

# Impending migrations in Europe

Andreu Domingo



A line of Syrian refugees crossing the border of Hungary and Austria on their way to Germany. Hungary, Central Europe, 6 September 2015.

According to the latest United Nations figures, in 2017, the Member States of the European Union were home to 55.7 million people living outside of their birth country, which equalled 10.9% of the 511.8 million inhabitants of the EU as a whole at the time. Among them, 36.7% (20.4 million) were originally from another EU country, whilst the remaining 63.3%, or 35.3 million inhabitants, were from a non-EU country (see Map 1). In total, the EU was home to 20.3% of the world's international immigrants. At the same time, 36.8 million people born in the EU were registered outside of their countries of birth (see Map 2), 56.3% of which were living in other EU countries. The figure for EU passport holders would be much higher, as, in addition to European expatriates, we would need to add those born in a non-EU country who had obtained the nationality of an EU Member State, whether through migrating and residing there or marrying an EU national or due to being a descendent of former European migrants.

The experience of the increase in migrations during the first years of the millennium, with the EU seeing more than 24 million arrivals between 2000 and 2007, the foreseeable

demand for workforce against the backdrop of a decrease in the active population of more than 32.8 million (10% less) in the next 30 years, and the exceptional demographic growth of Africa, estimated at around 1.2 billion between 2018 and 2050, all suggest that, one way or another, migrations shall play a leading role in demographic developments in the EU in the coming decades. This will also be the case for the debate around regulating flows and the integration of the immigrant populations: in other words, migration policy and the redefinition of the European identity itself.

Of the three core factors making up demographic dynamics—fecundity rate, death rate and migrations—it is the third that is the most difficult to predict. Its high dependence upon extra-demographic factors, particularly the economy, make it more volatile, in that it responds to the current climate of any given time and less (although there is some effect) to the inertia imposed by the structure. However, it is difficult to predict political and economic trends, particularly in times of uncertainty, especially if we set our sights on the more distant future. It is, perhaps, for this reason that we tend to grasp for more simplistic explanations, the false security that appears to be provided by “common-sense” explanations that “stand to reason”. This is the case of what we might call the “hydraulic population theories”, which predict demographic trends as if they were based on a simple set of interconnected vessels; if ageing Europe shrinks and Africa—with its much younger population age structure—grows, then the future will be marked by migrations, until they even out. Nothing could be simpler (apparently). Predicting future migratory flows—according to this school of thought, at least—simply requires a calculation of the growth of one side and the shrinkage of another. And migration policy is “just” ensuring a fit between the employment market’s demands for workforce and forecast (demographic) surpluses. However, the principle of homeostasis is not applicable to demographics, not even in so-called “liquid times”. To make things a touch more complicated, the future is also the outcome of the images we have of it, or, more precisely, of the competition between the images we have of it and our standpoint as observers.

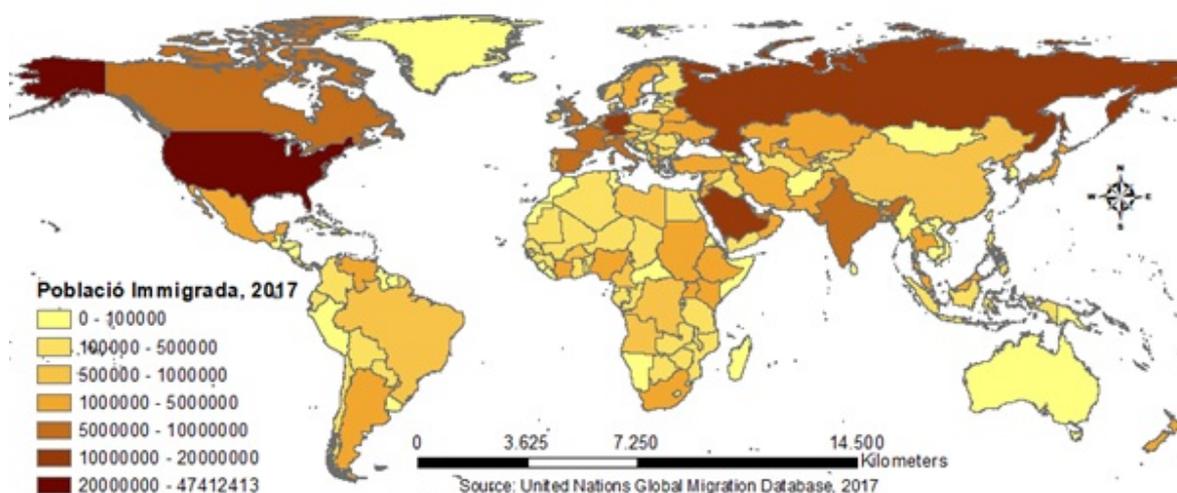
## **The building of Europe and migratory systems**

One of the effects of twenty-first century globalisation has been the speeding up, spread and diversification of international migrations. These migrations have not, however, taken place upon a blank canvas, but have stemmed from the colonial past. The main international migrations were, on the one hand, that of the descendants of past migrations (in terms of both origin and destination) and, on the other, existing diasporas resulting from geopolitical changes, leading examples of which include the building of Europe and its successive extensions, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the post-9/11 terrorist attacks. These migrations have ultimately led to the restructuring of existing migratory systems and the creation of new ones, with exchanges of flows involving people, goods, services and information. Such systems created shared spaces, which could be organised around economic integration or the exacerbating of already-existent economic inequalities. Remember that, from the European Economic Community’s beginnings in 1957 until the oil crisis of the 70s, the countries receiving most immigrants had deposits of cheap labour in Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal and Yugoslavia) or their respective former

colonies (Britain's Commonwealth, *la francophonie* for France and Surinam for Holland, to name a few), in addition to the cases of Turkish immigration to Germany.

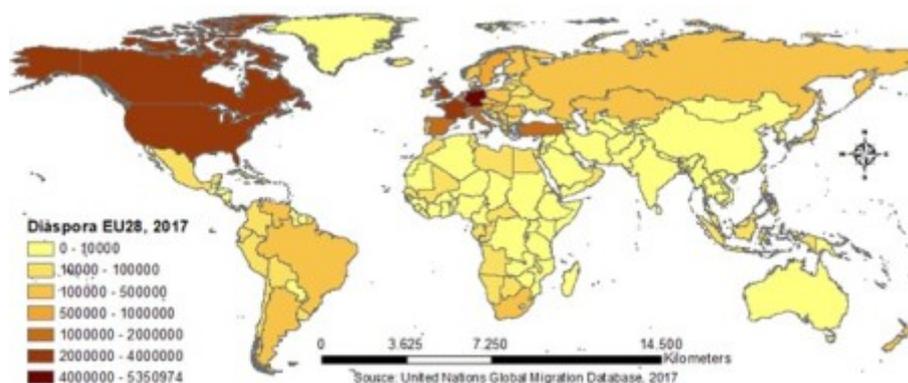
The crisis of 1973 is of great important in gaining some understanding of subsequent migration policies in Europe. The first reaction to it was a tightening up of the conditions for entering and staying in countries, in addition to the implementation of return policies. The phenomenon also saw a shift in character, with a consolidation of migration from non-EU countries, and the diversification of demographic profiles: where, previously, it had basically consisted of young men on their own, family reunification processes (often illicit in nature) now raised the issue of family migration, with children and spouses. The European Union seemed to be on the way to becoming the great testing ground for neoliberalism, ahead of Chile.

### Map 1: The immigrant population in the world, 2017



**Source:** Own work, United Nations. Population Division. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018

### Mapa 2: Diàspora europea al món, 2017



**Source:** Own work, United Nations. Population Division. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2018

Memories of the crisis would mark the conception of migration policies dependent upon protecting the local labour force, with this dream made reality in Schengen in 1985, combining the free circulation of goods and capital with that of persons, based on a design

of what was supposed to be the ideal internal labour market. A market that would meet its needs for unskilled labour with its own internal mobility, and in which the countries of the South could return to their traditional role of providing emigrants (remember that the entry of Spain and Portugal was subject to a two-year moratorium on mobility due to a fear of a northward “avalanche of migrants”), and that would only open its arms to non-EU migrants who were highly qualified or, if there was no alternative, aim to reduce their circularity, so as to (amongst other reasons) save on the expense of integration. Germany, with the fall of the Wall and the reunification of 1989, and previously wary of migration, at once feared and desired the arrival of Eastern European immigrants. Firstly, it would implement the ethnic migration programme for the aussieder, or descendants of German-speaking communities in Eastern European countries, and, secondly, immigration from these countries would give it the opportunity to regard them as falling under its area of influence and, on the quiet, “whiten” its immigrant population. Community policy abandoned the Mediterranean in favour of integrating the countries of Eastern Europe. So, the joining in 2004 of eight Eastern European states, following a tough structural adjustment plan, coincided with the deployment of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), headquartered in Warsaw and responsible for monitoring the Mediterranean. At the same time, it embarked upon the outsourcing of its border protection, making its cooperation with African countries dependent upon their help in stemming the flow of migrants from them and third countries towards Europe.

The reactivation of migrations during the closing years of the twentieth century therefore coincided with a progressive closing of Europe’s borders and the removal of its internal barriers. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the upswing in international terrorism led to a prioritising in Europe for security policies over those promoting integration. This involved the consolidation of the so-called “Fortress Europe”. The underlying mission of 1999’s Treaty of Amsterdam, a constituent element of the European Union, to develop an integration policy based on recognition of the equality and agency of the immigrants themselves, was forgotten. At the end of the twentieth century, all the countries of the EU had become complex demographic reproduction systems: in other words, their population trends were mostly dependent upon their migratory balance. Paradoxically, the dawn of the new millennium coincided with a migratory boom, with the countries of Southern Europe—traditionally emigratory in nature—as the main recipients. These flows contributed to the deregulation and segmentation of the labour market (with immigrants taking over low-skilled jobs) and in reproductive labour (with the outsourcing of domestic and care work, which would also bring about the feminisation of migratory flows).

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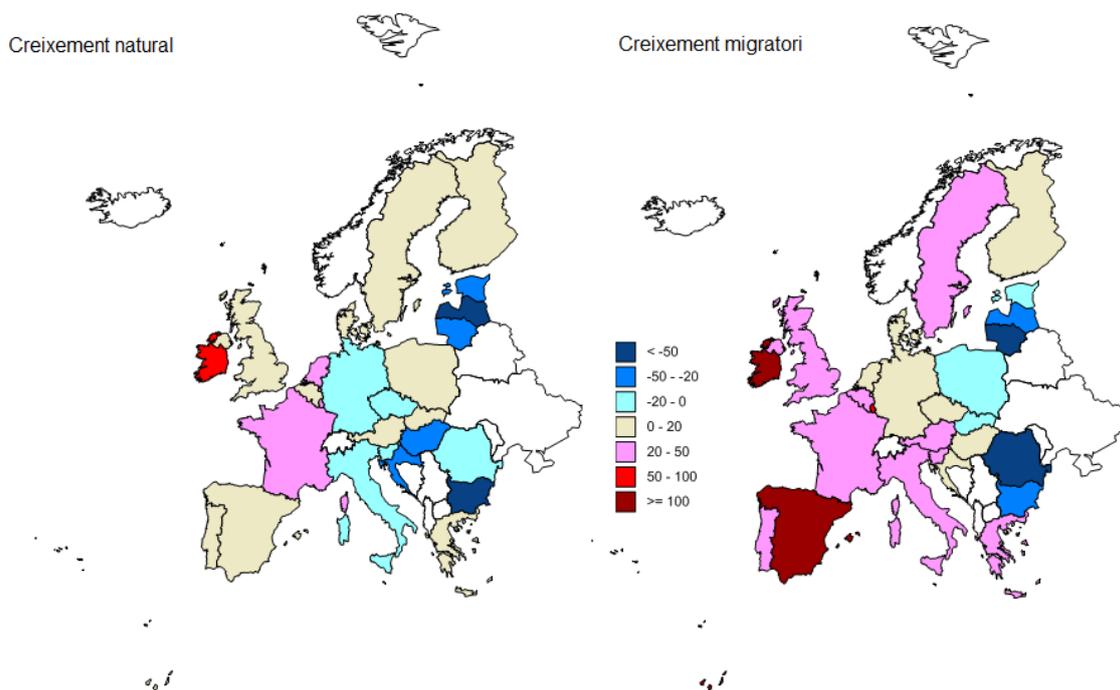
The European Union would see countries with both positive and negative net migration, irrespective of their demographic age structure, once again disproving the “demographic hydraulics” theory, with different players depending upon the particular economic situation (see Maps 3 and 4). The bursting of the property bubble and the financial crisis led to a drop in non-EU immigration, whilst austerity programmes encouraged, after an interval of many years, the emigration of young people (but now the best-qualified representatives) from its Southern Member States. Some technocrats in the European Central Bank and the German government dreamt that it was finally seeing the much hoped-for “internal mobility”, whose praises the members of Spain’s PP government never tired of singing. Not without reason, the blame for the delay in recovering from the crisis was laid at the door of a lack of a unified labour market, not to mention a unified tax policy. But the phenomenon was short-lived.

In 2015, the refugee crisis exploded onto the scene. The arrival *en masse* of refugees in search of the havens of Germany and Sweden—the majority Syrian nationals arriving in Greece from Turkey—caused a jump in demands for asylum to 172,000 in October alone. This laid bare, firstly, the weakness caused by the EU’s policy of outsourcing its border protection and, secondly, the fragility of an accelerated enlargement policy, with an increase in xenophobic populism, especially in the countries of the East, whose local population was disillusioned by the imposition of structural adjustment policies and the loss of national sovereignty. Ever since, the EU has proved unable to escape from the baffling maze of its migration policy, with its clash between market trends and the desire to put them into perfect order to maximise profits and reduce costs, and the pressure to restrict migrations from parties capitalising on the fears of a population under the threat of becoming redundant. Instead of remedying the situation, the European Commission has repeated the error of providing cooperation in return for help in curbing flows, negotiating with armed factions in Libya in 2018 and with the Arab League in 2019 and increasingly adopting an anti-immigration rhetoric in the name of “rationalising” flows, in a concession to the xenophobic parties baying at the doors of the European Parliament itself.

## Forecast population trends

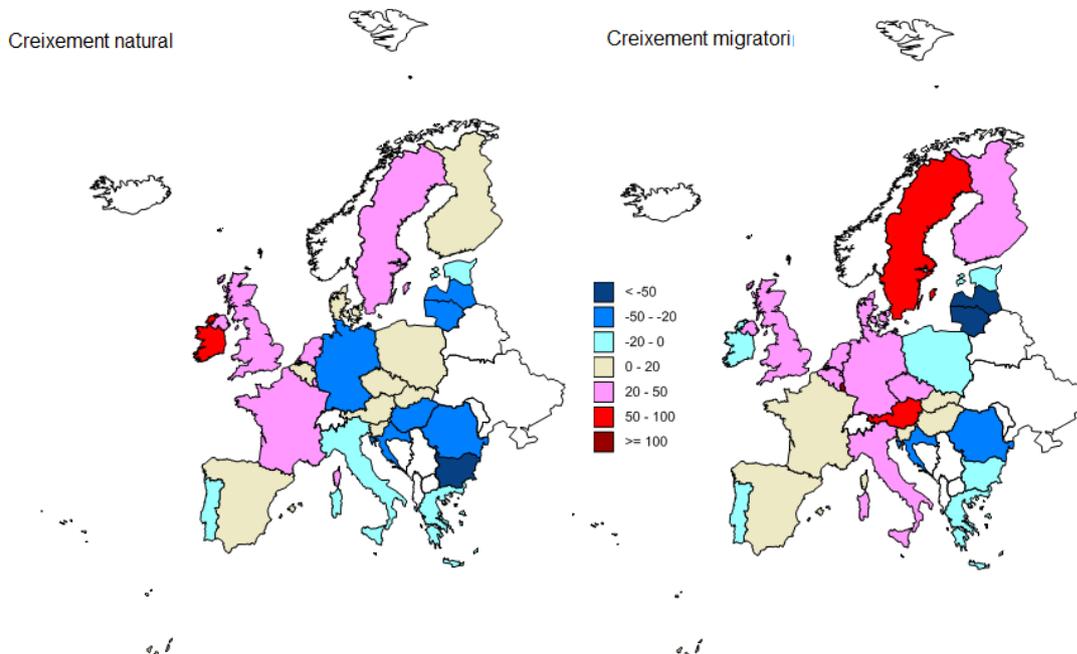
For the time being, the migratory flows from Africa have by no means been the most important either for the EU as a whole or for any of its individual Member States. A total of 52% of the 37.2 million constituents of the African diaspora have moved within the continent itself, particularly to two key destinations: South Africa and the Ivory Coast. Europe has received about a quarter of this figure, around 9.7 million people. When considering hypotheses on the future of migrations between Africa and the EU, four demographic phenomena need to be taken into account: 1) Trends in population numbers and structures; 2) Growth of urban populations; 3) An increase in education levels, particularly by sex, and 4) Climate change.

### Map 3: Natural and migratory growth in EU Member States, 1998-2007



Source: Own work, Eurostat, 2018

### Map 4: Natural and migratory growth in EU Member States, 2008-2017.



Source: Own work, Eurostat, 2018

One of the most significant features of population trends to 2050 is the fact that, coincidentally, the population of Africa is estimated to increase whilst Europe experiences a population decline (see Map 4). According to United Nations estimates, the former is forecast to see a doubling in the number of its inhabitants to reach the 2.5 billion mark, whilst the latter will experience a fall of 1.8%, down to 715 million inhabitants (510 million

for EU-28, including in this case the UK) in a world of 9.8 billion people. This divergence in trends is even more accentuated in terms of their population's age: whilst, in Africa, the elderly are forecast to represent 14.9% of the total, in Europe, this figure rises to 31.3%. For Africa, which is already seeing—albeit at a different rate between countries—a drop in fecundity rates, this period will witness an explosion in its workforce, which, in the case of countries like China, represented a demographic window of opportunity that acted as a launch pad for their economic growth (due to the relatively low expenditure on the dependent population and the extremely high returns from the active one).

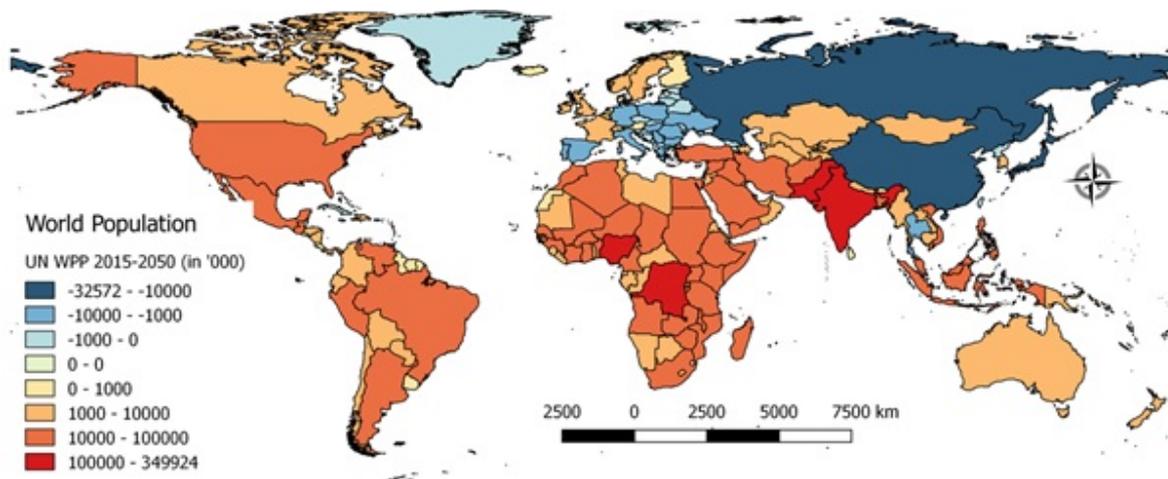
The challenge [in Europe is] redefining the demos in accordance with complex reproduction systems, in which migrations will mark the direction of demographic trends.

It will also be an important time for growth in Africa's urban population: from the 771.7 million of 2018, it is estimated that the figure will double by 2050 to reach 58.9% of the total, equating to more than 1.48 billion urbanites. This leap will be due both to the youthful structure of the population living in Africa's cities, helping boost birth rates even though fecundity rates will drop, and to migrations to its urban centres. Cairo, which is predicted to reach 24.5 million inhabitants by 2030 (making it the Mediterranean's largest metropolis), followed by Lagos with 24.2 million and Kinshasa with 20 million, will all join the list of the world's top 12 metropolises, ahead of all those in Europe. The challenges in terms of infrastructure and sustainability are obvious.

Thirdly, we need to consider trends in the education level of the population, particularly women, which should accompany growth of urban populations. So, by 2050, whilst Africa as a whole will see a sixfold increase in its population with a higher education, up to 146 million people, African women will see a sevenfold one. Clearly, the great challenge for the continent's different economies will be to take proper advantage of its vast human capital, in addition to the social changes that will accompany this increase. Its countries' social and economic structures will have to adapt to this new reality: if they do not, they may well collapse.

The last factor to consider is climate change. To date, it is difficult to prove that any migrations have been caused by global warming, but their behaviour appears to mirror that of refugee movements; the main impact is seen on a regional scale.

### **Map 5: Estimated population trends in the world between 2015 and 2050, absolute numbers**



**Source:** Own work, World Population Projects, 2018.

## Counterintuitive trends

Forecasting demographics means analysing what may occur in terms of numbers, but it cannot foresee the actual future. Demographic trends entail changes that are much more subtle and complex than mere numbers-based social Darwinism. When looking demographically at migrations in Europe, and particularly with regard to Africa's future, we need to counter some preconceived ideas.

Contrary to popular belief, the African immigrant population in the EU is strongly differentiated by education level depending upon the host country, with the features of their labour markets also playing a part. Thus, whilst in Spain, only 5.2% of the North African and 18% of the Sub-Saharan population have received a higher education, in the UK, these percentages stand at 51.9% and 45.7%, respectively. Also worth noting is the fact that, in Spain, more than a third of these graduates work in low-skilled jobs, meaning their human capital is not taken advantage of. This divergence is a feature that is repeated between the EU's southern countries, and its northern countries and the United States, where a large proportion of the immigrant African population are graduates or highly qualified workers.

It is reasonable to believe that migration will grow most in those countries in which the fecundity rate falls and the education level rises the most. Until now, except for areas expelling population due to armed conflict, emigration has not been determined either by growth in the population in general or in the active population in particular; it depends on the economic circumstances of each individual country. Although Africa's metropolises will absorb some of the continent's expanding population, subsequently, this progression may lead to migrations towards Europe, amongst other destinations, in which women may play a leading role as a consequence of the increase in their levels of education. Those in Europe thinking of a Marshall Plan to curb migration may find that, in the short and medium term, economic development may prove to be an incentive behind migratory movements and will only in the long term act to hold back the population. It would be better to think of co-development plans that are not based on neo-colonialism or political manoeuvring as the backbone of Europe's migration policy. A policy based on curbing migratory flows may turn

out to be one of the worst self-fulfilling prophecies we will have to deal with over the course of the next thirty years.

In the countries of Europe, most particularly those of its South, the challenge faced is not how to stem the oncoming tide of African migrations, but how to modernise production systems, and also redistribution policies so as not to condemn a large proportion of their populations to obsolescence, and how to open up democracies so they are capable of redefining the *demos* in accordance with complex reproduction systems, in which migrations will mark the direction of demographic trends. The contribution of young, educated Africans, not only the continent's graduates, could be leveraged to expedite these changes.

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Andreu Domingo i Valls holds a PhD in Sociology and is the Deputy Director of the Centre for Demographic Studies (Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics - CED) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, where he is the lead researcher of the Globalization, Migrations, and Space group —one of the center's three strategic areas. He is also a full member of the Institute of Catalan Studies (Institut d'Estudis Catalans). Specializing in international migration and family formation, his work also explores population and the social imaginary. He is currently co-directing, alongside Jordi Bayona, the MIGRA-GOC project on migration and demographic and social reproduction strategies in Spain, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. His recent publications include *Catalunya 3D: Demografia, Diversitat i Democràcia* (L'Avenç, 2022), and as editor, *Demografia y posverdad. Estereotipos, distorsiones y falsedades sobre la evolución de la población* (Icaria, 2023). He also coordinated the special IDEES issue "Demography: the challenges facing the society of the future".