

BACKGROUND NOTE

PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRATION

Migration may be the single most influential issue to drive politics in much of Europe and the United States today (Banerjee and Duflo, *Good Economics for Hard Times*, 2019) but it has become evident that there is a biased view on immigration and its effects, with deeply held negative stereotypes. Racist alarmism, xenophobic rhetoric and the imagery of “hordes” of migrants have dominated political and public discourse in much of Europe and the United States. However, these images contrast what the data is telling us. The stock of international migrants has in fact been constantly fluctuating around three per cent since the 1960s (JRC, 2018), and while we observed an unusual influx of refugees in 2015 and 2016 in Europe, the numbers of asylum seekers coming to the EU had returned to usual levels by 2018. Most migrants move regionally, and most forced migrants are displaced in neighbouring countries not in Europe.

The gap between perceptions of migration and the actual data is striking. A large-scale online survey of a representative sample of around 24,000 respondents from six OECD countries¹ measures the perceptions of and attitudes towards immigration held by the natives of those countries (Alesina et al., 2018). The average respondent thinks that the share of immigrants is at least twice as high as it actually is. Respondents not only misperceive the total share of immigrants in their country but also their origins and religion: they believe that immigrants originate disproportionately from the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa or North Africa and they significantly overestimate the share of Muslim immigrants. In all countries, a significant proportion of respondents believe that an average immigrant receives more than twice as much in government transfers than an average native while at the same time paying fewer taxes (Alesina et al., 2018).

In line with these opinions, the economics literature has traditionally focused on competition between immigrants and natives in the labour market and in the use of social services as the main reasons for individuals to oppose immigration. In practice, there is no empirical consensus on the effects of immigration on wages, employment and social services (Fasani et al., 2019). The effect of net government expenditures depends on the age and skills distribution of immigrants relative to natives (Storesletten, 2000). Finally, the Transatlantic Trends survey shows that the majority of people in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands believe that immigration will

¹ France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America.

increase crime in their society, while in reality there is no clear causal relationship between changes in immigration and crime rates (Fasani et al., 2019).

The purpose of this roundtable discussion is to shed light on the disconnect between perceptions and reality around migration and discuss the following:

- I. *What are the most significant public misperceptions in migration and why does this matter?*
- II. *Can attitudes and opinions be changed, and if so, how?*
- III. *What can we learn from communication experts on how to communicate better with the public and what role the media or public institutions play in this endeavour?*

SPEAKERS

- **Sunder Katwala**, Director of British Future
- **Irene Bloemraad**, Thomas Garden Barnes Chair of Canadian Studies & Director of the Berkeley Interdisciplinary Migration Initiative.
- **James Dennison**, Professor at the Migration Policy Centre of the European University Institute, where he leads the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM).

With contributions from a diverse range of practitioners. The session is meant to be interactive with room given to discussion and peer-to-peer exchange.

REFERENCES

Alesina, A., A. Miano and S. Stantcheva (2018): *Immigration and Redistribution*. NBER Working Paper No. 24733, Cambridge.

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Joint Research Center (2018): International Migration Drivers. A Quantitative Assessment of the Structural Factors Shaping Migration. *European Commission, Brussels*.

Storesletten, K. (2000): Sustaining Fiscal Policy through Immigration. *Journal of Political Economy*.