

FEATURE

With the European Commission pushing its blue card work permit scheme and France calling for an EU pact on migration, Hugo Brady asks whether the Union is – at last – about to move beyond rhetoric to action

WANTED: AN EU MIGRATION POLICY



Photograph: Belga

Our decision, your problem: Spain's 2005 amnesty for 750,000 illegal immigrants infuriated its northern neighbours

From Norway to Italy, Europeans are getting jittery about immigration.

It represents a potentially toxic issue in domestic politics – even in places like Spain or Ireland where public concern about the influx of foreigners has been buffered by high growth and low unemployment. Despite warnings from economists that Europe will need ever more migrants, polls show most see immigration as a problem to be solved, rather than an opportunity to be embraced.

In theory, the EU is supposed to support European governments to better manage immigration, asylum, border controls and crime. In the last year alone the European Commission has produced a raft of immigration proposals, now being debated by the member states. So what are the prospects for common European action on migration in 2008?

The odds are not good. The ever-ambitious Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security, Franco Frattini, wants the member states to adopt a “blue card” scheme to attract more of the “right kind” of immigrant – highly skilled workers with existing job offers –

powers to actually decide who gets a work permit; national governments would still set the specific numbers of economic immigrants entering their territory. Still, member states view the idea coldly. Britain, for example, has spent years developing an expensive points-based system, like those in Canada and Australia, to allocate work visas to migrants based on different tiers of qualifications.

With that system coming online in 2008, London will take some persuading that the blue card scheme is a feasible add-on. Ireland and Denmark are also likely to stand aloof. And Germany and Austria have no intention of giving the Commission a say in setting their labour, immigration or integration policies for the foreseeable future.

The best chance of the blue card idea coming to fruition may be if a smaller group of member states adopts it on a trial basis. A successful pilot would get the attention of professionally sceptical interior ministry officials across the EU.

Improved border controls and other ways to tackle illegal immigration are easier terrain for policymakers. Ever since tens of thousands of Africans

mandatory improvements to member states’ border controls, if these are found wanting. But again, most governments do not like this notion.

Better border controls are only one part of the EU’s so-called “global approach to migration”. This impressive-sounding strategy seeks to bring together all migration-relevant policy areas, such as foreign policy, development, economic demand for skilled labour and action against traffickers, in a more coherent way. The current priority areas are Africa and the Mediterranean, though in June 2007 the EU agreed to extend the strategy to non-EU countries in eastern and southeastern Europe.

A priority is for the European Commission to negotiate easier visa regimes and help with training border guards and immigration officials with the governments concerned, in return for their agreement to take back illegal migrants. Another is for the EU to reduce the “push” factors that force migration. According to immigration officials, the earlier European policies can intervene in the decision to migrate, the cheaper for both migrant and state. The EU’s funds for development aid are increasingly focused on poverty reduction, and are specifically targeted at improving refugee centres in places like Tanzania.

Of course, no single government can join up all its various policies in pursuit of strategic objectives, and the EU is far from being able to take a truly “global approach” to migration. The Commission needs to be able to offer jobs and work visas if African countries are to take back large numbers of illegal migrants and work harder at patrolling borders. But these things depend on national acquiescence and are not within the Commission’s gift.

Nonetheless, the search for an EU migration policy based on these trade-offs will be a key area of EU business in 2008, especially during the much anticipated French presidency. French President Nicolas Sarkozy developed much of his political pedigree as his country’s interior minister and he believes progress on immigration issues is key to improving the EU’s public image.

Sarkozy co-inaugurated the so-called G6 – the six-monthly meetings of the interior ministers of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain – to strengthen practical cooperation between the EU’s largest domestic

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to the EU. Currently only 5 percent of immigrants to the EU are highly skilled and research suggests Europe will need 20 million more to fill jobs left vacant by a rapidly ageing domestic population in the next two decades.

A pale imitation of the US green card, under Frattini’s proposal member states would grant successful blue card applicants a two-year residency, with the possibility to subsequently apply for work elsewhere in the EU. The job offered would have to be paid at three times the minimum wage and guaranteed for at least one year. Brussels would get to set the admission rules as well as ensure cardholders enjoyed the same healthcare, taxes and pension rights as their EU counterparts.

The proposal is catchy and media-friendly. Frattini is not looking for

began arriving on Europe’s southern shores in rickety boats in 2005, the Union has been focused on keeping unskilled workers and illegal immigrants out. Frontex, the EU’s fledgling border agency, is generally acknowledged as doing a good job of coordinating Maltese, Italian and Spanish coastal patrols in the Mediterranean.

But Frontex has an inadequate budget and problems finding staff. Furthermore, the Warsaw-based agency has no operations centre where it is most needed – in southern Europe. Much of the equipment and assistance promised to it by EU member states after the mass migrations of 2005 and 2006 remains in the hands of national governments. Its powers and resources are up for review in March. The Commission may argue that Frontex be given powers to order



Migration in Europe and the world

Europe is home to the largest number of international migrants – 33 percent of the world total according to UN figures. By contrast, North America receives 23 percent.

Remittances, or the money migrants send home whilst working abroad, far outstrip development aid as a means of alleviating global poverty. Economists estimate migrants send around \$400 billion to their home countries each year, four times what the West gives in aid.

The Nordic countries (except Denmark), the Benelux, the western Mediterranean and the UK integrate migrants best, according to

research funded by the European Commission. The policies of the Baltic states, Denmark, the countries of the eastern Mediterranean and central Europe are less progressive.

Traffickers and smugglers can earn as much as €30,000 per person from illegal immigrants desperate to move to Europe in search of a better life. The International Labour Organisation estimates that, as you read this, 2.5 million people are suffering at the hands of traffickers around the world.

The UN predicts that, on current trends, the numbers of people migrating will continue to increase, by 40 percent in the next 40 years.

Photograph: Reuters

security and immigration services. The G6 countries want the EU to adopt a "European pact on migration" in 2008. The proposed pact is a political agreement to coordinate national migration policies – the management of migration, visas and asylum – at EU level and between groups of member states.

One motivation for the pact is anger on the part of northern EU members over not being consulted on Spain's mass naturalisation of 750,000 illegal immigrants in 2005. The northerners believe such amnesties are a "pull" factor, sparking off further mass migrations. On the other hand, Spain and like-minded Mediterranean countries want a grand migration bargain because they feel entitled to money and resources to help them shoulder the burden of being the EU's gateway.

The pact will probably involve EU countries agreeing to make future migration decisions on the basis of shared analysis of migratory movements; to be equally tough on illegal immigration and use similar technology to strengthen borders, and to establish tough EU agreements with migrants' home countries on returning illegals.

Sarkozy may also try to tackle the vexed issue of how best to integrate minorities by reviving another idea from his G6 days: an integration "contract" between

immigrant and host state. Immigrants would be required to sign up to a list of responsibilities, including a commitment to learn the local language, in return for certain guaranteed rights.

Arguably, the best way to integrate immigrants is to provide a clear route to citizenship – and the sense of being a stakeholder – in the country of settlement. But European countries are especially bad at this. Migrants sometimes have to wait ten years before they can apply for citizenship, when they are often tested to ensure they pose no financial, social or medical burden to the state. Even then, the status of their spouses and children can remain insecure under the law for years.

While immigration to Europe has increased, refugee applications have fallen. (In 2006, the UK reported the lowest numbers applying since 1993.) Despite this, G6 governments are keen to see a renewed commitment to eliminate "asylum shopping" – when a person seeking asylum in one EU country also lodges applications in others at the same time – included in any new migration pact. The EU has some uniform rules on asylum but countries still apply them differently.

Throughout 2008, EU governments will wrangle with the Commission over the establishment of an EU asylum support

office to help national officials apply the rules uniformly. The Commission wants an office with some centralised powers, perhaps developing in future into a central point for approving applications made to member states. However, most countries will want the office to highlight best practices, offer training on EU asylum procedures and provide interpreters.

Overall, the EU's response to public demand to "do something" about migration has been to focus on the places where Europe's immigrants originate. This is also a good way of papering over disagreements at home: attempts to adopt a single immigration system for the EU are not getting anywhere.

But this new, outward-looking approach is still more about fuzzy concepts than concrete ideas. EU officials, for example, will talk ceaselessly about the need to promote "circular migration" and establish "cooperation platforms" with African countries, but with little clear sense of what these terms actually mean in practice. With the public expecting to see results after years of discussion, 2008 could be the year the EU's member states have to come clean about whether they actually can manage migration together.

Hugo Brady is a research fellow at the Centre for European Reform