

# Southern European Migration Towards Northern Europe

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## **Economic Crisis and Migrations in the European Union**

Although it was qualified as 'global', the 2008 economic and financial crisis did not produce identical effects in all parts of the globe. Even in the isle of prosperity that is the European Union (EU), the economic crisis hit the South much more severely than the North. Affected by long-term financial instability, high unemployment and a severe deterioration of their standards of living, many a southern European citizen has had to develop a series of strategies to deal with the crisis. Among these strategies are the options of training in order to adapt to the new needs of the job market, moving back in with one's parents to limit housing expenses or participating in social movements to contest austerity measures.

In this article, we will examine one strategy in particular: South-North migration with the European Union in the context of the economic crisis. First of all, we will present the main sociodemographic characteristics of these new migrants and demonstrate how they resemble or differ from preceding EU South-North migratory waves. Then we will discuss the political response adopted by southern and northern EU Member States in reaction to these new flows. And we will finish with a series of conclusions that this migratory episode allows us to reach regarding the EU's management of migratory issues with third countries.

In this article, we choose to speak of migration and not mobility to designate these flows of European citizens moving from South to North within the EU during the economic crisis. Although we acknowledge that these individuals enjoy a greater ease of movement thanks to their EU citizenship, we likewise consider that the use of the concept of mobility applied to EU citizens and not to migrants from third countries poses a problem. This distinction generally gives the impression that the former move necessarily in a voluntary manner and with the acceptance of the host societies whereas the latter are compelled to migrate and perceived as undesirable by the host societies. By revealing certain similarities between old and recent South-North flows within Europe but also between recent migrations by southern European citizens and non-EU migrants, we will call these implicit hierarchies into question.

## **Characteristics of New South-North Migration**

South-North migrations within Europe are not new. During a large part of the 20th century, especially shortly after World War II, different north European countries such as Germany, France or Belgium actually called for workers from the Mediterranean Basin to meet their heavy industries' labour needs. According to certain estimates (Zimmerman, 1996), no less than 5 million people migrated from the Mediterranean area (including Turkey) towards northern Europe between the end of World War II and the oil crises of the 1970s. Nearly a decade after the start of the 2008 economic and financial crisis, the South-North flows within the EU are of a significantly smaller dimension and remain well below the mi-

gratory flows from central and eastern European Member States.

Measuring South-North migratory flows within the EU with precision is a complex feat, in any case. It is at times difficult to calculate the movement of people who do not declare their departure to the authorities when they migrate because they are uncertain of the potential duration of their stay abroad. By the same token, the disparity between the statistics of countries of origin and those of destination are often significant (see Lafleur & Stanek 2017 for a discussion of migratory flows during the economic crisis and their characteristics).

To understand the acceleration of South-North EU migration during the economic crisis, we could consider the fact that the annual flow of Spanish, Greek, Italian and Portuguese migrants to Germany, for instance, was under 45,000 individuals in 2006 before the crisis broke out, whereas it surpassed 140,000 entries in 2013. Belgium experienced a similar phenomenon with annual Italian arrivals doubling from 2006 to 2012 (going from 2,600 to 5,200). Statistics from the countries of origin provide an identical image of acceleration of migratory flows during the economic crisis. In Spain, for instance, no less than 700,000 people emigrated between 2008 and 2012, according to certain estimates (González-Ferrer, 2013). In Portugal, on the other hand, a relative stability of flows was observed both before and after the crisis because Portugal, in contrast to Italy, Greece and Spain, had never truly ceased to be a country of emigration.

The transformation of southern European economies between the 1960s and 2008 has had clear consequences on the composition of new South-North migratory flows. First of all, since the end of the 20th century, southern Europe has mainly become an area of immigration rather than emigration (including Portugal). The foreign population residing in Spain thus went from 350,000 individuals in 1981 to 5.3 million in 2001. This means that, among the new south European migrants, some are immigrants of non-European origin (for instance, North Africans or South Americans) having spent enough time in a south European Member State to gain nationality. These populations, more exposed to discrimination and social exclusion by definition, have been the hardest hit by the economic crisis. They have thus been among the first to return to their

countries of origin or, on the contrary, undertake a new stage of emigration, this time towards northern Europe, as permitted by the EU passports.

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The new south European migrants moving north display two significant characteristics: first of all, they are a young population, with the under 30 age group being particularly well represented; and secondly, they have a high level of qualification, even higher than the EU average insofar as new Spanish and Italian migrants. This phenomenon can of course be ascribed to the general progression of educational levels among southern European populations, but also to the growing selectiveness of the labour market, explaining why qualified individuals today have a greater chance than others of entering the work force in northern Europe.

### Political Response in Host and Origin Societies

Few issues cause as much debate in European societies as migration. With the intensification of migrant flows during the economic crisis in conjunction with the opening of borders to free circulation by EU citizens from central and eastern Europe, migration has become a burning issue in both societies of origin and arrival of these new migrants. In southern Europe, the departure of thousands of young graduates during the crisis has led to particularly virulent debates among the Spanish and Italian political class. In Spain, despite quarrels about the scope of the phenomenon, it is truly the causes of migration that have been at the heart of debate. While for the Rajoy Administration, this new Spanish emigration was not at all a matter of concern but rather could be attributed to Spanish youth's desire for new experiences, the opposition saw a clear

sign of disagreement with the austerity policies instituted by that administration. In Italy, whereas the country experienced a number of departures of graduates proportionally comparable to other European countries, it was the risk of experiencing the effects of brain drain that occupied the political agenda during the economic crisis.

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In host countries, the increased south European immigration has at times gone unnoticed due to the much higher number of migrants arriving from central and eastern Europe. Nonetheless, reactions have been likewise varied. At the beginning of the economic crisis, Germany quickly saw an opportunity to attract young graduates to meet its labour needs. To do this, the government launched the programme “The Job of my Life” in 2013, through which thousands of young Europeans (60% of them from Spain) applied to train then do an internship at a company. In Belgium, on the other hand, the growing arrival of migrants from southern and eastern Europe caused tension among the political class, historically principally in favour of the free circulation of people within the EU. In particular, less qualified European migrants and beneficiaries of social aid have been the object of increased inspections leading to over 8,000 withdrawals of residency permits from 2011 to 2014.

This politicization of European migration in Member States experienced a particularly acute episode in 2013 when British, German, Netherlands and Austrian ministers jointly demanded the European Commission take measures to limit mobility of EU citizens accused of being a burden to the cities where they settle. Although other European governments as well as the European Commission then publicly defended the principle of free circulation, this tension remains largely unresolved today, as attested

by the centrality of EU migration in debates before and after the British so-called ‘Brexit’ referendum.

### European South-North Migration: What Lessons Can Be Learned for the Future of Migratory Policies between Europe and the Rest of the World?

The combined effect of the economic crisis and enlargement of the EU towards central and eastern Europe has not only produced an intensification of intra-European migratory flows, but above all a growing politicization of the issue. This politicization is reminiscent of debate on taking in migrants and asylum seekers following the so-called ‘migrant crisis’ that began in 2015. Putting these two recent phenomena in perspective within European migratory history allows us to draw three preliminary conclusions on contemporary migratory policies in Europe.

#### *Migratory Policies Produce Inequality*

We have demonstrated above that all EU citizens are not equal in the face of migration in periods of economic crisis. Whereas qualified migrants are particularly sought after and in certain Member States are even the object of policies to attract them, others, because they are less qualified or considered a burden to the welfare state, find their right to migrate restricted. This approach obviously echoes the treatment of asylum seekers recently arriving in Europe.

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Indeed, migration authorities in Member States generally base themselves on the principle that their request for protection conceals an economic motivation for migration, which would be by nature illegitimate and in itself would justify externalizing

asylum procedures to Turkey. In this regard, such treatment is quite different from the one the EU tries to offer highly qualified non-Europeans through its 'Blue Card' policy.

### *Social Policies Are Placed at the Service of Migratory Control*

The reaction of different EU countries such as Belgium to the growing European migratory flows has been to intensify withdrawal of residency permits for migrants considered undesirable because they are temporarily unproductive and dependent on the social welfare system.

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This use of social policies to migratory control ends also echoes policies of family reunification which, in the EU, today frequently contain economic criteria that often exclude non-European citizens with limited income from the right to live with their families.

### *Emphasis on 'Brain Drain' Instead of a Policy for 'Brain Circulation'*

The controversy emerging in southern Europe on the departure of young graduates during the eco-

nomics crisis curiously resembles the long-term debates held in African and South American societies. With the implementation of 'brain attraction' policies during the crisis period, certain southern European observers have become aware of the fact that unequal circulation of talent within the Single Market could be detrimental to their economic reconstruction efforts after the crisis. In this regard, they are faced with the same dilemmas as so-called 'developing' societies, attempting to limit the departure of their graduates. In both cases, limiting the migration of individuals having the greatest possibility for success abroad seems unrealistic. It would be better to consider true brain circulation policies allowing migrants wishing to temporarily or definitively return to their societies of origin to maximize the benefits of their stay abroad.

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