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Research Report

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Circular Migration

A Sustainable Concept for Migration Policy?

Steffen Angenendt

In the EU, a new discussion on temporary labour migration is underway, set in motion by a German-French initiative of Ministers of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble and Nicholas Sarkozy. Their proposal: that the EU states work more closely both to combat illegal migration and to control legal migration, especially by fostering 'circular migration'. The latter idea in particular has been met with criticism. Yet this critical perspective overlooks the fact that the initiative has injected new momentum into the halting development of a European migration policy. At the same time, key aspects must still be clarified to provide a foundation for a sustainable immigration policy. The debate on the open questions should be pushed further, both within the Council and in the other EU institutions.

What triggered the current discussion on circular migration was a strategy paper presented by Schäuble and Sarkozy at an informal meeting of interior ministers from the six largest EU countries (Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Poland, Spain) in Stratford-upon-Avon on 26 October 2006. In this 'German-French Initiative for a New European Migration Policy,' they articulate the fear of increased immigration to Europe in the future. To curb this threat, they call for a fundamental rethinking and tighter coordination of European migration policy. The member states should conclude a 'Pact for Immigration Control' containing the basic principles, priorities, and goals of a common migration policy. The interior ministers highlight four main areas where closer cooperation is needed: in the fight

against illegal migration, on development policy, in asylum policy, and in managing legal migration. In the latter area, the ministers argue that circular migration could make a contribution.

A new concept?

For the public at large, the concept of 'circular migration' is new. But actually it was used previously by numerous European institutions including the European Commission in its September 2005 Communication on 'Migration and Development'. In this statement, the Commission formulated its understanding of circular migration as mobility back and forth between country of origin and destination country, for example, the repeated tem-

porary employment of workers who had taken part in migration programmes previously. In the Commission's view, the value of this kind of migration for development policy lies in the transfer of knowledge between destination country and country of origin, which could potentially reduce the negative effects of brain drain. Furthermore, circular migration could help the members of a diaspora to invest in their home countries and create employment. Since this statement, the Commission has reaffirmed its understanding of circular migration in a number of subsequent statements, most recently in the communication on circular migration of 16 May 2007.

The European Parliament had dealt with the issue of circular migration prior to the German-French initiative as well, endorsing the Commission's recommendations on the subject. In their view, the concept of alternating stays in home and host country offers great opportunities for the development of both countries, and they recommended that the European Union and its member states promote this form of migration.

Differing concepts

While the Commission and Parliament are interested in promoting international mobility in order to encourage development, Schäuble and Sarkozy have placed their emphasis on controlling and limiting migration. In their paper, they state their priority—also for circular migration—as follows: “We want no uncontrolled migration into our labour markets and social systems.”

For them, circular migration is a management tool that allows the introduction of “labour migration quotas for specific professions”. These quotas should not be set at the European level, however, but should instead—as with labour migration as a whole—remain under national authority. According to the ministers, the economic situations and labour market needs within the EU differ so widely that member states

need significant flexibility also in the case of temporary quotas to react quickly and appropriately to changes. Nevertheless, they are expected to report these quotas voluntarily to the Commission, which will then use them in its negotiations with third countries on the readmission of illegal immigrants.

In the latter point it becomes clear that at its core the German-French initiative is about reducing illegal immigration through temporary immigration programmes. By this means, the countries of origin are to be integrated more closely in the efforts of destination countries to reduce illegal immigration. Although the ministers also cite development policy goals, these are clearly subordinate. They merely allude to the possibility of awarding temporary visas to selected migrants in order to offer them vocational training opportunities (or further education) and thus to foster educational elites in the countries of origin.

Since the introduction of their initiative, the ministers have repeatedly reaffirmed these priorities, and have successfully promoted their proposal in the European political bodies—for example, the Justice and Home Affairs Council and the European Council. In the meantime, a lively debate on the topic has emerged.

Yet critical voices are also being heard. First, the ministers are charged with bringing back a warmed-over version of the old guest worker policy pursued starting in the mid-1950s by some EU states—Germany and France, for example—to provide short-term solutions to labour market shortages. And according to the critics, the hope that these labour immigrants would voluntarily return to their countries of origin after their work contracts expired proved illusory even then. For this reason, the host countries pulled the brakes in 1973 and 1974 and stopped the recruitment of guest workers.

Second, it is charged that the ministers' proposals are imprecise and fail to provide concrete indications as to the countries

with which the partnership agreements are to be concluded. It is also unclear which professional groups of immigrants are intended, with which areas of professional knowledge and expertise, and whether their return is to be facilitated by return transfers and reintegration aid.

This critique reveals that at least two fundamental questions still remain unresolved.

Illegal immigration

The first question is whether it is even possible to reduce illegal immigration through the promotion of temporary migration. Thus far there is no empirically based answer to this question; one can merely make plausible conjectures. It is conceivable that individuals who are willing to participate in legal immigration programmes could be prevented from engaging in dangerous attempts at illegal immigration because they would have the reasonable hope of actually reaching their goal, possibly with some delay but with a much lower risk. This argument is used above all in relation to the ever longer and more perilous passages from North and West Africa across the Mediterranean to the EU.

Another consideration is that regular migration programmes with contingents for labour migrants are more likely to induce the countries of origin to cooperate in the readmission of their citizens.

Both arguments are plausible, but again, they are simply hypotheses that remain to be evaluated in practice. This should by no means stop the EU countries from testing and using new strategies and instruments. However, they should avoid awakening the impression among the general public that this is anything other than an experiment, in order to prevent false hopes about the chances of controlling illegal migration. In democratic countries, however, this degree of control is fundamentally out of the question.

Return

The second question pertains to the design of temporary immigration programmes: How can medium-term, temporary migration programmes with a duration of three to five years—as currently under debate in the EU—be organized in such a way as to ensure that labour migrants will return to their home countries? Here too, there is no empirically verifiable answer. In very recent times, some EU states such as Italy, Great Britain, and Spain have introduced such programmes on a trial basis, but it is still too early to evaluate their success.

To date, the only basis for these kinds of evaluations are the experiences with the guest worker programmes of the 1950s and 60s, along with the short-term recruitment programmes underway for some time now in various EU countries.

The experiences with guest worker recruitment are only partially applicable to the current situation. At the same time, they give cause to conclude that concepts for the promotion of circular migration with the defined goal of a subsequent return are more successful than one-time-only migration programmes.

This is confirmed by observations of the short-term recruitment of seasonal workers, who are allowed to work in some EU countries a few months per year on repeated occasions. These programmes usually fulfil their aim; Germany, for example, has covered a large portion of its seasonal labour demand this way for many years without encountering problems with these migrants' return. Obviously, for these seasonal labourers, the option to come back again makes the decision to go home easier. It would thus be advisable to expressly permit this possibility in the immigration programmes.

At the same time, in both cases—both with one-time and circular migration—it is important to answer how, from a practical point of view, migrants will be encouraged to return home. Along with experiences at the national level, proposals by international organizations such as the International

Organization for Migration and the World Bank can offer useful input on this point.

Perspectives

There are many indications that the ministers intentionally left their initiative open in order to launch the debate in the Justice and Home Affairs Council and in the other European political bodies. In fact, spelling out its content would probably have acted as an impediment to further discussion, given the member states' general reluctance to cede their discretionary competencies to EU institutions since the beginning of migration policy cooperation within the EU.

Without doubt, Schäuble and Sarkozy have provided an important stimulus to European migration policy—perhaps precisely because of the openness of their initiative—by placing the topic of labour migration on the political agenda. Joint regulations in this area are of ever-increasing importance: on the one hand because of demographic change and the growing need for specialist workers in particular areas, intensifying the competition for these specialists among the EU states; and on the other hand because of increasing immigration pressure.

However it is to be feared that the German-French initiative will fail to achieve sustainable effects if the questions discussed here are left unanswered. The process of resolving these issues can only take place in a European framework. The upcoming Portuguese and Slovenian presidencies should use the council's 18-month programme to push the European debate further in this regard.

Three points should be granted particular attention:

- ▶ First, it must be decided whether the concept intends primarily to achieve development policy or migration policy goals since the programmes' concrete form will depend on this.
- ▶ Second, it must be determined whether the concept of circular migration actu-

ally means repeated or simply one-time migration. This is a significant difference. In order to avoid the pitfalls of past recruitment policies, provision of integration measures should be considered also for temporary migrants when staying for longer periods (temporary integration).

- ▶ Third, it should be taken into account that temporary migration programmes can only achieve sustainable outcomes when they are incorporated into comprehensive migration concepts. To this end, it should be clarified under what conditions a temporary stay can be converted into a permanent stay.

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