Attitudes towards immigration are said to be split down an East–West divide, but it is western Europe that has traditionally feared ‘invasions’ from the East and that responded to EU enlargement in 2004 with restrictions on labour migration. Now that eastern and western Europe are more deeply integrated than ever before, the defining question will be how Europe negotiates immigration from outside its borders.

Ever since the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015, the common wisdom has been that attitudes towards migration are split down the old East–West divide. The Visegrád states – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – in particular are accused of preventing an equitable distribution of refugees who entered Europe during and after the 2015 ‘crisis’. All four countries have resisted compulsory quotas for the distribution of refugees within Europe. Viktor Orbán’s government in Hungary has been most stridently hostile to immigration, erecting a fence at the Serbian border in 2015 to close the ‘Balkan route’ and clamping down on NGOs dealing with refugees. Opinion polls in all these countries have shown majorities opposed to the reception of refugees. [1] All of this been identified as part of a broader trend towards ‘illiberalism’ in central and eastern Europe, a political force that some fear might spread to other European societies ‘with much deeper democratic roots’. [2]

There is indeed a history of European division on migration. However, it is a history that long predates both the 2015 migration crisis and the Cold War division. In it, it is not eastern Europe that stands out as being xenophobic. Traditionally, it has been the western countries that have felt threatened by the immigration of culturally distant and supposedly inferior aliens. In the western imaginary, people who came from ‘the East’ brought poverty and disease.

Fear of immigration from eastern Europe was one of the driving forces behind the development of migration restrictions in Europe and the North Atlantic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Germany’s restrictive turn in immigration and citizenship policy since the late nineteenth century had a lot to do with perceived threats posed by Polish and Jewish immigrants from the Russian and Austrian Empires. [3]
the early 1890s, the (often Jewish) transit migrants from the Russian and Habsburg Empires to North America were subject to strict medical supervision. [4] ‘Liberal’ Great Britain passed the restrictive 1905 Aliens’ Act with a view to fending off eastern European and especially Jewish immigrants. [5] In the 1920s, the spectre of eastern European refugees drove the United States to change its traditionally liberal attitude towards European immigrants, with catastrophic consequences for the Jewish refugees trying to flee Nazism after 1933. [6] In the 1930s, it was central and eastern Europe that provided refuge to racial and political refugees. [7] In many cases, western states would not have them.

Seen from this perspective, Cold War division and the Iron Curtain did a lot to help westerners - both Europeans and North Americans - forget their fear of eastern ‘invasions’. After 1948–49, immigration from the East was exceptional; whoever made it out of the Soviet bloc was embraced as a political refugee, or as a persecuted co-ethnic deserving of solidarity. [8] The closure of borders in the East enabled the conception of the West as the ‘free world’. [9]

Eastern European societies under state socialism were seen as being closed largely because of the restrictions imposed on citizens’ mobility. Some socialist states were more flexible with migration than others: non-aligned Yugoslavia, with its massive guest worker emigration to western Europe since the 1960s, was the liberal extreme. After 1961, the GDR with its highly restrictive and often deadly emigration regime was at the opposite end of the spectrum. In-between stood a country like Poland, which enabled the emigration of ethnic minorities and from the 1970s increasingly tolerated cross-border mobility. [10]

Recent literature has pointed to the importance of the West’s insistence on making human rights, including the right to emigration, part of the 1975 CSCE Final Act. This provided argumentative ammunition to activists in eastern European countries and increased the pressure on socialist regimes to let more of their citizens go. The ‘Helsinki effect’ supposedly undermined the emigration restrictions in Eastern Bloc states and ultimately the regimes themselves. [11] With the downfall of Soviet communism, freedom of emigration became the rule.

However, following a typical pattern of international migration, the same western states that had previously criticized communist regimes for refusing to let their citizens leave reacted to the exit liberalizations with immigration restrictions. Once again, fears of an ‘invasion’ from the East loomed large, this time of newly liberated eastern Europeans thirsting for freedom, consumer goods, and a share of capitalist wealth. [12]

**East-West migration after 2004**

The polemics surrounding the extension of intra-European freedom of movement to the citizens of the post-2004 accession states amply illustrate the comeback of western fears of eastern immigrants after 1989. Many of these fears were connected to predictions of wage-dumping in the West. To accommodate what were essentially protectionist
considerations into the ‘eastern enlargement process’, EU member states were allowed to opt out of freedom of movement for workers from the new member states for up to seven years. Germany made use of this option, postponing the labour immigration of Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians until 2011. This was despite, or perhaps because of the fact that since 1970 the country had already received more than a million immigrants from Poland alone, most of them on an ethnic German ticket, others as labour migrants and seasonal workers. In France, amidst fears about the ‘Polish plumber’, freedom of immigration for eastern Europeans was postponed until 2008. [13] Tellingly, these restrictions did not affect citizens of Cyprus and Malta, which joined the EU at the same time as the Visegrád states, the Baltic states and Slovenia.

Of all the ‘old’ EU states, only Ireland, the UK, and Sweden fully embraced the principle of freedom of movement in 2004. Among these three countries, Sweden was the only one to extend the same treatment to Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. However, the substantial immigration from eastern Europe, which was particularly prominent in the UK and Ireland, has not remained without political consequences: free movement from Europe famously loomed large during the Brexit campaign. Research has shown that support for ‘Leave’ was particularly strong in communities that had experienced a sharp increase of EU immigration in recent years. Anti-immigration and anti-EU sentiment merged in the minds of many voters, fuelling the rise of the anti-immigration and anti-EU party UKIP. [14] ‘Taking back control’ to a large extent meant preventing an unrestricted influx of eastern European immigrants.

Before 2015, eastern European states were therefore hardly the ones opposed to migration. On the contrary, when it came to intra-European movement, western European states were generally sceptical (to say the least) of the benefits of east-west migration, while eastern European countries for obvious reasons favoured it. Even now, there are significant divisions between eastern and western states on freedom of movement, for example concerning ‘posted workers’. Eastern European states lobby for deregulation in order to gain their competitive advantage on labour markets, while western European states support stricter regulation for the same reason. [15]

Some statistics may help to understand why intra-European freedom of movement has become so important. Since the end of communism, and in particular since EU enlargement, millions of citizens of eastern and south-eastern European member states have moved to live and work in the countries of the ‘old EU’. Of the ten EU countries with the highest mobility rate of citizens, seven (Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland and Estonia) are eastern European. [16] Romanians offer an impressive example: in 2017, more than 1.1 million Romanian citizens lived in Italy, 680,000 in Spain, 530,000 in Germany, and 380,000 in the UK (Romania has a total population of some 19.5 million). [17] That same year, 994,000 Polish citizens lived in the UK, 783,000 in Germany, 122,000 in Ireland, 121,000 in the Netherlands, 113,000 in France, and 102,000 in Norway (out of a total population of around 38 million). [18] In 2017, 196,000 Lithuanian citizens lived in the UK, 46,000 in Germany, 42,000 in Norway, and 36,000 in Ireland – figures which may seem less impressive in absolute terms, but more so considering Lithuania’s total population of only 2.8 million. [19] Bulgarian migration, too, has increased significantly in recent years, especially to Germany (where 263,000 Bulgarian citizens lived in 2017, more than twice as many as in 2013), the UK (109,000, as opposed
to 45,000 in 2014), and Spain (126,000 – though here, the numbers have actually been decreasing). [20]

In the receiving countries of the ‘old’ EU, eastern European immigrants make up an important part of total immigrant populations. In 2017, 51% of EU-born immigrants in the UK (approx. 1.9 million individuals) were from the new member states, with Poland and Romania at the top of the list of countries of origin. [21] In Germany, too, eastern Europeans form a large contingent of EU immigrants: 3.4 of 5.1 million (66%) – in this case both foreign citizens and naturalized Germans – are from the newer member states, despite Germany having delayed the free movement of citizens of these countries by seven years. In fact, many of them immigrated long before 2011 in connection with earlier streams of East-West migration. Between 1970 and 1995, Germany received one million Polish and 400,000 Romanian citizens, who entered on an ‘ethnic ticket’ as German Aussiedler. [22] The same status applied to some 2.4 million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who make up the largest single contingent of first generation immigrants in Germany, followed by those from Poland. [23]

In southern Europe, too, eastern Europeans have a major presence. In Italy, the more than a million Romanians represent the largest immigrant group. Citizens of European non-EU states are also significant in number, in particular the 430,000 Albanians, the 235,000 Ukrainians (mainly female) and the 127,000 Moldovans (also mainly female). [24] In Spain, the 680,000 Romanians top the list alongside a similar number of Moroccans. [25]

These substantial migratory movements have led to concerns about their detrimental effects on the economies and societies of the countries of origin. [26] In November 2018, the Romanian finance minister Eugen Teodorovici made the headlines with a call to curb freedom of movement for Romanians in order to counter labour shortages and brain drain. [27] Like western European fears about the impact of immigration, eastern European worries about excessive emigration are a resurrection of past discourses: in central and eastern European nationalisms there is a tradition of hostility to emigration. From the nineteenth century onwards, fears loomed large that emigration would weaken the ranks of the nation. [28] These fears long predated the Iron Curtain and remain alive today – though it is hardly a majority opinion for now, as the negative reaction to Teodorovici’s comments has shown.

Prospects

Is migration dividing Europe? On the face of it, it may seem so. Immigration from outside Europe in 2015 strained intra-European solidarity and the principle of burden-sharing to the point that the Visegrád states opted out. At the same time, intra-European freedom of movement has resurrected deep fears in western societies about immigration from the East and has started to cause concern in the countries of origin too.

Yet, amidst all the controversy, it is easy to lose sight of the dialectics of this process: the presence of millions of eastern and south-eastern Europeans in the West causes conflicts, but also contributes to the interconnection of European societies and economies across
the East-West divide. After all, an important part of the reality of pre-1989 division was the paucity of contact between the two halves of the continent, which led to detachment both in human and economic terms. Now, it is common for eastern Europeans to live and work in the West, while visiting, working or even living in eastern European countries has become normal for westerners.

This is not to endorse a romanticized vision of a borderless Europe – after all, there is little romance to be found in a slaughterhouse, on an asparagus field or in elderly care. Moreover, citizens of eastern European countries outside the EU cannot easily partake in this process of (re)unification, leaving some of them (citizens of the former Yugoslavia, in particular) worse off than before and causing new divisions (for instance at the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian borders).

Yet, all things considered, the current situation of intra-European mobility is surely preferable to the restrictive pre-1989 reality. This is something that opponents of free movement in the West would be well-advised to remember – just as the advocates of fortified borders on both sides of the former Iron Curtain ought to remind themselves that 1989 was about tearing down walls, not building new ones. Commemorations of the ‘fall of the wall’ in 1989 will ring increasingly hollow if they take place in a Europe surrounded and divided by fences.

In another, more cynical turn of the dialectic, eastern Europeans may in the long run ‘benefit’ from the controversies surrounding the increased influx of non-European aliens, though not in a ‘pretty’ way. Just as the ‘guest workers’ from the European Mediterranean ascended the ethnic hierarchies of their host countries as a result of the increased presence of extra-European immigrants, so the eastern European migrants of today may find that their status increases with time. With Islam now the predominant marker of difference, western European societies may increasingly perceive eastern European immigrants as fellow Christians – with the notable exception of south-eastern European Roma. The latter continue to be the object of intense stereotyping, as exemplified by German initiatives to declare states of the western Balkans ‘safe countries of origin’ – a barely concealed attempt to curb Roma immigration. Animosity towards Romanian and Bulgarian migrants can be interpreted in a similar way.

The development of a European identity might therefore mean the construction of the non-European alien (who, as with the Roma, might be from inside Europe). As history has repeatedly proven, the inclusion of one’s ‘own’ comes with the exclusion and persecution of ‘others’. Anti-immigrant mobilization could turn out to be a ‘unifying’ issue – and not just for the European right. Whether this is the kind of European identity we should aspire to is a wholly different question.


*The Serbian-Hungarian border on 18 August 2019 at Bajmok-Bácsalmás. For guest workers and students commuting, the wait usually goes up to several hours when entering the Schengen area, bringing tensions between those on the wait. The video is courtesy of Gergely Mucsi.*
Thanks to Janine Schmittgen for her assistance with researching this article.

Footnotes


5. On the evolution of British policies of migration control between 1880 and 1914 in comparison to Germany, see Christiane Reinecke, Grenzen der Freizügigkeit: Migrationskontrolle in Großbritannien und Deutschland, 1880-1930, Munich: Oldenbourg 2010.


7. See the ERC funded project ‘Unlikely refuge? Refugees and citizens in East-Central Europe in the 20th century’ at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, https://www.unlikely-refuge.eu/


18. Ibid. The number for Ireland refers to 2016.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/


24. https://www.istat.it/it/archiviaio/223598

25. https://es.statista.com/estadisticas/472512/poblacion-extranjera-de-espana-por-nacionalidad/

27. Moncia Pronczuk and Valerie Hopkins, ‘Romania minister calls for curbs on EU free movement,’ Financial Times, 28 November 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/35a31080-f322-11e8-ae55-df4bf40f9d0d