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Author(s): Ahonen, Pertti

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Of Walls and Fences: Brexit and Cross-Border Migration

Pertti Ahonen, University of Jyväskylä

Champions of Brexit have employed a large arsenal of arguments to boost their case for a Britain better off on its own, freed from its current European entanglements. All kinds of supposed ills have been linked to the country's EU membership in British public debates over the years, ranging from petty bureaucratic absurdities, such as directives regarding crooked bananas, to heavy-handed rulings on higher matters of domestic and foreign policy. Lamentations about continental meddling have been accompanied by grand, nostalgic visions of an unfettered future Great Britain, ready to return to its proper, independent role on the global stage once it manages to cast off the shackles imposed by Brussels. Although these types of considerations undoubtedly contributed to the outcome of the British EU membership referendum of June 2016, arguably the main factor behind the narrow victory of the Brexiteers lay somewhere else: in fears of incoming migrants and dreams of simple solutions that would keep them out.

Angst about high levels of immigration, whipped up by sections of the media and of the political class, had been building up in the UK for years, of course, but the catalyst that exacerbated these fears and hardened them into pro-Brexit attitudes came with the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-2016. The influx of large numbers of non-Europeans fleeing from various conflict zones into the EU provoked visceral reactions. The most notorious public statement in Britain was probably UKIP leader Nigel Farage's poster action of June 2016, unleashed just days before the Brexit referendum, in which the words 'Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all' were superimposed on the background image of a seemingly endless queue of vaguely threatening, overwhelmingly young, male and foreign-looking refugees.

But Farage and his party were by no means alone in dehumanizing and instrumentalizing refugees. No less of a figure than Prime Minister David Cameron described crowds of migrants at the UK's borders as faceless 'swarms of people' while stressing the need for defensive national action, and similar terms and metaphors abounded elsewhere in British public rhetoric too. A rejection and scapegoating of immigrants, combined with a reversion to entrenched ideas of a national community and of nationally defined political solutions to transnational challenges, was fundamental to the appeal of the Brexit option in the summer of 2016, as opinion polls and subsequent analyses have indicated.

In some ways, British attitudes towards the rest of Europe form a very particular case. Geography has made partial isolation from the continent a long-lasting dream and an at least occasional possibility for the island nation and erstwhile empire-master, feeding persistent and frequently distorted perceptions of cultural and political separateness, as highlighted in this roundtable by Anne Deighton, Dominik Geppert, Alex Körner and others. In the shorter term, peculiar neuroses about Europe, and the UK's relationship to it, have simmered away at least since Britain's entry into the EEC in 1973, particularly among the disproportionately vocal and influential Europhobic wing of the Tories, fuelled, for instance, by the 'awkward partner' narrative analysed in this volume by Piers Ludlow. However, fears of large-scale immigration, panicked reactions to it, and mostly futile attempts to stop it with walls and fences – some of them literal, others figurative – are by no means just a British peculiarity. They form an integral part of a much wider modern European – and indeed global – narrative of the interplay between migration and state attempts to control it, within which Brexit, too, can be subsumed.

In the largely nationally defined historiography of Europe, the long-term centrality of migrations has rarely received sufficient emphasis, although the fact remains that the history of Europe, including that of Britain, is, to a very considerable degree, migration history. Large-scale population movements that have frequently failed to respect political boundaries have fundamentally shaped Europe's development across the centuries, from pre-modern times to the present. Before the twentieth century, these movements could typically unfold relatively independently of political controls, driven and steered predominantly by economic and existential imperatives, often on a regional basis that cut across current-day national borders. But the situation changed profoundly in the early twentieth century, starting in the years before the First World War and intensifying after it, because of two overarching trends: the emergence of increasingly powerful and interventionist state apparatuses on the one hand, and the widespread application of exclusive, ethno-national criteria to define belonging to a particular state's citizenry on the other. In this configuration, foreign migrants from beyond a given nation state's boundaries were increasingly regarded as a problematic, alien element that required close control and regulation from the government, preferably through denial of entry at the country's external borders. In the UK, the Aliens Act of 1905, which introduced immigration controls and immigrant registration procedures, marked a major watershed, and similar shifts towards more restrictive immigration policies also took place in various other states around this time.

The Second World War further magnified the underlying twin trends in the interaction between European states and migrant populations, with major additional increases in the powers and capabilities of states and a significant tightening of the ethno-nationally defined criteria of belonging within those states. However, the post-1945 era nevertheless witnessed very significant levels of cross-border migration in Europe, at first primarily within the

continent, but – after the early post-war years – increasingly from beyond it as well. In a transformation of fundamental importance, Europe turned rather quickly from a continent of emigration into a growing magnet for transcontinental immigration, attracting newcomers from former colonial territories that were rapidly mutating into the so-called Third World of the Cold War era. Both types of migrants – Europeans and others – were periodically regarded as problems at the state level in post-1945 Europe, particularly in moments of perceived crisis. However, as time went on, population movements originating from the extra-European world, defined as consisting of cultural and racial 'others', came to be seen as the main menace. At the same time, regional inequalities across the globe remained glaring and conflicts and disasters repeatedly uprooted large numbers of people in its less developed regions. Meanwhile, Europe, ever more wealthy and predominantly stable, kept moving towards a sort of Fortress Europe under the direction of the EU, with far-ranging and growing mobility inside accompanied by increasingly tight controls and restrictions on entry from the outside.

In the course of the twentieth century, and particularly after 1945, European reactions to large cross-border migrations have come to be characterized by a particular pattern, which also explains much of the appeal of Brexit in the wider context of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015-2016. According to this pattern, at times of increased migratory pressures, which have usually coincided with moments of wider economic and political uncertainty, immigrants of different sorts are labelled as a major threat to the political and societal stability of European states. The result is typically a widespread sense of crisis, often inflamed by political leaders and other opinion-makers, partly in a constructed and instrumentalized fashion, with ulterior motives. The frenzied public discussions engender an atmosphere of panic which, in turn, helps to precipitate political action aimed at preventing or significantly curtailing

immigration. Historically such crackdowns have tended to be nationally focused and reflective of zero-sum assumptions in which particular states have taken action on their own, with little regard for wider consequences beyond their borders. Although these measures may have brought some results in the short term, at least by reducing the numbers of incoming migrants in particular categories, in the longer term the states in question **have** scored only limited successes at best and downright defeats at worst. Migration flows have typically continued, albeit in an altered form, with different kinds of migrants, so that the attempts at erecting protective barriers have proved largely futile, or even counter-productive. At the same time, the tendency to view immigration overwhelmingly as a problem has sustained a persistent tendency to downplay the many beneficial contributions that immigrants have brought to their receiving countries – and to ignore the demographic and economic necessity of immigration for many European states.

This pattern has been in evidence in numerous settings in Europe since the early twentieth century, with certain variations between the cases, of course. The increasingly strict restrictions on immigration introduced by most European countries after – and in several cases partly before – the First World War mentioned above were the first sustained example of such panicked crackdowns with ambiguous outcomes. Similar dynamics were also at work during the worsening general crisis of the late 1930s, when just about every European government did its level best to discourage and to prevent immigrants, particularly Jews and other persecuted refugees from the Third Reich and Eastern Europe, from landing on its territory. Reactions to the opening of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s formed another case in point, most vividly in freshly united Germany, where significant increases in the numbers of incoming asylum seekers, largely from Eastern Europe, pushed the government into the tortuous process of revising the country's hitherto exceptionally generous asylum legislation

in a political atmosphere which Chancellor Kohl saw fit to characterize as a ‘state of emergency’.

The clearest example of Europe’s crisis-driven, nationally focused and ultimately counter-productive pattern of responding to perceived migration problems – with the closest present-day parallels – can be found in yet another setting, however: the Western Europe of the early-to-mid 1970s. Around the time of the first oil crisis and the accompanying major recession, in a political climate of anxiety and fear, the West European countries that had been importing large quantities of cheap foreign labour from southern Europe, Turkey and North Africa during the preceding ‘golden years’ of economic boom abruptly reversed their policies. Acting separately, with little inter-governmental consultation, West Germany, France, Sweden, and Switzerland all moved to curtail further labour immigration and to encourage migrants who had arrived during the previous years to head back ‘home’. Although these measures did succeed in significantly reducing the active recruitment of new workers from the Mediterranean area in particular, they did not stop immigration as such, which continued at relatively high levels in the ensuing years, albeit in an altered form. Instead of labourers, the new arrivals were typically dependents and family members of the previously recruited workers, most of whom intended to stay in their new domiciles rather than return to a ‘home country’ that had become increasingly distant to many as the years passed and life worlds evolved. In other words, the new, restrictive policies against labour migrants failed to halt immigration; they simply altered its character and composition while steering public discussions and perceptions in a direction where immigrants were increasingly problematized and scapegoated and their positive potential and contributions downplayed or ignored.

Against this historical background, the prognosis for Brexit as a political solution that can significantly and enduringly reduce the overall level of immigration into the United Kingdom is poor. To be sure, in late summer 2018, statistics seemed to indicate that net migration into Britain from the EU countries had fallen noticeably since the holding of the Brexit referendum two years previously. However, in the same period immigration from outside of the EU had risen considerably, apparently reaching levels not seen for over a decade. In other words, the overall effect of Brexit-related changes seemed to be a continuation of immigration into the UK at comparable levels as before, but in altered forms, with different categories of immigrants, just as on similar previous occasions in modern European history. Meanwhile, various voices from the business and public sectors kept stressing that the very extensive positive value of migrants from the EU and elsewhere to the UK economy and society had too often been overlooked. Indeed, according to many experts, the British economy, including much of the service sector, simply will not be able to function in the future without the significant levels of foreign labour to which it has grown accustomed in previous decades.

Once again then, attempts to erect walls and fences to keep migrants away from a particular modern European country appear to have failed or, at the very least, are extremely likely to fail. The broader lesson also seems clear: the history of Europe as migration history will continue, as it has for centuries, regardless of the barriers, physical or otherwise, that politicians may try to erect to block the movement of people, especially at a time when global megatrends, such as population growth, inequality, and widespread political instability, make further increases in migration flows into Europe nearly inevitable. What today's Europe needs is serious discussion of the challenges posed by demographic and migratory pressures, combined with the development of realistic and responsible immigration policies at the

national and supra-national levels, not populistic slogans and false promises of quick-fix solutions to highly complicated problems. Migration has been and remains a real challenge for the EU. Brexit – fuelled as it was by concerns about immigration – is only one expression of this history.