

Freedom of circulation - In and Out in Europe

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Bénédicte Halba runs a research institute (iriv) which has been working on the theme of migration since 2003, she hosted a club at the Cité des Métiers for a migrant audience (2012-2022).

Since the Brexit, the UK has left the European Union. The Channel has become an “external” border for Europe. This new geographical but above all administrative configuration has caused many difficulties, and an infinite time, to the European and British negotiators to unravel all the advantages for the United Kingdom of belonging to a vast common market, the basis of European construction, accompanied by the three fundamental freedoms of movement – capital (long acquired), goods and services (highly developed) and people (the least successful so far among Europeans in any case to work).

Intra-European mobility is low. The proportion of citizens who go to live and work in another Member State is limited. In 2018, active mobile citizens accounted for only 4.2% of the total workforce in EU-28 member states (before Brexit). The main countries of residence for active mobile citizens and all mobile citizens were Germany and the UK (each just over 2 million); Spain and Italy (about 1 million each); and France, about 600,000. These five Member States welcomed almost 80% of the active mobile citizens in 2019. (1).

Of the 512 million people living in the EU in 2018, 7.8% have a nationality other than that of their country of residence: 3.4% are nationals of the EU Member State and 4.4% are third country nationals. The distribution is uneven between Member States. In 2018, Luxembourg had the highest proportion of citizens from another EU member state (41% of the population), followed by Cyprus (13%) and Ireland (9%). The highest proportions of third country citizens were observed in Estonia and Latvia (14% each) and Austria (8%). (2)

The number of people who immigrate to EU Member States includes those who have immigrated permanently and those who have immigrated for a period of one year or more. Over the period 2013-2017, total immigration to France, including European immigrants (EU member) and from a non-EU country (third countries), amounted to 3.4 million people in 2013, then peaked at 4.7 million in 2015 (migration crisis with the wars in the Middle East, especially in Syria). Immigration decreased by 8% to 4.3 million in 2016, then increased by 3% in 2017 to 4.4 million (3)

In 2018, the main destination countries were Italy (70% of total immigrants), Slovenia (65%) and Sweden (62%). For third country nationals, the highest proportions are observed in Luxembourg (68%), Austria (58%) and Malta (54%), (3)

Irregular immigration is the movement of persons from non-EU countries across EU borders without complying with legal requirements for entry, residence or residence in one or more EU countries. (4)

The year 2015, with the migration crisis, saw a significant increase in the number of irregular border crossings into the EU. Frontex, the European border guard agency, recorded more than 1.8 million illegal border crossings, the highest number ever recorded. Since then, their numbers

have declined significantly. In 2023, approximately 355,300 people entered the EU irregularly, the highest number since 2016. (4)

Immigration has been a priority for the European Union since 1997 with the Amsterdam Treaty. Various measures have been taken to manage migration flows and improve the asylum system. In September 2020, the European Commission presented the Pact on Asylum and Migration. In April 2023, the Parliament approved its position on the Pact and is ready to start negotiations with the Council. The EU has increased its funding for immigration, asylum and integration policies since 2015 with €22.7 billion in the budget for 2021-2027 dedicated to migration and border management (compared to €10 billion in 2014-2020). (4)

This European budget is a bet on the future if it is properly used. Even at the height of the migration crisis (2015-2016), the maximum number of immigrants from third countries, whether they arrived legally or illegally, is negligible in relation to the total European population. European demography (low birth rate, general ageing of the population...) is important to understand the need for third country workforce – thousands of jobs are unfilled and needed to meet pressing needs in many sectors. Services to the individual are particularly concerned - life-support workers (for elderly people), domestic helpers, maternal help (for early childhood) need foreign workers as the nationals are not enough (or interested).

The number of crossings detected has increased on all irregular migration routes. The crossing of the central Mediterranean remains the deadliest of the four migration routes to Europe, with around 1,400 people dead or missing in 2022 (4.). The Channel is not the most dangerous sea for exiles but the way families or young people coming from Afghanistan, Syria , ... are mistreated by the French police is symbolically very heavy of consequences. It feeds a «double standard» speech used by countries hostile to the European Union and western democracies in general. If the exiles cross the Channel at the risk of their lives, it is because no alternative is offered to them in France or Europe.

The European Union is strongly defending freedom of movement, its DNA, with the Erasmus+ programme, which has emphasized the advantages of mobility for its citizens in Europe (open-mindedness, social and intercultural skills...). Surprisingly the EU seems to forget the many assets of mobility among third country nationals despite an economy that needs a workforce from abroad and a European diplomacy, with the countries of the South in particular, that could also benefit a great deal in troubled geopolitics where Europe so desperately needs allies.

(1) Eurostat, 2020

(2) INSEE, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/interactif/4268204/bloc-1a.html?lang=en>

(3) INSEE, <https://www.insee.fr/en/interactif-tools/4268204/bloc-1b.html?lang=en>)

(4) European Parliament,

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20170627STO78419/lutte-contre-la-migration-irreguliere>