"States and Migration in Europe" Podcast
Episode #12 "Regulating migration: State failure or impossible task?"
With Anna Triandafyllidou

Enhanced transcript

By Emmanuel Comte

Abstract: In this episode, we grapple with an essential question: Can states regulate migration? We're joined by our esteemed guest, Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, a renowned expert in the areas of migration and nationalism from Toronto Metropolitan University. With surging nationalism and populism, anxiety over growing migrant populations is escalating. However, over the years, state intervention in migration affairs has been a customary practice. The persistence of migration-related concerns, even in the face of extensive state intervention, invites a challenging query – is this not a testament to states' failure to regulate migration? Professor Triandafyllidou scrutinises the motivations behind state regulation of migration and the hurdles that make it a daunting task. She provides insights into the complexities of migration control, often glossed over in public discourse. This episode offers an immersive journey into one of the most contentious debates of our era.

Introduction

Emmanuel Comte: Today we're addressing the contentious question of whether states can and should regulate migration. Nationalism is currently one of the most potent ideologies worldwide, and states are heavily involved in migration. Despite their significant influence, migration is a recurrent topic in political campaigns, especially in Europe and North America. Does this mean that state involvement in migration has failed? Why is migration such a focal point given states' significant intervention over the last half century? Some argue that states can regulate migration but fail to take necessary actions. To delve into this contentious topic, I have invited one of the authorities in the field of migration and nationalism studies, Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from Toronto Metropolitan University. Anna has an extensive record of publications on these subjects. Anna, thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this discussion on this important topic.

Anna Triandafyllidou: Well, thank you for having me. I'm very pleased to be here.

Emmanuel Comte: We will briefly review Professor Triandafyllidou's journey into migration studies. She will then discuss the arguments for and against state regulation of migration. We will use this discussion to highlight current policy implications.

A journey into migration studies

Emmanuel Comte: So, without further ado, Anna, let's get started. How did you engage in the profession of understanding migration in Europe and elsewhere?

Anna Triandafyllidou: Thank you for the question. It's an important one for me. I began my studies in the 1980s and left Greece in 1990 to do my PhD abroad. My Ph.D. was not on migration, but on the political and electoral behaviour of ideological minority parties. I was at

the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, doing my Ph.D. when significant changes began happening.

We celebrated the first anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall when I started my PhD. The reconnection of Europe created substantial changes in the field of migration, particularly within Europe. People from Central and Eastern Europe, from the former communist countries, started moving quite massively from Central East to West, and also to Southern Europe, as their states, welfare systems, education systems, and labour markets imploded due to the transition.

This was a significant change, particularly for Greece, which transformed overnight from an emigration to an immigration country. Previously, Greece was generally xenophilic, as foreigners were mainly tourists, often wealthy ones, or students from sub-Saharan or Asian countries studying at Greek universities. However, the situation drastically changed, and I became interested in studying it.

In the fourth year of my Ph.D., a colleague and I wrote a paper together on xenophobia. This was my entry point into migration studies, as it was a big puzzle for me to understand how Greeks turned xenophobic and, to a large extent, racist, in a very short time. I continued to delve into this topic in my postdoctoral study, looking at how identities were constructed in relation to migrants.

Initially, my focus was more on identity politics in relation to migration, which was closely related to my Ph.D. as it was about the strategies of influence for or against ideological minority parties. Later, I moved towards issues of migration management like governance, legalities, labour, family, and citizenship. It was a very personal journey for me, heavily influenced by what was happening in Greece and Southern Europe at the time.

Emmanuel Comte: That's interesting: Heaven Crawley, who came to this podcast, had a similar experience at the end of the Cold War. It was also transformative in her thinking about migration. So, this should mean that we will have a good crop of migration scholars in the coming years because migration has been such a prevalent issue in the last decade. So, you started from the perspective of Greece, which was typically a country of emigration – particularly towards Germany, from the 1960s onwards. However, it quickly found itself in the middle of a more dynamic area and transitioned from being primarily a country of emigration to a country of immigration. This shift resulted in a wave of xenophobia, and you wanted to better understand what explains this shift. Which research methods have you employed to study this?

Anna Triandafyllidou: I have primarily used qualitative methods in my research. I did my undergraduate studies at the University of Athens, completed my Ph.D. at the European University, and then moved to Brussels for a period to work on various projects. I also had the opportunity to study at the London School of Economics. Although I initially started with statistics, I have always leaned more towards qualitative methodology. I compared Spain, Italy, and Greece, and I conducted stakeholder interviews, interviewing social and political actors involved in migration from different sectors. This included NGOs, trade unions, relevant ministries, and state agencies.

My focus was not so much on the migrants themselves, but I did interview migrant associations. My goal was to understand how national identity was reconstructed in ways that excluded migrants. This was particularly evident in Greece, where identities have historically been very

mixed. Greece had grappled for centuries with a national formation process in the 19th and 20th centuries, excluding or homogenising people.

Many migrants in Greece were from nearby places and were often culturally and historically connected to Greece. However, they were excluded on the basis of legality and the rule of law, a civic dimension. This exclusion was unusual because the civic dimension is typically used to include people, not exclude them. But because Greece lacked an immigration policy, and due to compelling political and economic reasons, people generally moved without proper regulation or documents. Once in Greece, it was almost impossible to obtain documents due to the troubles with Greek public administration and bureaucracy. The prevailing notion was that these undocumented migrants were unwelcome because they did not abide by the rule of law – even though studies have shown that Greek public culture does not place much emphasis on the rule of law.

It was interesting to note that among the three countries – Spain, Italy, and Greece – Spain was the only one where stakeholders were more favourably disposed towards immigrants as they made connections between Spanish people abroad and people of non-Spanish origin in Spain. This was not the case in Italy and Greece. Instead, the narrative was about the lack of legal migration and the undocumented arrivals. But we also know that this is not accurate. This is where my socio-psychological perspective comes in. Groups reconstruct their identities in a way that keeps their identities alive, regardless of historical accuracy.

Emmanuel Comte: Interesting. So, you employ a method based primarily on qualitative interviews with actors involved in migration regulation, including members from ministries. This provides you with first-hand experience to address the question: can these actors truly regulate migration? I understand you have been close to some, possibly sharing in their uncertainties. Also, I understand that your research on state regulation of migration shows that this regulation creates a new basis for differentiation. Migrants are subjected to specific document requirements, it offers them the opportunity to regularise their status, but also places them at risk of non-compliance with these regulations. Even though adherence to the rule of law may not be common in the political culture of some countries, the annoyance for non-compliance backlashes disproportionately against migrants and becomes an additional reason to target them. This is a kind of secular reasoning.

Anna Triandafyllidou: What I suggest is that there are two levels of reality at play. I am not suggesting that reality is unimportant. It mattered greatly whether people had documents, and we know that Greece, both historically and currently, favoured migrants of Greek ethnic origin. Immigrants had to produce documents from Greek associations to prove it, whether these were from the former Soviet Union or Albania. This became a significant issue.

However, it is crucial to understand that there are policies and events that occur on the ground, and then there are the ways we make sense of these. These are different levels of reality that are interconnected. We can understand an event in various ways and reconstruct it accordingly. Venturing into the field of migration regulation significantly touches on the concepts of sovereignty and the nation-state, triggering a multitude of responses.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, absolutely. We have now discussed the Greek case extensively. An important context to consider is the shifting borders in the broader Balkan region and the diverse conditions there. States in this region are particularly focused on maintaining a certain ethnic composition within their populations.

Why states regulate migration

Emmanuel Comte: With that introduction, let's move to the core of our discussion: Can states regulate migration and why do they try in the first place? In what we have discussed so far, we have already seen states trying to shape the ethnic composition of their populations in specific ways. Let's consider the state as a key actor in migration regulation. What is the argument here?

Anna Triandafyllidou: Well, first of all, our understanding of migration is highly political. We live in a Westphalian world where there is what I call the "national state" – a state with a national majority that perceives the state as its property and feels it is a legitimate actor. That state regulates entry and exit from its territory, and the political, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries coincide with the territorial ones.

Our perception of migration has a lot to do with this. It was not always like this. People within empires moved quite freely. The passport itself is a recent invention. I live in Canada now, and the notion that crossing the line on the highway between Canada and the US signifies leaving one country and entering another is relatively new. Historically, there were border areas, not defined border lines.

It is crucial to remember this, as the future might not be the same. I believe it is important to understand that our perception of migration is heavily influenced by the concept of the nation-state.

My second point is that migration touches upon sovereignty and the notion of citizenship. As Abdelmalek Sayad, a famous French sociologist, stated in 1982, there is an immigrant paradox. Migrants are absent from where they should be, their country of origin, and present where they should not be, their country of destination. This "should" is understood in terms of the national doctrine. In this sense, migrants never seem to get it right as they are often criticised by both societies.

Another point is the changing nature of sovereignty. If we acknowledge that many issues cannot be regulated from a single state perspective and require either supranational entities like the European Union or coordination through international organisations, why should migration not be regulated in a similar manner? We accept that trade and climate change are transnational governance issues, so why not migration or asylum?

Lastly, it is important to note that the basic social contract is predicated on the idea that members of a community contribute to and benefit from that community. When a migrant enters, it disrupts this social contract. However, in a democracy, the delay in the migrant becoming a part of the citizenry should only be temporary. If the migrant never becomes a citizen, it severely undermines the very concept of democracy. We need to keep these points in mind when we think about state regulation of migration.

Emmanuel Comte: I believe the main argument in what you have mentioned is, indeed, that state regulation of migration is influenced by the perception that migrants can disrupt the balance of the community. The state manages this community, and there is a question of whether migrants contribute or merely benefit from it.

Based on that understanding, states regularly attempt to control migration to fit within this framework.

But you have also mentioned the process in recent centuries involving clear delineation of territories and passport controls. And there is a strong link between sovereignty and the capacity to control the population. When states are based on ethnic identities, it is extremely important to ensure that the population reflects these identities, especially in border conflicts. These border conflicts often stem from a resistance to possible ethnic mixing in border areas.

Would you like to add anything about the arguments for state regulation of migration?

Anna Triandafyllidou: Yes, as you have said, one question is that of borders. Migration can become a geopolitical, and indeed, a political question. We have seen migration and asylum rise to the level of high politics in international relations and diplomatic relations.

About 15 years ago, migration really started being elevated to the forefront of international relations and international politics. Previously, security, nuclear armaments, and peacekeeping were the main focus, with migration somewhat to the side. However, states, elites, and intellectuals began to realise that migration is central to these discussions.

I would also like to develop further the dilemma between inclusivity and exclusivity. When a person enters a country, they do not immediately become a citizen. However, the English expression, "no taxation without representation," comes to mind. If people come in, work, pay taxes, send their kids to school, and participate in society, they should become citizens, regardless of their ethnicity.

My perspective, not just as a person, but as a sociologist and a publicly engaged intellectual, is that there should not be exclusion because it undermines the democracy and the very essence of community.

Let’s take Canada as an example. Canada actively regulates migration, and immigration is part of the national identity. Justin Trudeau, the prime minister, famously said in 2015 that Canada is the first post-national state. In Canada, people mostly come through economic migration. They are selected based on labour market and demographic needs and have a clear path to permanent residency and then citizenship.

An issue arises with the policy regarding people in Canada who are citizens and want to bring their parents, through the so-called Parents and Grandparents Programme (PGP). There is a cap of 20,000 people per year for this programme, and if you do not qualify, there is something called the Super Visa. This visa is valid for ten years, with two-year stays each time, but you have to purchase health insurance for your parents.

This has sparked quite a bit of discussion because it is perceived as discrimination against citizens. Some citizens cannot bring their parents or grandparents, while others can. Some argue that these people did not contribute to our welfare and health system in Canada, so they should be temporary residents and pay for their own health insurance. On the other hand, there are valid arguments about a citizen’s right to fulfil their duty of familial care.

These are true dilemmas that societies and policies must discuss and resolve. The state regulation of migration is a constant process. There is no one-size-fits-all policy.

States and societies need to keep asking themselves who they are and how they are changing. Southern European societies, for example, have changed significantly after 1989.

Emmanuel Comte: One question that arises is the relationship between the state and society. Does the state merely represent society, or does it have its own unique identity? So, to sum up on this part, the first reason why states regulate migration is because it is part of their identity. The second reason is tied to the notion of the social contract, the contributions, and the scarcity of public resources. These reasons call for states to regulate migration.

The complexities for states to regulate migration

Emmanuel Comte: Now is a good time to consider the downsides of state objectives to regulate migration. There are difficulties inherent in controlling human movement as it involves a variety of complex cases. In your research and interviews, what have you observed about the challenges for states in regulating migration? What are the practical difficulties, and the financial calculations inherent in attempting to control the movement of people?

Anna Triandafyllidou: Thank you for the question. Firstly, mobility and migration are integral to our survival on the planet. Our ancestors migrated from different parts of Eastern South Africa to different parts of the Middle East and also France, where their first remains have been found.

The second point pertains to migration within a system of national states. States regulate their territory, their borders, their sovereignty, and migration. This comes as a challenge, and the same applies for seeking asylum protection. However, both migration and asylum are transnational challenges.

We live in a highly interconnected world. Many of the products we buy are the outcome of a global value chain. For example, a garment made in Italy has likely been produced in at least three different world regions and probably five countries. This interconnectedness is also evident in the production of our smartphones.

In contrast, when we see people, we think they should be in their country of birth or their country of passport, which is a paradox. We have seen this during the pandemic when we realised that a lot of protective equipment was produced only in East Asia and had to be shipped to other countries.

In such an interconnected world, with the spread of newspaper and electronic communication like TV and radio, followed by the internet and now social media, it is a paradox to expect that physical mobility can be regulated by one state. Politicians often say they are in control of their borders, but the truth is that they cannot control them, they can only manage them.

States should tell their citizens that while some movement will still happen spontaneously and perhaps not fully regularly, other movement will happen legally.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you for your detailed explanation. It was indeed enlightening. The prevailing global discourse is heavily influenced by the idea of powerful nation states dictating

migration. However, as you have made clear with your examples, the reality is more nuanced than this simplistic narrative.

In this narrative, there is one authority, one community over one territory, as if it is a private house. Yet, the reality of our global society and economy is far more complex, composed of networks that extend beyond state borders.

The idea of fitting reality into a nationally confined paradigm is inherently flawed. The complexities involved surpass any possible organisation or plan that could be managed by a single authority.

You have also worked on populism, a term with a debated definition. To me, it signifies the belief that the people's will can dictate reality. This simplistic view, however, often leads to serious curtailing of liberties and significant abuses.

Anna Triandafyllidou: It also entails violations of international law. Speaking of populism, it reminds me of the previous U.S. administration under President Trump, which propagated a strong populist discourse. This 'America First' mantra continues to some extent today, as the current Biden administration's handling of migration has not been significantly better.

Borders today are not just physical walls but also digital ones, bolstered by major corporate interests. Companies are involved in every aspect from constructing detention facilities to providing security and more. There is also a significant interest in the European Union in the companies that sell hardware and software for automated control systems at the borders.

This is an industry dominated by multinational corporations that often have relationships with different national governments. It is essential to remember that when we speak about migration and asylum governance, nearly everything is transnational.

Furthermore, when I started working on migration, it was assumed that asylum was a subject for lawyers specializing in international law and human rights, while migration was a topic for sociologists, economists, and political scientists. However, over the past 10 to 15 years, these two fields have converged.

We have come to understand that people move for both economic and political reasons. It is difficult to label someone strictly as an "economic migrant" or an "asylum seeker", as these categories often overlap. A person may be fleeing violence and conflict in their country but also have aspirations and plans for their future, so they want to choose where to build their life.

Conversely, someone who moves in search of better income might also be seeking political stability. Even though they might technically be classified as an "economic migrant", their motivations are partly political. We need more honest communication from governments about these complexities.

The phenomena on the ground are intertwined, including for people from Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. There are many intermediary situations that we need to examine. This is crucial because it is part of who we are as a community. The reason why the international community steps in is because it acknowledges that a single state cannot deal with these issues alone.

Crowd in a ravaged city in Syria

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, it is about the intricacy and contradictions involved in trying to impose a simple model of national sovereignty on a complex human reality. You mentioned the distinction between asylum seekers and economic migrants. We discussed this issue with Heaven Crawley, who spoke about the need to challenge these categories. For instance, a person leaving a war-torn country is initially a genuine asylum seeker. This person might leave Sudan and start working in a new country, e.g., Tunisia, and because they cannot sustain themselves there, they move further and become an economic migrant.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are people who leave impoverished countries like Chad and go to Libya. They become asylum seekers when they move further. This is to say that the simple categories that all migration policies include – the differentiation between economic migrants and asylum seekers – get blurred in the complexity of individual trajectories.

Confronted with this contradiction, you mentioned the case of large companies that try to bridge the gap between simplistic political discourse and reality by building physical or digital walls. We previously discussed in this podcast the idea of an industry of migration control in the media. You have added an interesting point: this industry of migration control itself is transnational. There is a network of firms whose business is to perpetuate the myth that you can have a world of well-defined borders, where states can accurately decide who enters and who leaves, despite the complexity of human reality. Have I understood your points correctly?

Anna Triandafyllidou: Absolutely. In fact, we recently held a workshop at my university in Toronto on the data-ification of migration governance. Several of the papers were revealing. For instance, they highlighted the interplay between those who start working in intelligence

and security and then transition into IT, and the interactions between government and large corporations.

We were mostly examining the software and databases that shape migration governance today. It is more the technological capacity that dictates migration governance rather than an initial decision of what and how we want to govern. Sometimes even the possibility of collecting data dictates what we do with the data, rather than first considering what kind of data we need and then figuring out how to obtain it.

In my research programme, we have published a very intriguing policy brief, which I recommend for those interested in this topic. It calls for parsimony in data creation. Currently, every international organisation, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) with their displacement tracking, is collecting data from different points without much oversight. They are not under the supervision of a specific government or specific regulations because they are international organisations. And while this data may initially be collected for good purposes, there is a need for oversight.

In an emergency or crisis, people usually move towards certain refugee camps. At times, these camps witness an influx of refugees, including many infants. The data related to these movements often travels without much oversight, resulting in uncertain outcomes for those involved.

International organisations like the IOM have been conducting regional operations, for example during the Libya crisis, facilitating the return of people from different sub-Saharan African countries. These people had been established and working in Libya for years and needed to go back to their countries, despite being away for a long time. The IOM has been actively registering people at borders and using this data for research purposes.

However, often, these people did not provide consent for this use of their data. They are in distress, traveling forward or returning, often under very difficult circumstances. I do not believe there is informed consent on those occasions, raising significant issues concerning the use of such data.

An additional element to consider, which often gets overlooked, is the role of the European Union (EU) in engaging with Africa, a region that is demographically active. (In contrast, regions like Europe and North America are aging rapidly, and Asia also faces similar demographic challenges. For instance, China is on the brink of a major demographic challenge.)

It is essential to understand that we cannot deal with African migration at a single state level. Neither countries on the geographical periphery of Europe, like Greece and Italy, nor centrally located states like Germany or Sweden, can tackle these challenges alone. The EU then intervenes and develops bilateral relations with specific countries of origin or transit, but it also needs to cultivate relationships with the African Union.

However, many actions taken by the EU in the regions of origin inadvertently affect their intra-regional migration patterns. For example, when the EU solidifies and closes borders, it can disrupt cross-regional trade and destroy a lot of informal economic activity. This is especially true within the region of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which

encompasses West Africa. EU actions can disrupt trade flows between countries in the Sahel region and larger countries, such as Nigeria.

The ECOWAS region

These interconnections emphasise the need for migration governance beyond the national level. We also must not forget that African borders are not of Africans' own making but are post-colonial borders. Their existence has significant implications for many ethnic or linguistic groups that are divided among two or more states.

The colonial legacy and post-colonial economic dependency are still deeply embedded in how states are organised in Africa, and this impacts state-society relations. Migration is part of this legacy and dependency. Therefore, we need to understand that migration is not a standalone issue. It is intertwined with how we have regulated our world with national borders and national identities. Those not working on migration often fall prey to simplistic narratives, but the reality is far more complex.

Emmanuel Comte: Yes, we are born with this mental map of the world, complete with distinct borders and country names, as if these were the true individual entities of global society. However, you have brilliantly shown that the reality is far more complex. The attempts to regulate migration often lead states into a dependency on international organisations. There are numerous transnational factors at play. You mentioned the International Organisation for Migration as one example.

We delve further into this contradiction and its unintended consequences when we refer to entities like ECOWAS. The EU has been engaged in a programme of externalising migration controls. Authorities have realised that simple border control measures are insufficient. They need to exert control further upstream of migration flows. This has led to a kind of consolidation of borders within the ECOWAS communities in West Africa, thereby disrupting trade flows within the area and possibly hindering further development.

That is a contradiction in the EU's approach. EU states claim to prefer development in the countries of origin rather than having migration. But by externalising their migration controls,

they create a new obstacle to development. This displays a stark contrast between the simplistic discourse of state sovereignty, bordered communities, and the complex reality of economic and social life.

The contradiction sometimes leads to absurd results. Large transnational corporations are necessary to maintain an illusion of a national world. Policies of immigration control, which depend on development because they expect development to reduce migration flows, end up hindering development in the regions of origin.

The demand for knowledge

Emmanuel Comte: Now, let's take a step back and consider the role of experts in these issues. How do you see experts being able to address these contradictions? How can migration scholars like yourself have an impact and respond to the demand for knowledge in this area? Do you feel at all a demand for expertise in these matters?

Anna Triandafyllidou: The subject of migration is often a contentious one. For instance, if you are a cardiologist or a surgeon, people at a dinner party would not claim to be experts in your field. However, when it comes to migration, people often feel they can give expert opinions. When you try to explain why a policy does not work or discuss the dilemmas, they might dismiss your expertise, saying that you are out of touch because you just live in your academic world.

The problem extends to governments as well. We speak a lot about evidence-based policymaking, but often, governments decide what policy they want and then ask for experts to support it. Unfortunately, some governments, like Greece's for instance, often do not listen to analyses. Instead, they create policies that are reactive rather than proactive and realistic.

Policies should see migration as an integral part of the economy and society and aim for a balance between the interests of the state, different communities, and potential migrants. Different societal segments, such as employers of potential migrants and local workers who may compete with some migrants for the same jobs, have different interests.

National interests on migration can be diverse, even within a single country. As an example, Canada has its Ministry of Immigration. This body is responsible for planning and implementing various migration and asylum policies. However, this does not necessarily imply that Canada fully adopts the suggestions of researchers.

For instance, the Canadian government has expressed plans to introduce a regularization program within the next year, which has been constructed in consultation with civil society, experts, and those with experience in this field. The final decision, though, is ultimately political, balancing various interests including the desires of the electorate and considerations about societal and economic impacts.

It is important to note that research we have conducted on irregular migration has largely been overlooked by the European Union, despite numerous policy briefs and workshops. When reviewing the policies adopted, a significant majority, around 80-90%, were contrary to our recommendations.

Our responsibility as publicly engaged academics is to voice our insights and to explain complex issues in accessible terms. Tools like this podcast or infographics and other graphic representations can help illustrate the complexities of policy, its effectiveness, and its dilemmas. This approach can help the electorate make more informed decisions and participate in politics more effectively. It also aids policymakers in making more informed decisions.

Consider, for instance, the mandatory refugee quotas introduced within the EU in 2015-2016 due to intense migration pressure, primarily through Turkey and Greece. This issue had been debated within the academic community for about two to three years. Various proposals were put forth, including the concept of tradeable refugee quotas like CO2 quotas.

Yet, there was a lack of effective communication between the expert and policy communities. It was serendipitous that these ideas were eventually adopted by the European Commission. It was largely due to a happy coincidence and the efforts of individuals like Ruby Gropas, my former colleague, who worked at the European Political Strategy Centre. She played a crucial role in communicating these ideas to decision-makers.

This illustrates the importance of informal channels, discussion groups, and the benefits of having academics in government roles and government individuals with academic careers. They play a crucial role in disseminating knowledge and facilitating evidence-based policymaking.

Emmanuel Comte: Despite this episode, it seems you share nevertheless a similar opinion to both Maurizio Ambrosini, who was a guest on this podcast a few months ago. He was somewhat pessimistic about the actual demand for expertise in this area. This may be due to the contradiction between what states want, given their identity, and the complexity inherent in trying to regulate migration. It is like trying to control the currents in the ocean – a nearly impossible feat.

Anna Triandafyllidou: That is an apt analogy. People move, it is part of human creativity.

The benefits of migration

Emmanuel Comte: Despite the complexity, states cannot stop trying to regulate migration for several reasons, not least of which is the issue of extensive redistribution with healthcare and other social benefits. It becomes even more complex when people potentially benefit without contributing. The lack of demand for expertise is a pity because it is an area of human development where there could be massive benefits. Some experts suggest trillions of euros of GDP could be won if there was a freer mobility of people and production factors.

Major economic development always coincides with significant migration. China's massive economic development over the last four decades, for instance, has been fuelled by migration from the inland to the shores and the big cities. Without this movement of people, China would not be where it is today. The same could be said about the United States and many other countries, like India, which has significant internal migration.

Anna Triandafyllidou: That is true, but within China, people are not free to move where they want, and this has led to a host of issues. The vulnerabilities that internal migrants face in big

cities where they are unregistered and cannot access welfare services have been well-documented by researchers.

Yes, the costs of migration control are vast. They include the direct costs, such as the money paid to companies and spent on border control, human costs like the loss of life, and indirect costs like the loss of human creativity and productivity. This is not to say that I am advocating for open borders, but we do need to keep a broader view of how migration and mobility relate to development and economic activities. We cannot expect to have global value chains and trade without expecting people to migrate. Europe, as an aging continent, should take this into consideration. The demographic projections for European countries, especially Italy and Greece, are bleak, with the exception of France and the UK, which have positive net migration.

The situation in Central Eastern Europe is dire. There has been a recent study on the impact of the war and invasion in Ukraine on the country's demographic future.

Canada, where I am based now, has a plan to increase its population through migration, largely because of the view that more production and consumption leads to greater prosperity and global influence. Europe should be forward-thinking on this topic, rather than allowing the political discourse to be dominated by theories such as the "big replacement". People have always migrated, there is nothing new in this.

Emmanuel Comte: The issue of aging is part of the broader question of complexity we were discussing. Different birth rates between countries, especially those with a pension system that redistributes from the active to the retired, introduce further complications. When you have different rates of population growth and population decline in certain areas, adjustments become necessary.

Conclusion

Emmanuel Comte: We have discussed the contradiction between the reasons that lead states to regulate migration and the complex reality of human life. Who is going to adapt – the identity of the state, or this complex reality? Is being a migration scholar ultimately not about considering the identity of the state and how it should regulate itself?

Anna Triandafyllidou: I believe it is an interactive process. It is going to be a mutual adaptation between the state and the reality of society. Reality has a certain force in shaping and organising society. However, I also believe leadership is important. Societies have the leaders they choose or deserve, but it is crucial that leaders can shape these courses. When faced with critical dilemmas, leadership should be informed by who we want to be as a society, not just by economic interests.

To illustrate, I would like to give an example from an Italian politician, Matteo Renzi, who is now vilified and has certainly made mistakes. However, in 2013, following a massive shipwreck off the coast of Italy, Renzi, then Prime Minister, introduced the Triton operation, an extensive search and rescue operation by the Italian Navy. Despite being a costly operation, Renzi did not consider the economic argument. He insisted that when people are drowning at sea, he could not turn a blind eye. He chose to act immediately, rather than waiting for a decision from Brussels, because that was the society he aspired Italy to be.

Migrant boat shipwreck

There are many factors to consider, but we should not lose sight of our values. It is not just about economic interests; it is about who we want to be.

Emmanuel Comte: Thank you very much, Anna. This has been a rich and insightful discussion. For those interested, Anna is readily available on platforms like Twitter and Facebook.

Anna Triandafyllidou: Indeed, you can find me on most social media platforms. Additionally, I hold the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration (CERC Migration) at Toronto Metropolitan University. Anyone interested can Google our work and follow our newsletter.