

CIRCULAR MIGRATION AND ITS REFLECTION IN EUROPEAN MIGRATION POLICIES

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The unfavorable demographic development manifested in the aging of the population in economically developed countries is a factor that forces their governments to revise their migration policy. In this context, there is growing interest in research into circular migration and its real implementation into migration policy in the countries of the European Union. The aim of our paper is to briefly outline the genesis of the concept of circular migration first and then demonstrate its growing influence on European migration policies. We will not rely only on official documents but also on examples of good practice. At the end of the article, we outline the main principles of modern migration policies that will enable full utilization of the potential of circular migration.

Keywords: demographic trends; circular migration; European migration policies

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Introduction

Demographic trends in developing and economically developed countries have a diametrically different character. We can observe a sharp increase in the number of people in developing countries, which, in the context of low economic growth rates, creates strong incentives for emigration on one hand.

These are one of the main causes of the increasing flows of migrants directed both to the countries of the European Union and to other economically developed countries of the world (see Tab. 1).

On the other hand, it can be stated that the unfavorable demographic development manifested in the aging of the population in economically developed countries is a factor that forces their governments to revise their migration policy.



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This is becoming increasingly selective. It aims to attract migrants who will fill vacant job positions in their labor markets. Furthermore, the preference is for temporary migration over permanent labor migration.

Table 1 - Inflows of foreign population into selected EU countries (thousands)
(Source: <https://stat.link/t56x78>)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Austria	125.6	135.2	154.3	198.7	158.7	139.3	131.7	135.0	121.3	139.5	246.3
Belgium	116.1	105.5	106.3	128.8	106.1	109.2	119.7	129.5	101.6	122.4	192.0
Czechia	28.6	27.8	38.5	31.6	34.8	43.5	55.9	63.3	53.8	67.3	347.7
Denmark	49.6	56.0	64.5	75.4	71.2	66.4	64.6	61.9	48.0	57.3	101.2
Estonia	1.1	1.6	1.3	7.4	7.7	9.1	9.7	11.0	10.3	12.5	42.4
Finland	23.3	23.9	23.6	21.4	27.3	23.7	23.1	24.2	23.3	28.0	42.6
France	...	249.2	236.0	240.5	243.6	246.6	259.9	268.5	208.5	250.4	284.9
Germany	965.9	1108.1	1342.5	2016.2	1719.1	1384.0	1383.6	1345.9	994.8	1139.8	2481.0
Greece	32.0	31.3	29.5	34.0	86.1	80.5	87.3	95.4	63.4	28.7	62.6
Hungary	20.3	21.3	26.0	25.8	23.8	36.5	49.3	55.3	43.8	49.1	55.5
Ireland	37.2	41.0	43.7	49.3	53.0	57.2	61.9	61.7	56.5	35.0	91.8
Italy	321.3	279.0	284.4	250.0	262.9	301.1	285.5	264.6	191.8	243.6	336.5
Latvia	3.7	3.5	4.5	4.5	3.4	5.1	6.5	6.6	4.6	6.4	7.3
Lithuania	2.5	3.0	4.8	3.7	6.0	10.2	12.3	19.7	22.3	21.1	81.0
Luxembourg	19.4	19.8	21.06	22.6	21.6	23.2	23.4	25.2	21.0	23.8	29.9
Netherlands	115.7	122.3	139.3	159.5	182.2	183.9	191.0	215.2	170.6	201.1	359.3
Poland	47.1	46.6	32.0	86.1	107.0	128.0	137.6	163.2	163.5	224.2	335.3
Portugal	38.5	33.2	35.3	37.9	46.9	61.4	93.2	129.2	118.1	111.3	143.1s
Slovak Republic	2.9	2.5	2.4	3.8	3.6	2.9	2.9	2.5	2.8	2.0	1.8
Slovenia	12.3	11.6	11.3	12.7	13.8	15.5	24.1	40.5	25.5	32.5	36.8
Spain	272.5	248.4	264.5	290.0	352.2	454.0	560.0	666.0	415.2	752.3	1120.5
Sweden	82.6	95.4	106.1	113.9	143.0	125.0	114.4	98.2	65.8	74.4	86.5

In this context, there is growing interest in research into circular migration and its real implementation into migration policy in the countries of the European Union.

Research objectives

The aim of our paper is to briefly outline the genesis of the concept of circular migration first and then demonstrate its growing influence on European migration policies. We will not rely only on official documents but also on examples of good practice.

A brief genesis of the concept of circular migration

The concept of circular migration is not new. First definitions of circular migration are already emerging in the mid-70s of the 20th century. It is necessary to mention a definition that appeared in the study of Bovenkerk: "The movement to and from between two places that includes more than one return to the place of origin". This definition is quite simple, but it explains the essence of the phenomenon, which consists of the repetition of movements within the workforce. If there was only a movement from a country of origin to the host country and back, it would not be circulated but so-called temporary migration.

G. Hugo (2009) suggests another definition of circular migration. It places emphasis on the distinction between permanent and circulating migration. This distinguishing feature is an attachment to a migrant's country of origin and/or the host country. According to Hugo, the circulating migrants feel more attached to their country of origin, while permanent migrants feel more attached to the host country.

A milestone in the genesis of the concept of circular migration was the year 2005, when the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) stated in its report that "the original paradigm of the permanent establishment of migrants is gradually released to temporary and circular migration".

In the same year, the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) noted, "The old paradigm of permanent migrant settlement is gradually giving way to temporary and circular migration". Furthermore, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) emphasized the potential benefits of circular migration in developing countries, channeling and facilitating temporary, repeated stays of migrant workers (IOM, 2019).

The question of circular migration has only played an important role in the political agenda of the European Union since 2007, when the European Commission published its Communication on Circular Migration and Mobility Partnerships between the European Union and Third Countries (European Commission, 2007).

An important element contained in the communication is that circular migration is presented as a means of satisfying the European labor market's needs. The communication also emphasizes the temporary nature of circular migration. Circular migration is increasingly becoming the key form of migration, and if it is well managed, it may facilitate the balancing of demand and supply of labor at the international level and thus contribute to a more efficient redistribution of available resources and to economic growth.

Also important: circular migration could allow residents from third countries to temporarily settle in the EU to work or study (or combine these activities) if they return to their home country and main activity after the period of admission. Circulation can be enhanced by allowing immigrants, upon their return, to maintain a certain privileged form of mobility to and from the Member State of the Union in which they previously worked, for example, through simplified immigration procedures.

We consider the article by Orosová et al. (2018) to be a valuable contribution to the development of the concept of circulating migration. The authors of the article understand circular migration as a neutral phenomenon whose effects can be both positive and negative depending on the policies adopted by the host countries and countries of origin of migrants. The positive nature of circular migration is associated both with economic development and with the respect of the rights and interests of the migrants.

The approach of researchers Dayton-Johnson & Xenogiani (2007) is considered very constructive as well. These authors tend to emphasize that circular migration implies the concepts of return and repetition: "Circular migration is distinct from temporary migration in that it denotes a migrant's continuous engagement in both home and adopted countries; it usually involves both return and repetition".

Constant & Zimmermann (2011) draws four dimensions to characterize the circular migration phenomena: spatial, as it involves a geographical displacement between at least two countries; Temporal migration refers to the short-term or specific life-cycle migration, such as after retirement, which implies a significant variation in the duration migrants spend in each country. Iterative or repetitive migration, on the other hand, refers to the repetition of migration movements (i.e., multiple cycles), where migrants travel back and forth between their home and destination countries.

The iterative dimension distinguishes circular migration from return migration. The fourth and final feature is the human dimension, which refers to the potential benefits obtained from this movement.

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Carrera et al. (2009) defines circular migration as international, temporary, repeated migration for economic reasons and includes the reason and motive of migration as the four dimensions: space, time, repetition, and reason.

Some newer definitions of migration include the IOM's, which says that circular migration is "a type of migration in which people repeatedly move back and forth between two or more countries" (IOM, 2019). Temporary migration, on the other hand, is "migration for a specific reason and purpose with the intention to return to the country of origin or habitual residence after a limited period of time or to undertake an onward movement". Other authors or institutions highlight that circular and temporary migration both share a temporary nature. Yet, circular migration implies a migrant's continuous engagement in both origin and destination countries for different reasons, from educational purposes to work opportunities, while temporary migration is limited to one cycle of mobility.

The critical characteristic of circular migration is the idea of return, distinguishing it from other forms of migration. A narrower definition considers that circular migration implies that migrants not only stay for a short period but also come back several times.

The Global Compact for Migration sees circular migration as one of the ways to improve the availability of legal migration. Among the actions drawn by the Global Compact for Migration to achieve orderly pathways to regular migration is the development of flexible labor mobility schemes for migrants in the form of circular migration programs that provide flexible and convertible non-discriminatory visas and permits for work, study, business, and investment purposes.

This part of our article can be concluded by stating that despite the increasing use of the concept of circular migration in immigration policy research, there is no agreed definition or common understanding of the concept. Circular migration, as found in existing literature, refers to different migration patterns, ranging from spontaneous or forced repeated migration to government-led recruitment programs (Ammassari & Black, 2001).

While the concept of circular migration has undergone various definitions, it generally encompasses the notion of temporary repeat migration.

The aforementioned definitions of circular migration do not clearly determine specific criteria for the legal status, duration of stay, and character of repetition.

Besides, in many instances when policymakers talk about circular migration, it is not apparent whether they are referring to a spontaneously occurring phenomenon or to a controlled form of migration designed by policy. Yet, there is a growing interest in institutionalized or managed circular migration within policy circles.

Approach to circular migration in EU migration policy

The European Commission introduced the concept of circular migration into European policy-making through its Communication on Migration and Development in 2005 (European Commission, 2005). The main motivation for this implementation was that the labor market was changing - there were more temporary jobs requiring very specific skills, and thus the argument was that the traditional understanding of migration leading to settlement as a main goal was not capable of capturing these new realities.

Other reasons for introducing this concept were to counteract the brain drain from third countries' health sector and also because circular migration was seen as a means of allowing skills to move back and forth.

In order to encourage migrants to engage in circular migration and travel back and forth between their country of origin and their country of destination, the Commission emphasized the need to grant returnees a multi-entry visa allowing them to go back to their former country of residence, as well as maintaining the validity of the returning migrants' residence permits once back in their countries of origin (European Commission, 2005).

In December 2006, following the proposals of the Commission, the European Council identified circular migration as one of the guiding principles in the development of the EU's policy on legal migration. By June 2007, the European Council asked the Commission to come up with ideas on legal migration that would focus on building a balanced partnership with third countries and making it easier for people to move around and stay for a short time (European Council, 2005).

In response to the invitation of the European Council, the Commission published a Communication in May 2007 that focused entirely on circular migration and Mobility Partnerships between the European Union and third countries (European Commission, 2005).

Following the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council adopted the Stockholm Program in 2009, calling for "an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis in order to further explore the concepts of temporary and circular migration".

In response to this invitation, the European Migration Network (EMN) undertook a study entitled "Temporary and Circular Migration: Empirical Evidence, Current Policy, Practice, and Future Options", which was published in 2011 (European Migration Network, 2011).

The study found that even though the EU was trying to make this kind of migration easier, policy and legal changes at the national level were still "in an embryonic stage" and very different. It was also found that while some member states' policies included parts of circular migration, these were not made clear.

After 2010, interest in this concept sharply declined. Nor was it mentioned in the European Agenda on Migration that was adopted as a response to the 2015 "European refugee and migrant crisis" (European Commission, 2023). However, the European Commission (2016) continued to use it as an instrument within the GAMM framework.

We have seen a revival of interest in circular migration in European migration policies following the COVID-19 pandemic. The recovery of labor markets, characterized by labor shortages, primarily drives this interest. Attracting mid- and high-skilled migrants from abroad to support economic recovery and address labor shortages has thus become a priority in migration agendas in many countries. More skill-selective policies and general efforts to facilitate immigration processes reflect this.

In order to step up efforts to actively recruit immigrant workers, several EU countries are signing bilateral agreements and advance migration and mobility partnerships with selected countries of origin.

The new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum launched by the European Commission in September 2020 reaffirms the importance of structured partnerships in the field of labor migration to address EU skills needs in light of its growing shortages and increasing global competitiveness in the "race for talent" (European Commission, 2023).

The Skills and Talents Package (European Commission, 2023), published as a follow-up to the Pact, proposes key changes for more efficient and attractive immigration systems.

At the EU level, the Talent Partnership launched in the context of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum aims to address skills shortages in the EU.

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Spain's approach to circular migration as a positive practice example

Spain has signed a number of agreements with Gambia and Mauritania to establish a formal framework for circular migration. Spain already has similar agreements with Morocco and some Latin American countries, which allow temporary stays of up to nine months. In 2023, 16,000 people utilized this system.

The Spanish economy has recently come out of a long recession, with migrant labor playing a key role in the economic recovery. However, the country, like so many of its European neighbors, is still suffering from labor shortages, with a need for a further 200,000 to 250,000 immigrants annually to support their welfare and pension systems.

Spain's new agreements with Gambia and Mauritania aim to manage rising migration flows through a circular migration framework. By offering temporary work opportunities, the policy seeks to address Spain's labor shortages while providing legal pathways for migrants.

The process will require coordination between Spanish authorities and the governments of Gambia and Mauritania.

The Spanish government will provide job opportunities, and the source countries must help pre-select candidates who meet the required criteria.

Recent reforms have simplified the administrative processes for circular migration, allowing for longer-term contracts and reducing bureaucratic hurdles for both recruiting companies and migrant workers.

By employing temporary workers, Spain and other EU countries can boost their economies while avoiding the long-term costs associated with permanent immigration. Through these agreements, workers benefit from legal employment, fair working conditions, and the opportunity to return to their home country with accumulated savings and skills.

Conclusion

Circular migration can be defined as a migration that is temporary, renewable, legal, respectful of the migrant's rights, and managed in such a way as to optimize the equilibrium of labor markets at both ends.

Unlike permanent migration, circular migration involves a cyclical pattern where individuals return to their country of origin after completing a fixed-term contract abroad.

This system facilitates legal migration while meeting labor needs in the host country and supporting economic development in the source country.

A circular migration scheme should be part of a comprehensive migration policy and a shared approach to labor markets between sending and destination countries. Sending and destination countries should adapt these projects to their specificities.

Both sending and receiving countries need to ensure that circular migration policies are integrated into their employment and labor policies, their comprehensive migration policies, and their overall bilateral and regional relationships.

Elements of reciprocity and dialogue in circular migration schemes should be emphasized: destination countries should devise instruments to ensure social rights and transferable social benefits for circular migrants; sending countries should devise incentives for reintegration.

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