

CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION IN EUROPE: PROSPECTS, CHALLENGES AND POLICY RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to assess the current situation regarding migration in Europe, with a focus on socio-economic challenges, demographic prospects, and the effectiveness of recent policy measures taken at both the national and EU levels. To analyze these factors, the study offers a comprehensive approach based on an examination of current legislative frameworks and existing migration management strategies. The study's findings point to growing polarization: despite the clear economic need for labour migrants to offset demographic decline, policy measures are increasingly prioritizing restrictive border controls and short-term crisis management rather than long-term social integration. The research's scientific novelty lies in its comprehensive assessment of the EU's recently adopted migration framework against the backdrop of changing demographic realities. The findings can be utilized in the development of strategies for a balanced and sustainable migration policy in the future.

Keywords: migration, Frontex, EU policy, socio-economic integration

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration to Europe is one of the most complex phenomena of the modern era. This phenomenon shapes the socio-economic and political landscape of the European Union in the 21st century. Europe is one of the main destinations for migrants from all over the world. This trend is particularly reinforced by increasing globalisation, climate change, and geopolitical instability in the Middle East and Africa. Such historical roots have led to the emergence of a dual system in which there is an interconnection between objective demographic prospects and current social challenges. On the one hand, there is a serious threat to the pension systems of EU countries against the backdrop of a decline in the proportion of the working-age population and the ageing of the native population. In this context, regulated legal migration is a necessity for the economic sector and helps to address the shortage of both skilled and unskilled labour (Vankova, 2020, p. 112).

On the other hand, illegal immigration poses challenges for the system. Such illegal migration places a burden on the host countries' systems, and furthermore, this constant pressure increases social tension and potentially leads to social fragmentation and higher polarization. These processes require the development of fundamentally new policy measures, and the response to this phenomenon has been an attempt by national governments and EU institutions to find a balanced approach between national security concerns and the fundamental principles of protecting individual rights.

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The tightening of external border controls, as well as the drafting of a new EU pact on migration and asylum, reflects a gradual shift towards a more pragmatic approach in this regard. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the current foundations of European migration and to assess the balance between the economic imperatives of migration and the real threats to the social structure of Europe.

2. THEORETICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF EU MIGRATION POLICY

2.1. The Recent Change of the EU Legal Framework: From Dublin III to Securitization

The 2015 migration crisis marked a turning point in the European Union's legal system, prompting a review of asylum provision and border management. The 'Dublin III' Regulation, adopted in 2013, had formed the basis of the pan-European asylum system prior to that period. Under this system, responsibility for a migrant mainly fell to the country whose border they had crossed. Karamanidou and Kasperek argue that such a mechanism was characterised by structural asymmetry. The main burden of migration flows fell on the border countries of Southern Europe, such as Italy, Greece and Malta (Karamanidou & Kasperek, 2022, pp. 1324-1325). Due to their geographical location, these countries' administrative, financial and legal systems were under constant pressure, and by 2015, the strain on national data systems had become excessive.

This has led to operational difficulties within the standard Dublin system. Local border services faced significant difficulties in registering arrivals in a timely manner within the single Eurodac database. These countries were often points of entry into the EU and served as transit points for further migration to countries in Northern and Western Europe. This phenomenon is known as 'secondary migration'. The excessive strain caused by migration flows led to the temporary reinstatement of passport controls by local authorities. This temporarily destabilised the functioning of the Schengen Agreement.

Such management measures are linked to the gradual shift of the European legal framework away from the classical humanitarian approach towards the concept of securitisation. It is important to note that, in the context of migration policy, the securitisation implies a re-evaluation of migration flows. As Bossong and Carrapico point out in their study, migration flows are viewed not as a matter of humanitarian law or a necessity for the labour market, but as a factor that has a direct impact on state security and social stability (Bossong & Carrapico, 2016, p. 45). Whilst integration and the protection of rights were the priorities in the early 2010s, the key objectives in subsequent years were the prevention of irregular migration and the improvement of return procedures. This gradual shift is evident within the changes of official EU documents, whilst the 'European Agenda On Migration', adopted in 2015, sought to balance humanitarian aid for refugees with measures to combat people-smugglers; subsequent documents, such as the Security and Defence Strategy and other directives, have placed the primary emphasis on security (Ciger, 2017, p. 108).

This shift in priorities became even more entrenched in the early 2020s. Following changes in the geopolitical situation on Europe's eastern borders, European institutions introduced new concepts into their legislative frameworks, such as 'hybrid challenges' and 'the instrumentalisation of migration'. The description of migrants in official documents has also changed. Migrants were previously described as people escaping war; such migration flows are now interpreted as a potential tool for political pressure from other countries, with the potential to destabilise the European space. Specifically, this refers to the overburdening of social services or the intensification of internal conflicts. To secure these changes, the European Union has significantly reduced the amount of financial assistance provided to refugees, whereas previously, those arriving were guaranteed a comprehensive package of social support. This approach reduced Europe's appeal to certain groups. Secondly, the processing of migration cases was streamlined. The possibility of filing multiple appeals, which used to prolong proceedings, was restricted. A fundamental change was the acceleration of border procedures. Asylum seekers without legal grounds were rejected immediately. This significantly relieved the burden on the judicial systems of the countries.

From now on, the individuals were sent back before they even entered the legal territory of the European Union (Casolari, 2021, p. 820).

2.2. Institutional Restructuring and the Expansion of Frontex

The shift in the European legislative framework was also accompanied by a profound restructuring of the very institutions responsible for safeguarding the EU's borders. A key step was the transformation of Frontex (the European Border and Coast Guard Agency) into a supranational body with extensive powers.

Frontex was established in 2004, and until 2015 remained an organisation with an extremely limited budget and no operational staff of its own, primarily engaged in analysis and consultation. Whilst border protection remained the responsibility of national governments, the 2015 crisis demonstrated that the protection of national borders by individual states places a strain on their institutional system. As a result, Frontex underwent a series of reforms. These reforms were completed by 2024-2026. Ekelund demonstrates that these changes transformed Frontex into a supranational law enforcement agency (Ekelund, 2019, p. 345). In 2016, following the adoption of new regulations, the organisation adopted its current name and an expanded mandate, along with an increase in its budget. The agency invested in equipment, such as drones, helicopters, vessels, and night-vision systems, and such investments have enabled the organisation to carry out continuous, independent monitoring of border areas. In parallel with the development of its monitoring activities, Frontex also expanded its legal powers, specifically in the area of deporting immigrants. The agency was now authorised to organise and carry out operations to deport individuals present on EU territory without any legal grounds. To this end, charter flights were arranged between Member States. Moreover, Frontex's activities extended far beyond the EU's borders, as the EU signed agreements with the Western Balkan countries and African states. The agency was granted the right to deploy its equipment and conduct border controls on the territory of third countries. This enabled the agency to curb illegal migration at its very inception (Fernández-Rojo, 2020, pp. 91-93).

A further structural change at Frontex was the introduction of a common training standard; specifically, a common core curriculum was developed. This meant that differences in the working methods of border guards from different Member States were minimised, and operational border control was carried out according to standardised procedures. This shift in the agency's structure created an asymmetry in which the focus on deportation and monitoring took precedence over longer-term refugee social integration programmes. This transformed the agency into the primary implementer of European securitisation policy.

Despite the relative effectiveness of the reformed system, in order to maintain the academic neutrality of the analysis, it's important to note that such centralisation of Frontex has faced serious challenges. In academic discourse, alongside the expansion of Frontex's responsibilities, concerns have also been raised regarding the acceleration of border procedures, and critics argue that the accelerated procedures described earlier can sometimes hinder refugees' access to the legal process for the examination of asylum claims. Specifically, there are concerns regarding potential legal complications if an individual's personal circumstances are not properly assessed or considered. Although the strengthening of a unified border control system and the development of modern technological monitoring methods have enabled EU countries to significantly improve the management of illegal migration flows, these innovations have highlighted the need to find a new balanced approach. European institutions therefore faced the challenge of balancing their commitment to fundamental human rights, which have historically formed the basis of European identity, with the practical necessity of ensuring effective protection of the EU's external borders in response to changing geopolitical circumstances.

3. CONTEMPORARY OPERATIONAL MECHANISMS AND EXISTING CHALLENGES OF THE MODERN EU MIGRATION SYSTEM.

3.1. The Digitalization of Migration Control: The 'Smart Borders' and Information Systems

In order to strengthen the operational mechanisms for managing migration flows, the EU has set a course for the digitalisation of the system in addition to physical control. In parallel with the expansion of Frontex's powers and physical measures to control legal and illegal migration, an initiative called 'Smart Borders' was launched. This concept has become a key element of modern migration security in the EU countries (Mitsilegas, 2021, p. 275). Simple border controls at airports and land borders were digitized by a unified system with a large-scale database. This digital frame is based on several systems. Each of these systems addresses a specific vulnerability in migration control, allowing the collection, exchange, and analysis of all necessary data that an individual provides as they cross the Schengen Area. Such a system optimises two processes at once. First, for legal migrants, the control process is accelerated, and second, illegal migration is curbed.

One such system is the Entry/Exit System (EES). This system was developed to address a long-standing migration issue in EU countries - overstayers. This problem concerned people who entered EU countries on a legal basis but refused to leave the territory once their stay had expired. Under the new system, every time an individual crossed the border, their name, the type of travel document they held, and biometric data were instantly recorded. Specifically, fingerprints and a digital photograph were collected, and if an individual overstayed their authorised period, national law enforcement agencies received special alerts and could take action accordingly. This technology made it possible to identify irregular migrants not during random checks, but in accordance with a new automated algorithm.

Another such system aimed at addressing the existing vulnerabilities of the European system was the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS). This mechanism was created on the model of the existing US ESTA system. Prior to the introduction of this system, a significant number of citizens from various countries were allowed to enter the Schengen Area without visas, which meant that European border guards would only receive information about such travellers upon their arrival at the border. This approach increased security risks due to the lack of systematic control, but with the introduction of this system, the approach changed radically. Foreign citizens who had visa-free entry were required to complete a special online form in order to be able to purchase a ticket, after which the system runs the individual's details through the existing immigration databases of EU countries and Interpol. If no issues are found, the algorithm automatically completes the authorisation process within a few minutes, and in case any violations are detected, the application is sent for a manual review. This modernisation of the system enables the European Union to detect potentially dangerous individuals at the application review stage, which is not the first example of preventive measures to stricter EU security.

It is also important to note that, in addition to the creation of new systems, existing systems have also undergone significant changes. For instance, the EU's existing biometric database - Eurodac - has tightened its controls. Whilst the database was originally created to collect fingerprints from the age of 14, this age limit was later lowered to 6, and furthermore, a facial recognition algorithm was added to the database's functions, along with the registration of all migrants crossing the border illegally. These innovations significantly optimized the work processes of local law enforcement agencies, and moreover, local law enforcement agencies had direct access to the updated system. According to Mitsilegas, these changes to the EU's border area have influenced a shift from a purely physical space into a digital ground (Mitsilegas, 2021, p. 275). This not only enabled the system to be standardized but also raised the level of internal security in the EU.

3.2. Existing Challenges of The Modern EU Migration System

The introduction of modernised systems for monitoring migration flows has significantly streamlined security procedures; however, this approach does not resolve the fundamental challenges of socio-economic integration inherent in the very structure of EU countries. These challenges stem from the tension between the existing need for economic integration and the need to ensure social stability within the European area. In the context of an ageing population, the inflow of migrants is considered a necessity for the economies of EU countries. At the same time, chaotic and irregular migrant flows can undermine public security, place a strain on local institutions, and lead to increased social tension.

Social infrastructure, in the form of education, social housing and healthcare, is also under constant pressure in the countries of 'first reception'. Meanwhile, local populations in countries in Western or Northern Europe are frequently dealing with challenges of social disintegration. Furthermore, such crises in existing migration control systems are fuelling the rise in popularity of far-right parties. These parties often offer a return to previous, stricter national borders. The approach offered by this study doesn't mainly focus on an 'open-door' policy or a complete closure of borders, but proposes a shift towards a more pragmatic model that will provide the successful implementation of socio-economic integration, whilst also meeting national security requirements (Campesi, 2018, p. 548).

One of the proposals is to decrease the pressure on the institutions of Southern European countries. It is proposed that specialised centres be established in third countries or transit countries to process asylum applications. This approach will only serve to strengthen the practice of curbing illegal migration at its very inception. It's argued that this will help to reduce the pressure on the social institutions and infrastructure of EU countries. European experts will be granted the right to grant legal status to refugees outside the EU. The second proposal involves addressing the current issue of deportation. In such cases, countries refuse to accept migrants deported from Europe. This effectively leaves them stranded on European soil. It is proposed that trade relations and preferential treatment be made conditional on third countries cooperating on deportation matters, including the issuance of visas. Countries whose citizens are deported from EU member states are proposed to be obliged to take them back, assuming full responsibility in this matter (Slominski & Trauner, 2018, pp. 446-447). This solution could potentially help EU countries transform migration management. A reactive emergency response can be shifted into pragmatic socio-economic integration with a long-term perspective.

4.CONCLUSION

This study provides an analysis of the current migration situation in Europe, taking into account the backdrop of demographic and socio-economic challenges. The previous 'Dublin III' system is often linked with an excessive burden on southern border countries, which led to a gradual shift in European policy from the traditional humanitarian approach towards securitisation, in which migration is mainly perceived as a security threat. The main instruments of control became the expansion of the powers of Frontex. The agency has changed significantly over the last decade, and the digitalisation of borders through the biometric systems, such as EES, ETIAS, and Eurodac. Despite the economic need for labour due to an ageing local population, the focus has primarily shifted towards national security and stricter border controls. For long-term stability, this study proposes a pragmatic approach. The study proposes the establishment of application processing centres in transit or third countries and the linking of trade preferences to other countries' willingness to take back their deported citizens.

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