



Interview with Georges Lemaitre

Interview with Georges Lemaitre, OECD international migration expert, on recent migration trends in the European Union.

Georges, there's a lot of talk about the economic crisis and recession hitting immigrants in the European Union. Can you give me an overview of recent migration trends in the region?

Over the past few years, there have been considerable movements of workers from the new member countries of the EU (Poland, the Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania), where wages are lower, to the other countries of the Union. These have generally been into lesser skilled jobs, essentially because the workers even when qualified have not often had the necessary language proficiency to move directly into higher skilled jobs. The jobs have been in areas like construction, food processing, hotels and restaurants. Migration from outside the European Union has generally been highly skilled because this is the form of migration which governments allow and it is generally employer-driven. These workers have to have a job before they arrive, often in technical, financial or scientific areas.

What impact has the crisis had on migration so far?

With the downturn it is the free-movement migration which has gone down the most: these are workers who can come and go as they please, as they have the right to live and work in other EU countries, and it may be advantageous for those who lose their jobs to take their savings and return home, where the cost of living is lower. And these workers had often been going into jobs that were in shortage because of a booming economy. These are the jobs that have been hit the hardest by the economic crisis.

Workers from the rest of the world tend to be hired into jobs that are "structurally" in shortage, that is, for which the domestic educational system and population are not turning out enough candidates. They also tend to stay in the country if they lose their jobs, because it is more difficult for them to get back in (they have to have a job offer, etc.). Indeed, government incentives to encourage returns to the home country have not met with much success. For example, out of the 137 000 unemployed immigrants eligible for the Spanish return programme in June of 2009, only 10 000 persons (and 3 600 family members) had applied by the end of January 2010.

What numbers are we talking about in Europe?

France has seen only a drop of 5% in regulated labour migration in the first three quarters of 2009 compared to the same period in 2008. Spain already saw a drop in immigration of about 25% from 2007 to 2008, almost all of which was concentrated among immigrants from Europe. The drop in regulated migration from the rest of the world was a little over 6%.

The United Kingdom has seen a drop of about 25% from 2007 to 2008 in free movement labour migration and it appears that there will be a further drop of 40% in 2009. Again the same story with respect to regulated labour migration, a drop of about 5% from 2007 to 2008 and of about 17% from 2008 to 2009, smaller than for free movement migration.

Ireland has seen a drop of about one third in allocations of personal public service numbers from 2007 to 2008. You can pretty much use this as a proxy for the drop in movements of workers, because you need to have such a number in order to work and/or collect benefits. Most of the drop is showing up in workers from the new member states of the European Union.

Will we continue to see the same level of movement between European member states?

The free movement within the European Union is likely going to taper off eventually, because employment conditions will improve in the new member states and because those countries are ageing too, so they will need workers as well.

At that point, countries will be faced with the decision of whether or not to recruit more broadly from the rest of the world for lesser skilled jobs. They have not wanted to do this, except temporarily and on a small scale, because the track record on integration for low-educated immigrants from developing countries has not always been good, for reasons which have as much to do, and perhaps more, with inadequate policies as with the low education of the immigrants.

To what extent do governments have control over migration flows?

They do and they don't. There are in fact two different types of migration: what you could call "discretionary" and "non-discretionary" migration. Non-discretionary refers to the fact that there are certain forms of even legal migration over which governments do not have much discretionary authority. There are several reasons for this. The first is that governments have signed international treaties committing them to do certain things. One example is the treaty of Rome in the European Union, which gives EU workers the right of free movement within the EU. Another is the Geneva Convention, in which signatory countries agree to consider requests for asylum on the territory of their countries and to give the right of residence to applicants who satisfy the requirements (which are specified in the Convention). Still another example is, interestingly, that of H1B visas in the United States. The United States has committed itself under the GATS (the General Agreement on Trade in Services) to making available 65 000 of these visas every year. It cannot renege on this without providing financial compensation to origin countries. But it doesn't give these out freely to immigrants wanting to come in. Employers must recruit them.

Another reason why certain forms of migration are non-discretionary is the fact that most democratic governments recognise certain fundamental human rights, such as the right of citizens and/or permanent residents to live with members of their immediate families or to marry or adopt whomever they want to. The right of immediate family members to immigrate is often subject to certain conditions, such as having sufficient income or lodgings, but if these conditions are met, governments do not exercise any discretionary authority with respect to the immigration, although restrictive measures can delay it.

Family migration of immediate family members (spouses and minor children) is generally considered non-discretionary, while migration of siblings, adult children or parents is not. Indeed the United States is the country which has the most liberal provisions with regard to the migration of non-immediate family. On the other hand, it tends to be restrictive on labour migration and now that European countries are opening up on this score, it is becoming one of the more restrictive countries in the OECD with regard to labour migration. This restrictiveness in a context of strong demand has undoubtedly contributed to creating a climate in which irregular migration could flourish.

What about labour migration?

The distinction between discretionary and non-discretionary migration applies to labour migration as well. The example cited above with regard to workers in the European Union is an example of non-discretionary labour migration. Workers can move from any country to another and look and find work without any restrictions. Otherwise labour migration is discretionary, that is, it can be allowed or not allowed by governments.

There are two forms of discretionary labour migration. One is so-called "supply-driven" and reflects what Australia and Canada have generally done. These countries invite persons abroad interested in migrating to apply and then assess them on the basis of certain criteria (age, knowledge of the language, educational qualifications, occupation, work experience, presence of relatives in the country, etc.). Points are awarded for each characteristic and persons having a certain minimum number of points are invited to immigrate with their immediate families, up to a pre-specified maximum per year. Immigrants do not have to have a job before arrival (sometimes extra points are awarded if applicants have a job offer) and enter the labour market once they arrive, to look for work like any other person.

What about companies that look abroad to hire workers?

That's what we call demand- or employer-driven migration, that is employers make requests for workers to public authorities (generally they have specific persons in mind), which then allow the workers to come in if they deem that no workers in the country could satisfy the job requirements of the jobs for which the potential immigrants are being recruited. This form of labour migration is the most common one and is the one prevalent in the United States, Europe and Japan. There is generally a "labour market test" to determine if workers in the country could take on the job; this takes the form of a requirements to advertise the job and to hire domestic candidates with the required qualifications. Governments may set up lists of "shortage occupations" to speed up recruitment in occupations where there are obvious needs; in these cases no labour market test is applied to job offers in the shortage occupations.

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