

Chapter Title: Public opinion towards new migration flows in Europe and the increasing role of the EU

Chapter Author(s): Juliet Pietsch

Book Title: Migration and Integration in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia

Book Subtitle: A Comparative Perspective

Book Editor(s): Juliet Pietsch, Marshall Clark

Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2015)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16f986x.7>

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Amsterdam University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Migration and Integration in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia*

# 3 Public opinion towards new migration flows in Europe and the increasing role of the EU

*Juliet Pietsch*

## Introduction

As the European Union moves towards a common set of policies on immigration and asylum, increasing attention to public opinion on immigration suggests that public opinion matters (Anderson 1998; Dalton & Eichenberg 1998; Franklin, Marsh & McLaren 1994). Governments often find it difficult to reconcile public concerns about immigration with the EU project of internal free movement for EU citizens. In addition, citizens concerned about unemployment and a downturn in the economy have become increasingly vocal in pressing for more restrictive measures on policies concerning family reunification, freedom of movement, work permits and border security. In this chapter, the development of immigration policy and public opinion in Europe will be discussed in three sections. The first section discusses contemporary concerns about temporary and irregular migration in Europe since the 1990s. The second section examines attempts to build a regional response to migration policy through the development of EU legislation. These two sections provide a background to the third and final section on EU migration policy and public attitudes towards new migration flows.

## Migration pathways in Europe

Immigration has been a hot issue in Europe, particularly since the late 1980s and early 1990s when immigration rapidly increased in countries in southern Europe. According to Boswell and Geddes, since the early 1990s, we have seen:

- a greater intensity of migration flows to and within the EU;
- more countries affected by immigration;
- a growing role for the EU;
- new manifestations of the immigration problem, for example growing concern about irregular flows, people-smuggling and human trafficking (Boswell & Geddes 2011: 3).

In Spain and Italy, for instance, there has been a rapid increase in the number of migrants since the beginning of the 21st century. When Spain received an increase in migrants from neighbouring poor countries in the 1980s and 1990s, this did not lead to high levels of racial prejudice and anti-immigrant attitudes because at the time immigration was not politicised (Boeri, Hanson & McCormick 2002). However, by 2010, widespread anti-immigrant sentiment was reported in Spain, as the migrant population had risen from 2 to 12 per cent of the population in the first decade of the 21st century (Boswell & Geddes 2011: 5). Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Slovakia and Slovenia also experienced an increase in immigration during this decade. By contrast, countries in Eastern Europe including Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania experienced population decline, with more people leaving than entering.

An emerging concern for many countries in Europe is the national and regional issue of irregular migration flows. In some countries in southern Europe, there is a more permissive political culture towards irregular migrants than in other countries. Spain, Greece and Portugal have been under considerable pressure by the EU community to tighten restrictions on irregular migrants. According to Gonzalez-Enriquez, when it comes to managing irregular immigration, southern Europe is viewed as a policy failure because 'irregular immigration since the late eighties has been de facto accepted as a common way of entry' (Gonzalez-Enriquez 2009: 140). For example, almost half of the migrant population arriving in the EU since 2000 registered first in Spain.

Greece also experienced a sharp increase in migrants in the late 1980s when increasing numbers of migrants flowed from the Balkan region, particularly Albania. Later, in the 1990s, migrants began arriving from wider Central and Eastern Europe. Greece was largely unprepared for the sudden and unexpected migrant flows, as it had few legislative frameworks in place to control and manage immigration (Triandafyllidou 2009). Immigration was considered by many in Greece to be not only a socioeconomic threat but also a serious threat to their cultural and ethnic identity. According to Triandafyllidou, 'Greece seems to have been stuck for a long time with its national interests' concerns and an overarching view that migration is an unwanted burden for the country despite developments in other European countries and at the EU level' (ibid: 174). It was as recent as 1997 that Greece introduced a programme to regularise irregular migrants. After 1997, migrants could only be considered legal if they had secure employment.

As soon as their employment contract was finished, they were no longer allowed to stay in Greece.

In general, migration policy towards irregular migrants and asylum seekers became less friendly from the 1980s and early 1990s, as greater pressure to tighten borders made it more difficult for irregular migrants and asylum seekers to gain entry into the EU. For instance, in the United Kingdom the 1993 Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act led to a sharp decline in the number of asylum seekers granted refugee status. The Act withdrew numerous welfare benefits previously available to asylum seekers and remained the Labour government's policy throughout the 1990s. From 1997 onwards, the British government made it harder for asylum seekers to be granted special provisions to assist with their settlement. For example, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act replaced cash benefits with a voucher system, and special support was provisional on participation in the national dispersal scheme that was implemented to stop the influx of asylum seekers and relieve housing and social pressures in London and southeast England. Despite the gradual scaling back of welfare benefits, the United Kingdom continues to be one of the more favourable destinations for asylum seekers in Europe.

With such vast populations on the move within the EU, the need to build consensus around a common EU migration and asylum policy has increased. Border security and irregular migration are of particular concern for member states. In most EU countries, there is public resistance to increased immigration and an ongoing conflict between the economic and demographic reasons to increase immigration (Boswell & Geddes 2011: 31). One way governments have tried to appease a restless public is to promote regular migration and emphasise the need for strict control over irregular forms of migration. Another way governments have tried to deflect anti-immigration public sentiment is to focus on migration of a temporary nature that does not offer permanent residency. These concerns have largely been reflected in the EU's attempts to harmonise immigration policy across Europe.

### **The harmonisation of European immigration policies**

While the overall population of the EU-27 has grown, some countries in Europe are facing population decline. According to population projections, virtually all countries in Europe are expected to decrease in size. While migration may help to improve this situation, migration on its own cannot

solve the problem facing many countries in Europe. According to the United Nations Population Division:

The levels of migration needed to offset population ageing (i.e. maintain potential support ratios) are extremely large, and in all cases entail vastly more immigration than occurred in the past ... maintaining potential support ratios at current levels through replacement migration alone seems out of reach, because of the extraordinarily large numbers of migrants that would be required (2001).

Since 2002, net immigration into the EU has oscillated between 1.5 and 2 million per year (European Commission 2007). The process of EU enlargement has resulted in a substantial increase in labour mobility from East to West (Fic et al. 2011). While there are significant concerns for Western Europe, the more detrimental effects of the current pattern of immigration are in Eastern Europe, where population outflows to the EU-15 countries from countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Lithuania are estimated to result in a population decline in those countries of around five to ten per cent (ibid.). Romania is particularly affected by emigration. Demand for highly skilled migrants in the EU-15 countries suggest a brain drain from Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. As populations move increasingly from East to West, there is a growing awareness of the need for European member states to debate and reach consensus on immigration policy. For example, in 2007, the European Commission argued that 'in a single market with free movement of persons, there is a clear need to go beyond 27 immigration policies' (2007: 7).

The European Commission is formally responsible for initiating EU immigration policy by proposing new legislation to the EU Council and the European Parliament (EP). Once the Commission lodges a proposal with the EU Council and the EP, the three institutions collaborate to try and reach a consensus (Hix & Noury 2007). The Lisbon Treaty signed in December 2009 gave the EP legislative powers equal to those of the EU Council of Ministers. In order to gain majorities in the EP, it is necessary for Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to compromise and negotiate with MEPs from other parties until a consensus is formed. Adding complexity to the EU governance structure is the overriding value of the sovereignty of the state. As immigration policy shifts from the domestic domain to the EU level, it is to be expected that the EP and the transnational political groups will play a greater role in decision-making on immigration. However, in most member states, national party leadership controls the selection of candidates for the EP elections. National parties have often used this power to ensure that

MEPs have political preferences similar to those of their national party leaders. For example, party leaders often issue instructions to MEPs on how to vote on important issues such as immigration (El-Agraa 2011).

Members of the EP sit according to broad political groups, which cut across nationality (Lahav 2004). The broad political groups are meant to reflect new political cleavages that respond to a shift in value systems evidenced by an increase in voter volatility and the growth in single-issue movements and non-traditional parties (Kreppel 2002; Raunio 1997). However, voting in the EP is by and large influenced by the left-right ideological orientations of the EP political groups (Lahav 2004). Evidence of this left-right divide is particularly noticeable with the recent formation of far-right anti-immigrant party alliances. For example, the growing influence of the European Alliance of National Movements (EANM) grouping is of some concern. While it cannot be formally recognised as a political group until it has the required 25 MEPs from seven EU member states, the grouping has been able to attract EU funding even though some of the member parties are not supportive of European integration (Taylor 2012).

Since the Lisbon Treaty, the EP has gained more legal authority in migration decisions. For example, in June 2008 the EP and the Council reached agreement on the return of 'illegal' migrants (and third-country nationals who are not EU citizens) under the co-decision procedure by 369 votes to 197. The main aim of this agreement, known as the Returns Directive, was to outline EU-wide rules and procedures on the return of illegal migrants. While the EP is considered to be slightly more migrant-friendly than the Council and the Commission (Acosta 2009), expectations that the EP would stand up for migrant rights have not been met. For example, the Returns Directive adopted through co-decision attracted a great deal of criticism by NGOs because of its lack of attention to individual human rights. While migrants who are deported under this directive are afforded some protection, there is a great deal of ambiguity about who exactly are considered 'illegal' migrants. In some cases, regulations and directives allow member states to adopt higher standards, but in other cases they encourage member states to lower their standards.

## Negotiating public opinion and EU immigration policy

The effect of public opinion and the growing influence of the far right impose significant national constraint on various attempts within EU institutions to improve conditions for migrants through new legislation.

Increasing support for far-right anti-immigration parties in Europe reflects citizens' concerns about unemployment, lower wages, overcrowding, crime and safety, border security and identity. The radical right has emerged as a growing electoral force in Western Europe (Arzheimer 2009; Bos & van der Brug 2010; Spanje 2010), most notably in the formation of anti-immigration right-wing parties. In fact, the populist radical right-wing parties form the most successful new European family since the end of the Second World War. They have not only increased their electoral support but have also entered national governments as part of coalitions (Mudde 2013). For example, in the 2009 EP elections, populist radical right-wing parties in Austria and the Netherlands attained a share of the vote that approached 20 per cent, and their share of the vote in six other countries exceeded 10 per cent. Voting for these parties tends to be based on fears about cultural identity and a desire to reduce the level of immigration (Rydgren 2008).

Adding to citizens' concerns about the increasing role of the EU in responding to new immigration flows is the fact that there is a low level of public support for the EU more generally. Historically, there has been little support for EU institutions, many of which have been 'perceived as unresponsive, unaccountable ... [and] ... centralising' – a perception that has led to popular distrust in transferring power from national governments to the EU level (Fella 2000: 71). There have been attempts to bring the EU closer to citizens and make it more accountable. The greater legislative and agenda-setting powers given to the EP are just a few examples of attempts to further democratise EU institutions. There have also been efforts to engage citizens directly through the new European Citizens' Initiative (European Commission 2011b), which is intended to provide individual citizens with access to channels of influence within the EU. All EU citizens old enough to vote can instigate initiatives and invite the European Commission to propose a law in an area in which it has the power to do so. Before, citizens had to form a citizens' committee composed of at least seven EU citizens living in at least seven different EU countries before they could propose a law.

Despite such attempts to make the EU more accountable, findings from the 2009 European Election Studies show that EU institutions' overall legitimacy continues to be weak. For example, Table 3.1 shows that only 50 per cent of citizens believe the EU considers the concerns of citizens and less than 50 per cent of EU citizens trust EU institutions. Overall, much greater importance is still placed on national institutions. For example, a higher proportion of citizens believe that it is important which party wins at national elections (68 per cent) compared to EP elections (58 per cent).

**Table 3.1 Public support for EU institutions, 2009**

	'Strongly agree' or 'agree'	
	Percentage	Number
EU Parliament considers concerns of citizens	50.1	13,552
Trust in institutions of the EU	46.8	12,667
Important which party wins most seats at EP elections	57.9	15,688
Important which party wins at national elections	68.3	18,483

Source: 2009 European Election Study (EES) Survey (N = 27,069)

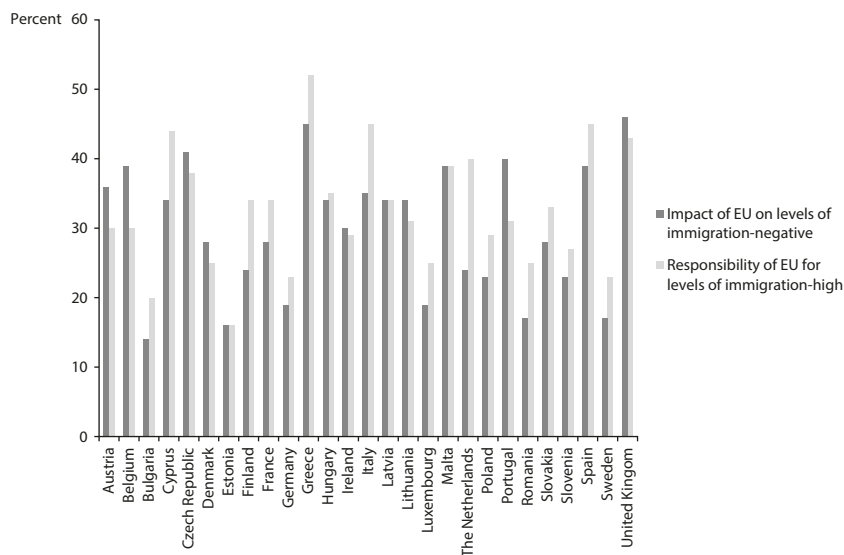
Public support for EU decision-making on migration policy varies considerably between EU member states. Figure 3.1 shows the percentage of respondents in EU member states in 2009 who felt that EU policies on immigration had a negative influence on their country and the percentage of respondents who felt that the EU was responsible for the numbers of immigrants coming into their country. Some countries were more pessimistic than others about the EU's policies on immigration. For example, when asked whether the EU policies on immigration have had a positive or negative impact on their country, up to 46 per cent of respondents in the United Kingdom and 45 per cent of respondents in Greece expressed the belief that EU policies on immigration had a negative impact on their country. In terms of whether they felt the EU had full responsibility for levels of immigration in their country, 43 per cent of respondents in the United Kingdom believed that the EU had full or near full responsibility for the levels of immigration. A significant proportion of respondents in Greece (52 per cent) felt that the EU, as opposed to their national government, was largely responsible for the levels of immigration in Greece.

By contrast, in Eastern Europe, EU policies on immigration were not seen to have such negative consequences. For example, only 14 per cent of respondents in Bulgaria, 16 per cent in Estonia and 17 per cent in Romania believed that EU policies on immigration had a negative influence on their country. In terms of future demographic impacts, the effects of EU migration policies were considered likely to be far more detrimental for sending countries than for receiving countries. Romania and Bulgaria are the two largest sending countries within the EU region where the effects of emigration were considered likely to have significant demographic consequences.

While the EU supports increasing immigration flows in the EU, in some countries there is an overwhelming consensus on the need to reduce immigration (see Figure 3.2). For example, in 2009 over 85 per cent of the population



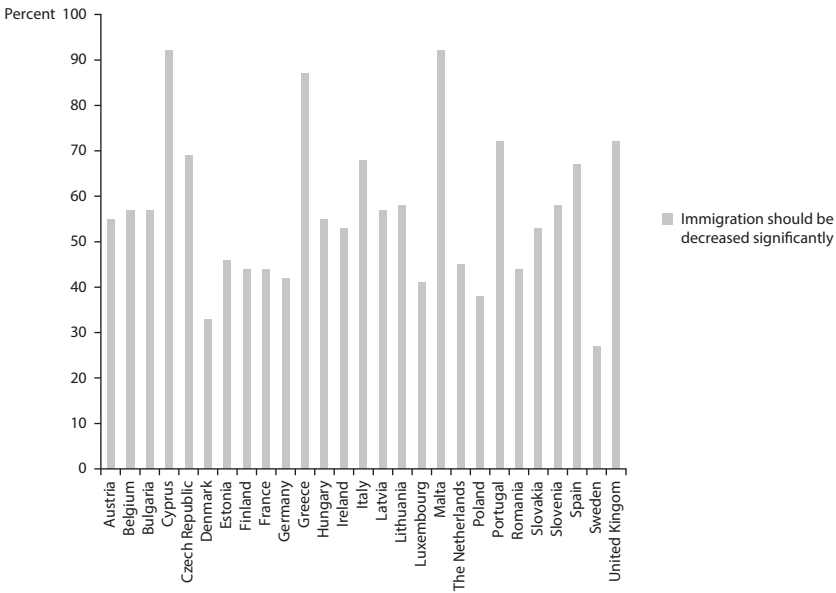
**Figure 3.1** Perceptions of respondents in EU countries of the impact of EU migration policies on their countries, 2009



Source: European Election Study, 2009

in Cyprus, Greece and Malta and over 65 per cent of the population in the Czech Republic, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom said that they believed immigration should be decreased significantly. Public debate on immigration in Europe has focused primarily on concerns about employment and competition with native workers and the impact of temporary and irregular migration flows on wages (Hatton & Williamson 2005). Those who perceive they will be most affected tend to be those in more insecure forms of employment and those who are fearful of losing their job. Lahav (2004), for instance, finds that unemployment in and of itself may not always be a significant predictor of attitudes towards immigration. Rather, what can sometimes matter more is the fear of losing one's job in a declining labour market and ending up in a situation of long-term unemployment.

The other debate on immigration focuses on the perception that migrants rely on welfare. However, this debate is not confined to the EU. Studies around the world have found that local citizens frequently perceive new migrants as a burden on the welfare system (Dustmann & Preston 2007; Facchini & Mayda 2006; Scheve & Slaughter 2006). These perceptions are heightened when low-skilled or welfare-dependent family migrants dominate immigration patterns in developed countries. While the public may have concerns about the impact

**Figure 3.2 Public support for decrease in immigration levels in EU countries, 2009**

Source: European Election Study, 2009

of new migration patterns on welfare, research by accession monitoring has countered this argument by demonstrating that the fiscal impacts of migration are marginal (Sriskandarajah, Cooley & Reed 2005). First-generation migrants may sometimes generate fiscal costs. Second-generation migrants, however, are expected to generate a fiscal surplus.

It is possible that the arrival of asylum seekers can also heighten public debate about the need to reduce immigration, but there appears to be no clear link between the arrival of asylum seekers and public opinion towards immigration levels. For example, the main destination countries for asylum seekers in Europe are France, Germany and Belgium, yet it is not in these countries that the strongest opinions towards immigration levels are expressed (Bitoulas 2012). The arrival of asylum seekers could be playing a role in public support for a decrease in immigration levels in Malta, which has had a high number of asylum applicants relative to its population (Bitoulas 2012).

Debate on immigration policies can often fuel unnecessary prejudice and intolerance. New migrants often become the target of public frustration that is more related to increasing globalisation and economic interdependence between countries. The Netherlands is a case in point. Compared with

the rest of Europe, the Netherlands experienced more harmonious social relations during the economic downturn of the 1980s. Non-citizens gained the right to vote in local elections, and in the 1998 local elections a large number of Turkish and Moroccan candidates won office (Luedtke 2009). In addition, new subsidies and other social protection measures were provided to new migrants (Ireland 2004). However, simmering resentment has since generated increasing anti-immigration sentiment and far-right political parties such as the Party for Freedom (PVV), which is anti-immigrant and anti-Islam. Migrant workers and asylum seekers from Muslim backgrounds have become caught in the middle of the political and public debate about the collision of Western European and Muslim values (Ireland 2004).

The government in the Netherlands has called on the EU to initiate much stricter legislation on immigration. News reports in 2011 highlighted some of the Dutch government's attempts to appeal to a public concerned about EU immigration policies and high unemployment. For example, the former immigration Minister Gerd Leers of the right-of-centre Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) opposed Bulgaria and Romania joining the Schengen Agreement. Leers expressed fears that Bulgaria and Romania were not doing enough to combat widespread corruption. However, the real issue may have had more to do with domestic concerns about a slow economy and high unemployment rates (Sniderman & Hagendoorn 2007). Table 3.2 shows the percentage of respondents in the Netherlands mentioning, among other issues, the economy, unemployment and immigration as the most important problems facing the country in 2009. In a list of 49 issues, immigration was ranked the fifth most important issue for the Dutch population behind concerns about the economy, unemployment and the national way of life.

**Table 3.2 Public perception of the most important problems facing the Netherlands, 2009**

	Number	Percentage
1. Economic conditions	404	40.2
2. Unemployment	77	7.7
3. National way of life (reference to patriotism/ nationalism)	74	7.4
4. Effects of financial crisis on domestic economy	45	4.5
5. Immigration	32	3.2
Other	373	37.0
Total	1005	100

Source: 2009 European Election Study (EES) Survey

Up to 45 per cent of the Dutch respondents felt that immigration should be decreased significantly. In response to this sentiment, the Dutch government has been at the forefront of a number of proposals to the EU for a more restrictive immigration policy. In 2012, the Dutch coalition minority government suggested changes to at least five of the EU Directives. The changes included much stricter requirements for family migration and a reduction in the issuance of work permits to people from outside the EU so that governments could focus on addressing the problem of high unemployment (DutchNews 2011a). The more restrictive immigration policy agenda in the Netherlands is seen as an attempt to maintain the support of the right wing political party PVV, which would like to see a 50 per cent reduction in non-Western immigration.

In a similar pattern to the Netherlands, the United Kingdom has tended to prioritise domestic public opinion in favour of political gains at the European level (DutchNews 2011b). For instance, the UK prefers to participate selectively in EU arrangements so that it can opt in and opt out when it is electorally beneficial to do so (Geddes 2005: 723). This is in part related to the fact that the British public is not very supportive of the UK's adoption of EU immigration policy. As already noted, nearly half of the population (46 per cent) felt in 2009 that EU policies had a negative influence on immigration levels in the UK, and only 21 per cent believed that EU policies had a positive influence on levels of immigration (26.6 per cent believed the EU had no influence, and 7 per cent either did not know or did not answer the question). Overall, in terms of confidence in delegating important decisions to the EU, only two per cent of the British population felt confident that EU decisions are made in the interests of the UK. The cases of the Netherlands and the UK point to the inherent difficulties in negotiating the concerns expressed in public opinion while participating in the European Union.

## Conclusion

This chapter has shown that immigration is a hotly contested issue in many parts of Europe, where some countries are relatively new immigration destinations. Throughout contemporary Europe, public attitudes towards different types of migration are divided. Some of these attitudes stem from fears about the economy, while others stem from concerns about the impact of new migration flows on national identity. This chapter has shown how institutions within the EU have been working towards a greater harmonisation of 27 immigration policies in response to the transnational

nature of migration. However, moves towards an increasing role of the EU in immigration policy have been met with significant resistance from populist radical right-wing parties on the one hand, and with calls from NGOs for better human rights standards on the other. But most of all, the EU must contend with broad public opinion that not only fails to demonstrate overwhelming support for EU institutional involvement but also demonstrates little support for an increase in migration flows in general. Raising the standard of cultural, social and political rights for new migrants in what is sometimes a fairly hostile social and political environment will provide multiple challenges for national governments and EU institutions in the years ahead.