respectively). Again, this is gross immigration – many of these countries see net negative migration as the proportion of emigration is higher than that of immigration.

Inward migration is more evenly spread than previously – whereas in 2007 Spain saw far and away the largest number of foreign immigrants at 920,534 people with Germany and the UK in a rather distant second and third place (with just the former just over half-a-million and the latter just under). The figures for Spain are particularly stunning given its much smaller population. By 2016 in contrast, a total of ten EU states saw immigration of over 100,000 non-nationals.

Finally, these figures all include non-EU migration which has been very significant for a number of countries. Those along the Mediterranean have seen sporadic influxes from Africa (notably Eritrea) and the Near East, with the military situations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan providing significant numbers of migrants to Europe. Ex-colonial powers continue to see arrivals from former colonies, with India and Pakistan providing significant numbers to the UK and parts of Northern and Central Africa to France. Finally, there have been significant numbers moving into the Eastern countries of the EU from further East (with Ukraine to Poland a notable flow since the military conflagrations in recent years). Russia has also proved a significant source country for some countries in Europe.

In this vein it is noteworthy that Theresa May has explicitly promised an end to unrestricted migration from EU countries after the end of any transition period. Naturally, this will equally affect Britons seeking to move to other parts of the EU. Nevertheless, given that a majority of migration to the UK comes from outside the EU (and has always been entirely under the control of the UK) it is difficult to see what the ultimate impact of this will be. In any event, it is clear that a number of nationalist figures throughout Europe also desire to dramatically reduce rates of immigration and will be watching what happens extremely closely.

1. Ashcroft, M. *How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday… and why*. 2016; Available from: https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/.

2. Goodwin, M. and C. Milazzo, *Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit.* The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 2017. **19**(3): p. 450-464.