

Migration: Is our identity at risk?

by Edit Inotai

1

Migration has become a hot topic on both sides of the Atlantic in 2015: the European Union was hit by an unprecedented refugee/migrant crisis, whereas in the U.S. it was the presidential pre-election campaign, which skyrocketed immigration back into the limelight. Immigration, the failure of integration policies, terrorist attacks and the potential closing of borders have stirred political tensions and created an atmosphere in which it was almost impossible to have rational, fact-based discussions.

Scene One: Europe

More than one million people applied for asylum in the European Union in 2015. This is a 70% increase of the already record-high level in 2014, when 626 000 people claimed refugee status. According to EU statistics, 45 % received first instance positive decisions, but the rate of acceptance varies significantly from country to country, Bulgaria and Sweden being on the positive end, while Hungary and Croatia on the negative one, with a rejection rate of around 90 %. However, this is not necessarily an outright sign of anti-refugee feelings but is more due to the fact, that the vast majority of applicants leave Hungary and Croatia in a matter of days or weeks, thus their cases are automatically terminated.

It is difficult to foresee how many of the applicants in 2015 will be granted asylum, but it is expected that roughly half of them will be eligible to stay, while the rest will be qualified as irregular economic migrants, who are simply looking for a better - or at least decent - life in the EU. Their fate is unclear, since the potential return or deportation of hundreds of thousands of people could be a politically sensitive and logistically challenging issue.

The refugee/migrant crisis drew the attention to serious shortcomings on the European level: since the EU lacks a common migration and asylum policy, each country tried to handle the situation in its own way, ranging from an almost exclusively humanitarian to an overwhelmingly security-based approach. The lack of coordination among member states created a complete chaos, questioning such basic European achievements like the Schengen-system and the free movement of people. The refugee crisis highlighted the enormous differences in the historical experiences and the value systems of the member states. Some countries - especially Germany - welcomed refugees and migrants in the beginning, claiming that they should be seen as an opportunity to solve their serious demographic problems. Refugees and immigrants would constitute the workforce necessary to keep the German economy booming. Yet under the pressure of the refugee crisis, (especially right-wing) populist politicians in some old member states, started to question the overall benefits of immigration, underlining the unsolved challenges of integration, the frustration of the second and third generation

immigrants, and the growing problems of the so-called parallel societies. After the brutal terror-attacks in Paris, immigrants (especially Muslims) are being viewed with a suspicious eye. All in all, immigrants are increasingly considered as a threat, a potential problem and an economic burden, and not as an opportunity the society might benefit from. Even Scandinavian countries, previously being the safe havens for many refugees started to introduce restrictions on immigration.

2

The intensity of the political debate creates the impression that Europe is “overwhelmed” by immigrants, although a relatively small minority of EU-citizens is foreign-born: as of 2014 (latest data from Eurostat), 33,5 million of the more than 500 million citizens were born outside the EU and 19,6 million were citizens of a non EU-country. This amounts to roughly 10 percent of the total EU population. Another 6 percent of those already born in the EU have migrant background (at least one parent being born outside the EU). This would add up to 16% of the population having some migrant background, either because they are themselves foreign-born or because they have at least one immigrant parent. Obviously, in certain West-European countries (and cities) the ratio of people with migrant background is far higher, since the EU-average is counted on the basis of 28 countries, including the Central and East-European states, where immigration - especially from a culturally different background - has been a relatively unknown phenomenon.

This is partly the reason why the question of refugees/immigration divided not only the so-called West-European old democracies, but split the EU along the old east-west frontiers. The Visegrad countries - Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia - do not share the historical experiences of the Western democracies (often one-time colonial powers), who have built up and got used to multicultural and multiethnic societies in the past decades. Central European countries still have relatively homogeneous societies, based on an ethnic (and not political) understanding of a nation. They lack the experience of dealing with immigrants, particularly those coming beyond Europe’s borders. Interestingly, their governments reject not just the compulsory quotas and thus the burden-sharing in the refugee crisis, but the whole notion of immigrants, as a potential solution to counterbalance their catastrophic demographic situation. Nevertheless, these countries are mostly suspicious towards culturally distant groups, but keep their doors open to ethnically or linguistically similar people (in the case of Hungary, basically ethnic Hungarians, whereas Poles already accommodated hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians. Slovakia offered to accept only Christian refugees from the Middle-East, making religion a decisive factor in the domestic debate.) The rejection of migrants has united the previously fractured V4, and cemented the power of the ruling elites running anti-refugee campaigns in both Slovakia and Hungary, but sidelined the extreme-right for the time being.

Positions are momentarily rather rigid in Europe, creating a dangerous situation for the future of the European Union, especially as the debate on immigration and refugees is conducted primarily by politicians on an emotional level, and much less by experts in a rational, fact-based manner.

Scene Two: The U.S.

3

On the other side of the Atlantic, there seems to be at least an understanding that the U.S. is the most successful country of immigrants. However, integration and especially illegal migration is a hotly debated issue. Immigrant (foreign-born) population reached 42 million in the U.S. in 2015, amounting to 13.3 percent of the nation's total population. This is the largest share in 105 years, according to the Center for Immigration Studies. Adding the U.S.-born children (of all ages) of immigrants, it turns out that approximately 80 million people, or one-quarter of the overall U.S. population, is either of the first or second generation.

Roughly three-quarters of the 42 million immigrants are in the country legally, it's the one quarter - around 11 million - illegal immigrants who are often subject to intense debate. These are the people whom Donald Trump, a potential Republican presidential candidate would like to deport from the country. Trump regularly earns headlines in the global media with his anti-immigrant stance, and thematises the debate in the U.S. The terror attacks in San Bernardino, California added another - hardcore security - dimension to the immigration debate, and prompted Trump to call for a ban of Muslims trying to enter the U.S. Over-emotional and even outright racist declarations are also part of the debate over the Atlantic.

Nobody would question that the U.S. is a society of immigrants, but integration and the viability of multiculturalism is an issue there, too. Whereas in the 1980s everybody referred to the American society as the melting pot, there is a tendency of calling it more like a salad bowl: linguistic or cultural as it may seem, it reflects the changing attitudes towards assimilation, cultural ties and ethnicity. According to a recent research at Cornell University, segregation has not disappeared, but spread over to the new, immigrant communities: on the surface, the country has become more colorful, but in fact many whites are moving even further out from black or immigrant neighborhoods, often behind the walls of gated communities or from the more "mixed" coast to the still more homogeneous countryside. Take the example of Ferguson, Missouri, where the percentage of the black population increased to 67,4 % from 25,1 % between 1990 and 2010, while the white population dropped to 6,206 from 16,454 - writes The Atlantic. Hispanic and Asian residents are segregated into their own cities and towns, too. Dover, New Jersey, a town 30 miles west of New York, was 70 percent Hispanic in the 2010 Census. In 1980, it was only 25 percent Hispanic.

The trends of immigration have changed dramatically in the last half century. After World War II. most immigrants tended to be of European origin, whereas in the last two decades, they are mostly Hispanics (Mexicans leading with 12 million). Immigration has dramatically altered the racial and ethnic makeup of the United States. In 1965, whites of European descent comprised 84 percent of the U.S. population, while Hispanics accounted for 4 percent and Asians for less than 1 percent. In 2015, 62 percent of the U.S. population is white, 18 percent is Hispanic, and 6 percent is Asian. By 2065, just 46 percent of the U.S. population will be white, the Hispanic share will rise to 24 percent, Asians will

comprise 14 percent—and the country will be home to 78 million foreign-born, according to Pew projections.

These massive transformations have an effect on the public opinion. Only half (51%) of Americans this year said immigrants make the U.S. stronger because of their hard work and talents. Meanwhile, 41% said immigrants are a burden because they take jobs, housing and health care. However, those who have made it to U.S. territory should be allowed to stay. A solid majority (72%) of Americans – including 80% of Democrats, 76% of independents and 56% of Republicans – say undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S. should be allowed to stay legally if they meet certain requirements. Thus the idea of Donald Trump about deportation is not necessarily a winning card. Security and a more effective border control is, nevertheless, an important topic: according to the Pew poll, 46% favored building a fence “along the entire border with Mexico,” while 47% were opposed. Republicans (62%) were far more likely than independents (44%) or Democrats (39%) to support the construction of a border fence. All in all, immigration and how to tackle illegal immigrants will be a decisive and sensitive issue in the presidential campaign, as candidates try to reassure the American society that their values and their security will be defended, but without alienating Hispanic voters, who might be decisive to win the election.

In the seventh Euro-Atlantic Café we will discuss the complex issue of migration and compare the experiences on the two sides of the Atlantic. Is immigration viewed as a risk, a danger or a possibility to win the best brains? Do we need immigration, or is it a phenomenon we can only try to channel, but not avoid? We are also trying to find answers to the challenging question of: what are the differences in integration policies in the U.S. and in Europe, and do they work better on the other side of the Atlantic? And how do society and politics view the questions of ethnicity and identity? Whereas in Europe many immigrants tend to feel as a foreigner even in the second and third generation, immigrants in the U.S. share the American dream almost from the beginning. Or is this only an illusion?

Ms. Edit Inotai is a Senior Fellow at Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID)

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher. © CEID, 2016