

CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN REFORM

Towards a better EU migration policy

by Hugo Brady, 8 April 2009

Over the last decade, EU countries have experienced a rapid rise in both legal and illegal migration, mostly from Turkey, Morocco, Albania, Algeria and Serbia. Each spring and summer, Mediterranean member-states struggle to cope as migrants perish attempting to reach Europe from North Africa in unseaworthy and over-crowded boats. The deaths of 300 people, who drowned while trying to reach Italy from Libya, marked a particularly grim beginning to this year's 'smuggling season'.

Unsurprisingly, then, migration has supplanted terrorism and crime as the top priority for European interior ministers. Ministers think that collective EU action is essential if migration is to be managed better. That includes making European border management more effective and technologically advanced; integrating migration issues – visas, border controls, the resettlement of refugees and the return of illegal immigrants – into EU foreign policy; and helping Europe to fill the 50 million skilled vacancies that Europe's retiring baby boomers will leave behind by 2060.

European policies to tackle these challenges are in their infancy, such as the Union's rather weak scheme to attract more skilled workers with an EU working visa or 'blue card'. One reason for this is that ministers have to work around major knowledge gaps about the specific foreign labour needs of the single market and about the movement of migrants into and around the EU, a free movement area. Governments have little idea where migrants go next after entering the UK from Pakistan, Spain from Ecuador or Poland from Brazil. For example, how many move to other EU countries; how many go back home; and how many are granted residency? Similarly, policy-makers are not yet certain about how good the EU's border controls are. How many visas to the EU's passport-free area result in illegal overstays or how many travellers are allowed in, refused at the border or returned home? Officials say they need to properly understand such movements before they can agree serious migration policies.

In many cases, such data is available but the patterns have not yet been analysed to draw concrete conclusions. The European Commission, which might be expected to have such information readily to hand, is over-burdened. Its directorate-general dealing with migration issues also has a plethora of other responsibilities, ranging from commercial law to terrorism. To overcome this lack of analytical capability, Commission officials often emphasise technological solutions such as biometric databases for visas and law enforcement. But these have tended to be subject to long development delays and will not, in any case, cut out the need to synthesise vast amounts of information.

One idea to help address such knowledge gaps would be to create national 'immigration profiles'. The idea – already floated by the Commission – would be to maintain a precise and detailed picture of migration and border management in each member-state at any given moment. The Commission would also be able to ascertain the foreign labour needs of each member-state, by identifying skill shortages by sector and occupation, though member-states would still control the issuance of work visas. Similar profiles of non-EU countries could help identify the skills composition of different migrant communities and to provide analysis to EU policy-makers negotiating with migrants' home governments on visa facilitation, border controls and the return of illegal immigrants. The member-states think that the EU speaking with one voice in such negotiations would be a significant improvement on national efforts.

The compilation of national immigration profiles is not a panacea for solving all of Europe's migration challenges. But if implemented effectively, the profiles could help to ensure that future migration policies are properly evidence-based and, therefore, more effective. However, if the Commission wants the job of providing such analysis, it will need to create a separate department for migration or to boost the resources of its current directorate-general for justice, liberty and security.

Hugo Brady is a research fellow at the Centre for European Reform.