

The paradox of intra-EU immobility

An immobility crisis in the European Union?

In 2017, over 100 million Europeans said they would 'ideally' like to migrate 'if they had the opportunity' (Gallup Analytics, 2019).

EU citizens can migrate. They are entitled to free movement within the EU and comprehensive policy frameworks are in place to facilitate their migration.

Yet, as of 2019, only 21 million Europeans were living in another EU Member State. This represents 4.1% of the European population, 2 percentage points up from 1990 levels (UNPD, 2020; World Bank, 2020).

How can we explain the fact that high levels of migration aspirations combined with high levels of migration capabilities do not result in high levels of migration?

References

Gallup Analytics, 2019, *World Poll Survey*, Move Permanently to Another Country, Aggregate values.
UNPD, 2020, 'international migrant stock' database.
World Bank, 2020, 'Population, total' database.
Background picture by S. Tretta on [Flickr](#).

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100 million Europeans:

- want to migrate;
- can migrate;
- but don't migrate.

High levels of migration aspirations



High levels of migration capabilities

Low levels of migration

What about you?

① Are levels of migration aspirations actually high?

Not necessarily. When asked as part of a survey, many Europeans may answer that they aspire to migrate without having ever really thought about it. Structured interviews with non-migrants from Lithuania and Slovenia confirm this. Migration intuitions can be used to account for the unconscious immobility of those who have never thought of migrating as an option for themselves.

② Are levels of migration capabilities actually high?

It depends on the standards you set. Traditionally, free movement is considered a primary human right. For citizens to enjoy this right, public authorities should refrain from interfering with the free circulation of people. According to these standards, yes, EU citizens have high migration capabilities. Yet, this may not be enough. Free movement could also be considered a secondary human right, in which case the active involvement of public authorities (e.g., to support the acquisition of foreign languages) would be needed for citizens to enjoy their right. According to these standards, no, EU citizens do not have high migration capabilities. The EU does very little to actively encourage migration: its policies focus on short-term mobility.

③ Are levels of migration actually low?

Not exactly. Europeans migrate a lot: 7% of all those born in the EU qualify as migrants. This is twice as much as the world's 3.5% average (UNPD, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Yet, levels of intra-EU migration are rather low, especially compared to the volume of intra-EU short-term mobility.

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- The 'aspirations/capabilities' approach to migration would be reinforced by adding a first 'intuitions' stage.
- Free movement may qualify as a secondary human right.
- Europeans migrate a lot, but not necessarily within the EU.