



New European Perspectives on Migration

Panel discussion organised by the European Liberal Forum in cooperation with Republikon Institute on 22nd November 2018 in Budapest, Hungary

Conference report

On 22 November 2018 Republikon Institute organised the conference called 'New European Perspectives on Migration' in cooperation with ELF. The first section consisted of three presentations given by Žilvinas Šilėnas (president, Lithuanian Free Market Institute), Ágnes Hárs (senior researcher, Kopint-Tárki), and Nils Erik Forsgård (Think Thank Magma). The presentations discussed migration, especially migration from non-European countries, from a labour market perspective. At the end, the three researchers reflected on each other's presentations and answered questions from the audience; this session was moderated by Csaba Tóth (ELF Board Member, Director of Strategy at Republikon Institute). The second section was a debate between Balázs Orbán (Parliamentary State Secretary of the Prime Minister's Office) and Péter Niedermüller (S&D MEP, DK). This session, moderated by Dániel Mikecz (Republikon Institute), revolved around the topics of immigration, the refugee crisis, and demographic concerns in Hungary.

The first presentation, given by Žilvinas Šilėnas, discussed the extent and impacts of migrant labour from non-European countries. Based on a series of research on labour published by LFMI, he introduced data and showed several graphs on issues such as labour flexibility. Mr Šilėnas pointed out that migration happens without regard to our opinions on it; therefore, the question we should be asking is how to make the most of it. He claimed that the difference in attitude towards migration does not directly map onto the East-West divide. He also addressed some myths, such as the 'lump-sum of labour' fallacy and the regular overestimation of the number of immigrants in a country. Mr Šilėnas specifically focused on the situation of the countries of the periphery, where there is significant emigration towards Western European countries; he argued that non-European workers would help replace missing labour force. Emigration, combined with an increasingly aging population, would endanger the generous welfare state – but immigration has the potential to improve the situation. He concluded by saying that the countries that open their borders will 'win' in the long run (whereas those who do not will lose out); what is needed are 'smart limits' that identify needs and manage immigration appropriately.

The presentation given by Ágnes Hárs took up many of the themes of Mr Šilėnas' presentation (such as the relationship between labour mobility and migration), but paid special attention to the issue of the European refugee crisis. She presented a comprehensive overview of migration in numbers. Based on her research, she argued that the drivers of migration are mainly economic, mostly labour market motivations. As she explained very early on, both Brexit and the refugee crisis would inevitably challenge old knowledge on economic and labour market effects of

migration; for example, the immigration context challenged the supply-demand rule of economic theory. She emphasised that when discussing the effects of migration on the labour market it is of crucial importance to differentiate between assumptions and empirical results (her presentation being based on the latter). She mentioned some examples, such as the question whether less qualified immigrants are more likely occupy complementary positions, that require solid empirical research. Mr Hárs suggested that since migration is generally beneficial for all, there is a pressing need for a more careful and thorough discourse. She added that since the refugee crisis and the EU's free mobility of labour both change migration patterns, including inflow and outflow, to which there are two potential approaches: curbing migration or coping with it. Ms Hárs said the most important connections between countries of origin and countries where people emigrate to are remittances. Lastly, she discussed the low willingness among migrants to return to their home countries and emphasised the role of diaspora connections.

The third and final presentation was given by Nils Erik Forsgård, who discussed migration and demographic concerns specifically from a Nordic perspective. His opening slides showed the current reproduction level and the projected demographic development of Finland; as both painted a rather bleak picture of the Finnish demographic situation, he argued that the crucial question that needs to be answered now is how the generous Finnish welfare state is going to be financed by a steadily dwindling population. Looking for the causes of the decline, he talked about the dilemma faced by women: choosing between having children and having a successful career, a dilemma which undoubtedly contributes to the low level of demographic reproduction. He also discussed increasing urbanisation and slowly dying rural regions as characteristic of Nordic countries. Mr Forsgård argued that the steady number of the population is entirely due to net migration; without it, the population would have already begun to decrease. He added that, besides a strong xenophobic perspective permeating public discourse, immigration in the North is seen as a bluntly economic issue; the notion of 'building bridges between cultures', for example, is almost entirely missing. The whole situation is very similar in all Nordic countries, except for Sweden, which has been open for refugees and migrants for a longer time. At the end, Mr Forsgård recounted three case studies, three examples from Finland of successful integration of non-European migrant workers. Drawing on his examples, he attempted to identify the factors that lead to success; for example, he noted that the third sector is often indispensable for the success of any integration project, as it is able to provide a unique 'human aspect'.

At the end of the first section, the researchers took questions from the audience and reflected on each other's presentations; this session was moderated by Csaba Tóth. Ms Hárs talked about migration from and to Hungary in the past decade. Mr Šilėnas expressed his dislike of talking about immigrants as if they were solely a labour force; he said that rather than 'companies bringing in immigrants', immigrants are people who make their own decisions. Mr Forsgård similarly suggested that public discourse on immigrants should shift in a more positive direction.

The second section was a debate between Balázs Orbán and Péter Niedermüller, moderated by Dániel Mikecz. At the end, the floor was opened for discussion again.

Mr Mikecz opened the debate by asking about the relationship between migration and demographic concerns. Mr Niedermüller claimed that when the Hungarian government makes ideology out of a policy question (migration, for instance), it does so for political gains. Mr Balázs retorted with arguing that recent years saw the return of politics and ideology replacing a technocratic approach to policy issues. The moderator then asked about the 2019 elections to the

European Parliament and its significance. Mr Niedermüller said that migration is likely to be one of the most important topics in the campaign, and it is also likely that it will mostly be used for scaremongering (as it was already seen in Italy), despite the success of various efforts to integrate refugees and migrants. Mr Orbán detailed the situation of Turkish migrant workers in Germany and the resulting dilemmas at length. He also described an ideological rift between the EU's 'founding fathers', especially with regards to shared problems. He went on to emphasise the right of countries to formulate their own answers, as per the rule of subsidiarity, a key EU principle. European countries have different experiences with migration – therefore, they should be allowed to deal with it in their own way. His opinion was in stark contrast with Mr Niedermüller's, who advocated shared answers to shared problems (but added that those answers do not have to be uniform).

Having discussed the migration from a European perspective, further attention was paid to the demographic issues of Hungary. Mr Orbán said that these problems should be solved within Hungary as much as possible; migration should only be the very last resort. Mr Niedermüller stated that there are many factors in Hungary that prohibit population growth, such as the inadequacy of the education system and the family policy of the current government. To this, Mr Orbán said that the mere fact that there is labour shortage in Hungary is testament to the economic successes of the present government. The two parties also touched upon the latest national consultation with regards to demography. Mr Orbán defended the national consultation, saying that rather than based on a government vs. opposition logic, its questions were in fact difficult to answer; it also included the latest governmental proposal of 'full-time motherhood'. He asked the audience to ponder over the questionnaire and return it in time. Mr Niedermüller, however, said the questionnaire was 'stupid' and reiterated that due to a sub-optimal environment in Hungary there is a plethora of tasks the government should undertake before expecting population growth. He said it is key that having children should not represent a risk of poverty. He further added that migration will probably be necessary to ensure there is no further population decline.

At the end, a lively debate began as audience members asked questions concerning several topics, during which both Mr Niedermüller and Mr Orbán were able to further clarify their previous arguments.