Migrations, integration processes and perceptions of the host population

Pietro Mazzette, Gabriele Ruiu
Department of Economics and Business, University of Sassari

Introduction

Public debate on migration in 2023 is still dominated by opposing positions in many developed countries. On the one hand, there are those who see migration as a problem, a factor of social and economic instability. On the other hand, there are those who see migration as a natural and positive phenomenon, which can bring economic and cultural benefits to host societies.

Among the most debated topics is the fight against illegal immigration: many politicians and opinion leaders argue that it is necessary to strengthen border controls and increase penalties for offenders. Others, however, believe that it is necessary to find more humane and forward-looking solutions, such as improving legal immigration channels.

Another very important topic is the management of migration flows: in many European countries, there has been a long-running debate about how to manage migration flows arriving from the Mediterranean. On the one hand, there are those who argue that migration is a threat to security and national identity and that it is necessary to adopt more restrictive measures to control flows. Especially, in the rhetoric used by populist parties, Migrants are indeed repeatedly accused of stealing jobs from citizens of the countries of arrival because of an unfair competition for wages and/or engaging in criminal activities. On the other hand, there are those who argue that migration is a positive phenomenon for the economy and society, and that it is necessary to adopt more inclusive policies to promote the integration of migrants. However, recent studies have shown that the economic impact of migration is generally positive, as it contributes to economic growth and improved business competitiveness (Engler et al. 2020). Quantifying the net impact of immigration is not in any case a simple task. As Borjas (2019) explains: "The observed relationship between immigration and growth obviously depends on many variables, including the skill composition of immigrants, the rate of assimilation, the distributional labor market consequences, the size of the immigration surplus, the potential human capital externalities, and the long-term fiscal impact. Despite the methodological disagreements about how to measure all of these effects, there is a consensus on one important point: Immigration has a more beneficial impact on growth when the immigrant flow is composed of high-skill workers".

Lastly there is the role of the European Union, which is called to play a central role in managing migration flows. However, the member states are often at odds on how to address this issue.

The main migration conflicts in Europe, in fact, are those that concern the flows of people from the countries of North Africa and the Middle East. These flows are caused by a number of factors, including wars, internal conflicts, persecution, and difficult living conditions.

The most important conflict in this sense is the war in Syria, which has caused the flight of over 6 million people from the country. Most of these refugees have taken refuge in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, but a significant number have sought to reach several European countries through the Mediterranean, including Greece, Germany, Italy, France, and Spain.

Finally, we must not forget the recent war in Ukraine, as from the beginning of this war more than 8 million people have left the country, the majority of whom have sought refuge in Europe. According to estimates

by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are more than 8.7 million Ukrainian refugees in Europe, of which over 6.3 million have registered in the countries of the European Union. Poland is the country that has welcomed the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, with over 3.4 million arrivals. Romania follows (1.05 million), Moldova (580,000), Hungary (430,000), Slovakia (350,000), and the Czech Republic (300,000).

What is certain is that the future of Ukrainian refugees in Europe is uncertain. The war could drag on for months or years, making it difficult for many of them to return home. In this case, Ukrainian refugees will have to find a way to integrate into European societies.

An opportunity to discuss these issues at the international level was the International Conference on Development and Migration, which was held in Rome in July 2023. The participants in the conference agreed on the need to address the root causes of migration, by investing in the development of countries of origin, and to promote the integration of migrants, by guaranteeing them the rights and opportunities to participate in the social and economic life of countries of arrival. Anyway, any attempt at integration cannot be imposed using a top-down approach but must take into account the attitudes of the local population towards migrants. Part of the success of populist parties in various European countries is in fact linked to the growing hostility of the population, partly fueled by populism itself.

Our work therefore aims to explore the perception of migrants by the population of the European Union. This will be done using the lens offered by two theories: Group Threat Theory (GTT) and Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT). According to the GTT, whenever a new group comes into contact with another population, the reaction of the incumbents will generally be negative due to the little information available about who arrives. The larger the incoming group, the more it will therefore be perceived as a threat by the local population (e.g., employment, cultural identity, security issues) (see among others Blake et al., 2006; Blumer, 1958; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2008; Stephan et al., 2009). The ICT, instead, argues that the larger a group of participants, the more interactions with locals increase and the more prejudices and mutual differences will be challenged. Therefore, this should contribute to improving integration (see among others Allport, 1954; Hewstone, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew, 2007; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Schlueter & Scheepers, 2010).

This paper, therefore, aims to further explore the perceptions of local inhabitants regarding migrants in European Countries.

Data and Method

Our main data source is the 2017 Eurobarometer Survey (Eurobarometer 88.2). In particular, the wave used in our analysis contains several questions that allow us to focus on both the perception of immigrants by natives and the frequency of contacts between locals and immigrants. This source has been integrated with official statistics on the amount of incoming migration and the unemployment rate registered at the region (NUTS 2 level) of the respondents. This information comes from OECD data.

Our main variable of interest has been derived from the following question: 'Generally speaking, do you think immigration from outside the EU is more of a problem or more of an opportunity for [Respondent's Country] today?' We constructed a dummy variable named 'immprob' if the respondent answered that

immigration is a problem for their country. We used this dummy variable as a dependent variable in the subsequent two-level random intercept logistic regression:

$$Log\left(odds\ of\ immprob_{ij} = 1\right) = \beta_{00} + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 Unemp_{ij} + \beta_3\ Immrate_{ij} + u_{0j}$$

Where X is a matrix of individual level controls (age, education, gender, etc), $Unemp_{ij}$ is the unemployment rate registered in 2017 in region j of the respondent i, $Immrate_{ij}$ is the immigration rate in the region j of the respondent i, while u_{0j} is the deviation of the cluster-specific intercept from the fixed intercept β_{00}. Among the regressions and according to the GTT we also included a variable that captures the perceived size of the immigrant population.

This method is particularly well-suited for analyzing data that is hierarchical in nature, such as data collected from individuals nested within countries or regions. In the context of this study, the multilevel analysis will allow us to take into account the fact that the participants' attitudes and responses may be influenced by the context in which they are immersed, such as the country or region in which they live, the level of immigration in their region, and the unemployment rate in their region.

The multilevel analysis allows us to examine how individual-level factors (such as a person's age, education level, job) and contextual-level factors (such as the unemployment rate in the person's country or region) interact to influence public attitudes towards immigration.

Preliminary Results and future developments

Immigration is a complex and controversial issue. People's attitudes towards immigration are shaped by a variety of factors, including their own personal experiences, economic situation, and the social and political climate in their country.

Overall, the study's findings suggest that both group threat theory, and so economic competition, and intergroup contact theory play a role in shaping perceptions of immigration. In particular, two important factors that have been shown to influence perceptions of immigration are unemployment rate and intergroup contact.

The study found that regions with higher unemployment rates were more likely to perceive immigration as a problem. In fact, in times of high unemployment, people are more likely to view immigrants as a threat to their economic well-being. Indeed, as predicted by GTT, when resources become more scarce people are more likely to believe that immigrants are competitors for jobs and public benefits.

However, the study also found that the more frequent the relationships between individuals and immigrants, the less likely they were to perceive immigration as a problem. Thus, this can help to reduce negative stereotypes and prejudices towards immigrants, as when people have interactions with immigrants, they are more likely to see them as individuals and less likely to view them as a threat. It is worth to underline that our results refer only to the frequency of contacts not to the quality of the relationship. Therefore, this suggests that exposition to the presence of immigrants is sufficient to lower possible biases in the perception of them.

However, it is important to note that the findings of this study are preliminary, and more research is needed to fully understand the relationship between unemployment, intergroup contact, and perceptions of immigration.

For instance, one of the planned extension of this work is to also include a time dimension in our analysis. Unfortunately, at the moment in which the authors are writing the 2021 wave of the Eurobarometer containing the same questions about immigration has not yet been made publicly available.

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