



EP4U STUDENT CONTEST WINNING PAPER

Addressing the EU's Migration Problem through Circular Migration

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Abstract

This policy brief addresses the question of migration, and the destabilising effects it has on the EU. The brief offers circular migration as a solution and has three key recommendations. Firstly, agreements with third countries, secondly equipping migrants with the necessary skills to work in the EU and finally, to explain the policy well to the citizens of the EU.

Introduction

The recent crisis at the border between Poland and Belarus is only the most recent example in a row of incidents where states neighbouring the European Union attempted to weaponize migration flows to divide or coerce the EU. Like the current crisis, earlier attempts by Turkey and Morocco led the EU to respond in ways not in line with the EU's own human rights policies. However, apart from the very high numbers of migrants entering the EU in 2015/2016, the number of migrants now upsetting the EU and making it set aside its migration and asylum safeguards are much lower. Approximately 7000 people at the Polish border have sent the EU into

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political crisis for weeks¹. The strong reaction by EU leaders is an indication of the level of politicization of the issue. This politicization is partially the reason why third countries can effectively weaponize migration in a game of coercion, the EU and its Member States will respond forcefully even to a relatively small number of migrants. The political response to migrants is partly a reflection of societal opinion, though this in turn is cultivated by politicians². This leaves the EU in a strategically insecure position and has resulted in an overall worse reception of migrants. At the same time, however, Eurostat (2020)³ projects that in this century the EU's population will fall by 30 million people, making up for almost 7%. The decline will be spread unevenly with Italy's population projected to fall to 51 million from 60 million, Poland to 27 million from 38 million, and Romania to under 13 million from 19 million today. Notably, it is projected that net migration will keep Germany's population stable. The decline throughout much of the EU poses an economic and societal problem for the EU. The population decline will make European welfare, health and pension structures unsustainable. In 2100 there will be fewer than two people of working age for every retired person, whereas there are three now⁴. Population decline may also lead to further economic decline and abandonment of services as there won't be enough Europeans to work in factories and

hospitals for example⁵. Circular migration can form a solution to the EU's population decline, while, if done correctly, it can enhance the way migrants and refugees are viewed from within the EU. Circular migration is a repetition of legal migration by the same person between two or more countries⁶.

Policy Recommendations

Forge Agreements with Third Countries

Over the years more and more economic migrants present themselves as asylum seekers because EU Member States are granting few work visas. The number of legal migrants admitted to the EU has been roughly halved to 280,000 a year compared to the period before 2013. The number of work visas dropped by 70 percent between 2008 and 2017⁷. For years EU Member States have unsuccessfully tried to negotiate agreements with countries of origin in Africa, the Middle East and Asia which would have these countries take back migrants whose applications were rejected. These negotiations have been without much success. In 2020, 70,200 third-country nationals were returned to a country of origin. This corresponds to 18% of all return decisions issued during the year, down from

¹ UN News. (2021, November 29). *IOM scales up aid at EU-Belarus border, as migrant hypothermia deaths*. Retrieved from <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1106692>.

² Lesińska, M. (2014). *The European backlash against immigration and multiculturalism*. *Journal of Sociology*, 50(1), 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783314522189>.

³ Eurostat. (2020, September). [Population projections in the EU](#).

⁴ Taylor, P. (2021, August 19). *More migrants, please*. Politico.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-migrants-asylum-economy-afghanistan/>.

⁵ Merritt, G. (2021, June). *People Power: Why We Need More Migrants*. I.B. Tauris.

⁶ European Commission (2007, May 16).

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions On circular migration and mobility partnerships between the European Union and third countries, COM(2007) 248 final.

⁷ Taylor:2021

29% in 2019⁸. The result of this failure to deport rejected applicants is that four million irregular migrants now live in the EU, being employed in the shadow economy while they could be of benefit to the EU Member State as well as to the country of origin. Instead of trying to negotiate only about the deportation of rejected applicants, the EU should negotiate a circular form of migration. Third countries will be more likely to sign up to an agreement like this than to the agreements previously discussed because it would constitute an economic opportunity for the countries of origin. Inherent to this circular migration would be that migrants would come to the EU for a certain amount of time to work and then will return to their home country where they will contribute to the home economy with the skills and know-how they have gained while working in the EU, they will also have more money to spend in their home country which will also help the economy⁹. This process may be repeated. In this way, the migrant contributes to both the EU and the country of origin's economy, while the EU has more control over its immigration.

Equip Migrants with the Necessary Tools

To fully benefit from the migrants and their labour in the EU it is important to train and accommodate them. Migrants should receive an identity card that is usable throughout the Union, this would help them to get housing, insurance and bank accounts. On the professional level, governments and private-sector employers should work together to create jobs and set up training schemes and language courses that could take place in the

country of origin. National governments should offer tax breaks for the employers willing to take part in such a scheme. Governments should see circular migration as a continuous process of investing in workers that work in the Member State for a certain amount of time, go back to their country of origin to work there for some time and then come back with fresh perspectives. Circular migration also plays a role in stopping the brain drain from the countries of origin because the migrants will return with the experience they can use at home. Circular migration could in this way contribute to a stabilization of the neighbourhood of the EU, although these effects must not be overestimated.

Explain the Policy

A vital part of the policy is to explain it well to the citizens of the Union. Over the years, and especially in the last decade, the issue of migration has been so politicized that any migration policy will spark heated debates, especially if the Union starts to actively recruit economic migrants to come work in the Union. Newspapers have been filled with the narrative that migrants are 'taking our jobs'. The economic logic of circular migration is clear, migrants are not putting people out of work but fill the vacancies needed to uphold the European way of life. In the migration debate, it is, however, also important to address emotive arguments. National government should stress that the migrants are working in the EU temporarily and will return to their countries of origin. Under a policy of circular migration, migrants are also less likely to end up in the shadow economy or society because they are better integrated upon coming into the Member State because

⁸ European Commission. (2020, February 7). [Statistics on migration to Europe.](#)

⁹ ie Dhian Ho, M., van Heukelingen, N., van de Weem, N., van Mulligen, A., & Lepla, R. (2021,

June). [Gedeeld belang bij circulaire migratie: Naar duurzame partnerschappen.](#) Clingendael.

of the earlier language and skills training and they have gone through legal means of entering. If done correctly it may even be possible to separate the debate on economic migration from that on political refugees and defuse them. If circular migration brings down the number of asylum applications because economic migrants can enter through the scheme and don't apply for asylum the general population may be more willing to receive refugees.

Conclusion

This policy brief suggests embracing circular migration as a means to both enhance the EU's strategic position and elude the risks population decline pose to European economies and societies. By negotiating

agreements with third countries, the EU diminishes the chances of these countries weaponizing migration against the EU. Third countries will be more likely to agree to such an agreement because the skills and know-how migrants will bring back home will benefit their economy, it will also help to avoid brain drain. To make the policy work the Member States should aim to equip migrants with the necessary job and language skills. It will be important to explain and argue for the policy to the European population. Circular migration offers a way to strengthen the European standing in a range of twenty-first-century challenges, from growing geopolitical instability to population decline and future migration crises.

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