

MIGRATION AND MIGRANTS IN TODAY'S WORLD

Refugees migrating
to Europe

What is migration? Who are the people that migrate,
and what drives them to do so?



FISHWANG44/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Józef M. Fiszer

Institute of Political Studies
Polish Academy of Sciences, Lazarski University

Every person has the right to have a homeland and to live in peace, and no one should be left with no option other than emigration. Nevertheless, many people are unfortunately still forced to leave their country for various reasons. Population migrations are certainly not new; nor are they typical of the present times. Rather, they could be described as a natural element of world history. Humans have migrated since they first appeared on Earth, struggling to find conditions supportive of a decent and safe existence. In the past, thousands upon thousands of people sought refuge beyond the borders of their countries.

This is still the case today. All over the world, people migrate away from poor, underdeveloped countries hit by various disasters and catastrophes. They are forced to do so by a bad economic situation, international conflicts and wars, as well as lack of employment opportunities and life prospects. Moreover, migration contributed and continues to contribute to the development of civilization. The movement of not only individual migrants, but entire groups and communities leads to the exchange of cultures, goods, and genes, thus propelling the progress of civilization. Throughout history, the only aspects of migration that have changed were its causes and conditions, which can be generally broken down into the following categories: voluntary vs. forced (deportations), economic vs. political (refugees), and legal vs. illegal.

A good example here is offered by the Poles, who have for centuries migrated in search of better livelihoods. This was especially true after the end of the 18th century, after consecutive partitions of the country and the loss of independence, after national uprisings, after World Wars I and II, after the introduction of martial law in December 1981, and indeed after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004. The Poles mainly migrated to America, Canada, Australia, and Western Europe, in particular France, the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. In all these places, they created Polish migrant communities (called *Polonia*). By working hard, they contributed to the progress and socioeconomic development of those countries. It may be worth mentioning here that after the Chinese and the Germans, the Poles form the world's largest group of migrants, with the *Polonia* community comprising an estimated 20 million people.

When modern-day nation-states emerged, migration became naturally limited by the establishment of controlled national borders. However, this meant

not the complete elimination of migration processes, but the establishment of certain principles for their control. In this way, legal migration was reduced. In practice, however, this reduction led to a rise in illegal migration, experienced by Europe on an unprecedented scale in 2015–2016. This caused what came to be known as the migration crisis in the EU, yet to be resolved. Its effects are still being felt, and this is unlikely to change any time soon. Other similar examples of illegal mass migration include the migration of poor, desperate people from Middle and South America to the United States. In late March 2021, the media raised the alarm about circa 100,000 migrants, mostly from Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, and other Hispanic countries, camping out on the southern borders of the United States in the hope that the newly-elected president, Joe Biden, would allow them to enter the land of their dreams, which his predecessor, President Donald Trump, had vowed to close off to them by building an expensive wall on the Mexico-US border.

In this article, I will try to answer some questions related to migration and migrants. Why have migrants been coming to Europe in recent years, and what for? Where do they come from? How do they reach Europe? What consequences does this entail for individual countries and the continent as a whole? What should be done to civilize contemporary migration? How can we help migrants to improve their often dramatic situation? How can we prevent their odyssey from being marked by barbed-wire fences along borders? How can we stop them from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, as Pope Francis has repeatedly urged us to? How might we help migrants return from Europe to their homeland in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia? Many of them would gladly do so if they could and if they had something to return to. Europe, where nationalism, xenophobia, and intolerance have been on the rise for years, is now less and less open and welcoming to migrants.

Migration and migrants then and now

Migrations are social processes associated with the movement to another place to live. As I have already mentioned, migrations have always been a part of mankind's past. By taking a closer look at their history, we can identify migration waves thousands of years ago. The only aspects of migration that have changed were their causes, forms, scope, size, and effects. In the past, people migrated in search of new, more fertile soils and better and safer places to live. They fled from persecution, wars, and environmental disasters. Today, as was the case in the past, people leave their homes and countries in search of safety, better economic conditions, and places where they might live



Prof. Józef M. Fiszer

is a historian, political scientist, and Europeanist. He is head of the Department of European Studies, PAS Institute of Political Studies, and the Department of International Political Relations, Lazarski University in Warsaw, deputy chairman of the PAS Political Sciences Committee, and editor-in-chief of the quarterly *Biuletyn Analiz i Opinii*.
fiszer@isppan.waw.pl

ACADEMIA INSIGHT Politics

with dignity and in peace. Migrations are social phenomena shaped by a variety of factors. Sometimes referred to as escape to freedom or refugeism, migration is a social process that typically has political causes and poses one of the most important challenges in the modern-day world.

Migration has both advantages and disadvantages; it generates both positive and negative effects. Therefore, it should be analyzed in terms of both the benefits that it can bring and the adverse effects that it can cause, both for the countries left behind by migrants and for those on the receiving end. On the one hand, a mass influx of migrants may lead to a rise in terrorism and the emergence of crimes that were previously absent in the receiving countries. On the other hand, incoming migrants can fill the vacuum left behind by people who previously emigrated, and thus for instance reduce the population decline that most European countries are facing today. The benefits of migration can also include its impact on economic growth and economic development, progress, and cultural exchange.

The negative effects of migration also include greater unemployment among the citizens of a given country – they are replaced by migrants who often become sources of cheap labor. Other disadvantages include problems with the integration of migrants into the receiving community, sometimes the possibility of the development of foreign religions, a potential rise in organized crime and terrorism, and the emergence of new types of crime. Today, these threats are evol-

ing, and they are increasingly related to cultural issues and the blurring of national identities. In addition, migration-related threats include major changes in opinions on moral and religious issues, related to the values held by incoming foreigners, although these are sometimes important also to the local community. In turn, the advantages of migration include cultural development, understood mainly as getting to know the cultures, traditions, and customs of the receiving countries.

But the negative effects include separation from family and friends, often the need to leave behind property which the migrants may have worked their entire lives to attain or retain, and the disappearance of cultural distinctiveness and national identity. In addition, there are problems that result from labor shortages, discrimination, prejudice, racism, social inequality, as well as conflicts brought by migrants from their home countries to the countries that receive them. Moreover, migrants, as outsiders, pose a threat, and we often fear them.

Migration and migrants are the subject of study in all social sciences and humanities. The fate of migrants and refugees, fugitives, exiles, victims of wars and dramatic conflicts, is not easy. After what they experienced in their home countries, followed by a long and exhausting journey, they are faced with yet more difficulties, having to overcome legal, cultural, and language barriers in their new country. These problems are an important subject of research by sociologists, psychologists, historians, and cultural research-

Families living in Playas de Tijuana visit with family members living in the United States, meeting at the border wall; Mexico, 28 January 2017



CHAD ZUBER/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

ers. In political science and international relations, migration is considered one of the most important global problems facing the present-day world – with global problems being understood as international phenomena and processes that occur on all continents and are extremely difficult to resolve.

As I pointed out at the beginning of this article, migration is not a phenomenon typical of the modern world. Both the past and the present are filled with many watershed moments followed by a rise in migration. Such turning points include wars and armed conflicts that cause people to flee in masses, and lead to forced displacement. Modern-day examples include Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, affected for many years by wars that have caused people to flee in masses to neighboring countries, especially in Europe.

Why do migrants come to Europe? How do they reach it?

To answer these questions, I could generally say that migrants and refugees come to the Old Continent out of necessity, and definitely not for pleasure. All of them have their own reasons for leaving their countries. At home, they are unemployed, and they are looking for work. Most of all, however, they are looking for a safe haven for themselves and their families because they want to live with dignity and without fear. They hope for a better tomorrow, if not for themselves, then at least for their children and grandchildren. They often flee from their countries for political reasons or for fear of religious persecution or the threats that them and their families may face. Why do they choose Europe? Because relatively speaking it is closer than America, Canada, or Australia. For centuries, Europe has enjoyed a good reputation among migrants and refugees as a continent of tolerant and affluent countries with open and friendly people. Migrants often have relatives or friends in Europe. How do they reach it? In quite a variety of ways – legally or illegally, individually or in groups. They obtain work or study permits or are granted political asylum. Many of them take advantage of the EU's liberal migration policies and come to specific European countries as part of family reunification programs.

Depending on the country (or even more broadly, on the region of the world), migration may be driven by different factors. Some of them economic, others are increasingly often environmental and political, and still others are related to security. This gives rise to the question: when does the natural process of migration turn into what can be described as a crisis? Where lies the boundary between ordinary migration and migration that goes beyond the traditional pattern?

In recent decades, Europe and other highly developed regions of the world have been an attractive



NICOLAS ECONOMOU/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

destination for throngs of migrants. Favorable living conditions coupled with political stability and security have prompted thousands of people to take their chances and face the difficult journey to Europe. Often they can only hope to find refuge there, but they have no real guarantees. European countries, especially the EU (in particular Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden) and the UK, have active migration policies that support migrants and even encourage them to come. Such policies involve responding to crises in the international environment that lead to mass migrations. Moreover, the EU and Europe in general base their identity on universal values such as the promotion of human rights, democracy, and liberalism, support in the fight against poverty, and the development of civil society. Importantly, these are not only significant in the internal context. The EU also promotes these values internationally and takes them into account in relations with external partners.

One characteristic example is the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It was established after the biggest enlargement of the EU in 2004, which shifted the EU's external borders and altered the list of its neighbors. The ENP is a field of cooperation where the EU is striving to strike a balance between idealism and realism. On the one hand, the ENP has noble goals

A group of refugees on pontoons reach the Greek island of Lesbos; Greece, 13 November 2015

and principles. On the other, it reflects concerns about the nature of political regimes and the effects of their domestic policies, which may reduce the level of security within the EU itself. The ENP is called a “buffer policy,” and its purpose is to build a zone of peace and security in the broadest sense, including non-military (social and environmental) security in the countries that share land or sea borders with the EU. To put it bluntly, the ENP and the subsequently adopted Eastern Partnership were intended to protect the EU from illegal migration from Eastern European countries, but this goal has not been achieved in full. For many years, many migrants and refugees have come from such countries as Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, and Armenia to Europe, especially to Poland. In our country alone, the number of such migrants is estimated at nearly 1.5–2 million. They come legally and illegally, some with their families, many take up employment or study, and some start families here.

The massive influx of migrants from post-Soviet countries and the countries of North Africa and the Middle East in 2014–2016 showed that the EU was not a monolith, with European solidarity being called into question by the emergence of divergent attitudes towards migrants in individual countries. Migratory pressure fanned xenophobic attitudes, often associated with negative attitudes towards the EU, which is blamed for being too liberal towards migrants and for pressuring member states to take in refugees or to help finance the cost of their stay in the EU. As I have already mentioned, this has led to a migration crisis in the EU, which triggered a serious political crisis that still continues today.

The migrants who arrived in Europe in 2014–2021 come from at least several dozen countries of the world. However, the largest migrant populations come

from three countries: Syria, which alone accounts for one third of all migrants, followed by Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2015, they were joined by Kosovo and Albania, which are both European countries. Unfortunately, most migrants came to Europe illegally, via the Western Mediterranean, Eastern European, Western Balkan, and Eastern Mediterranean routes.

Solving problems

Migrations are one of the main global problems of the modern world. These are phenomena and processes whose effects go beyond a single country or continent. They affect the whole world and are very difficult to solve for a single state or even for all states of a given region or continent. Migrations are international, multilevel, and multifaceted processes that have a global reach and impact, and require global solutions, solidarity, and cooperation on the part of all countries and international organizations, both governments and NGOs. Nation-states are fully aware that they cannot meet the challenge of mass population movements on their own, so they seek to engage and utilize international organizations as platforms for cooperation and the regulation of issues related to migration and migrants. The global approach to migration has been driven by the actions taken, primarily by the United Nations. On the other hand, the most advanced efforts in the process of regional integration towards the creation of a supranational system of migration management have been made by the EU, which is creating an integrated system that has legal, political, and financial instruments. It is a response to the problems caused by the massive influx of migrants to Europe in the 20th and 21st centuries. Europe is still the most attractive continent for migrants from Africa and Asia, who see the EU as a dream oasis of freedom, democracy, and security.

Changes in the approach of international organizations towards contemporary migration as a social process of a political and economic nature also result from the transformations in the nature of migration processes themselves and their consequences. The first actions taken by international organizations, especially by the League of Nations after WWI and by the United Nations after WWII, were mainly related to humanitarian issues such as forced migration, deportation, resettlement, war refugees, forced labor, and human trafficking. Later, however, they focused on the issues of the rights of migrants in the context of the emerging international system of human rights. Current actions, in turn, center around social, economic, and development-related issues. At the same time, global and regional institutionalization has been coupled with the development of legislation that directly and indirectly concerns migrants themselves. It consists of numerous acts of legislation that constitute

A demonstration of Polish nationalists against Ukrainian migrants in Poland; Wrocław, 10 July 2019



ANELOVSKI/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



EDWARD CRAWFORD/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

The dismantling of a refugee camp known as the “Jungle” in Calais; France, October 2016

the international system of human rights protection, including conventions, recommendations, and other types of documents developed within the UN, the Council of Europe, the EU, and other international organizations and related exclusively to migrants and the protection of their rights.

Civilizing contemporary migration and helping immigrants settle in their new homeland requires not only legal and international solutions but also considerable funding, which is needed to ensure decent living conditions for migrants, speed up their adaptation to the new environment, provide them with employment and education opportunities, teach them foreign languages, and integrate them into the society of the receiving country. Unfortunately, these processes are not only costly but also long-term. On top of this, they do not always bring the desired results for both the migrants and the countries that receive them. This is demonstrated by the presence of migrant ghettos on the outskirts of almost all Western European capitals and large cities in the United States. The police fear to go there even in broad daylight, and such places are characterized by the spread of drug addiction, alcoholism, prostitution, human trafficking, and organized crime in the form of mafia. It is there that many migrants, disillusioned with Europe and America, radicalize their views and allow themselves to be recruited into various terrorist organizations, later carrying out attacks that have tragic consequences and often claim

the lives of innocent people. This fuels the spiral of hatred of migrants and becomes a factor behind rising populism, xenophobia, and nationalism in Europe.

Likewise, we must not forget that migrants often come to Europe against their will. As I have already noted, they are forced to leave their homes by famine, international conflicts, and bloody civil wars, such as those in Syria, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Responsibility for such wars lies largely with the “civilized” and democratic countries of the affluent West, led by the United States, and authoritarian Russia. Therefore, as a matter of priority, armed interventions should be ended as soon as possible and peace should be restored in the countries of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa that have been ravaged by war and brought to ruin. Solidarity is needed to rebuild those failed states so that the migrants who now live in Europe and the United States could return to their homelands. In my opinion, this is the only way to halt the process of migration to Europe and to solve the migration crisis, which now threatens the entire EU and the security of all the countries of our continent. Let us hope Europe will not witness the materialization of the warnings made by the British writer, journalist, and political commentator Douglas Murray, who wrote: “As a result, by the end of the lifespans of most people currently alive Europe will not be Europe and the peoples of Europe will have lost the only place in the world we had to call home.” ■