

Humanitarian Crisis, Refugees & Migrants

Briefing Paper by RECC



Migration is always in the news and this year this theme has dominated the headlines.

It would seem that there are two reasons for this:

- The impact of the humanitarian crisis and the conflicts at Europe's borders.
- The central place that the question of immigration has in the debate around the EU Referendum.

Redbridge Equalities & Community Council has published briefing papers and myth busting packs about migration in the past, but we think that it is particularly vital to do so now.

In some countries in Europe anti-migrant campaigns and parties have made gains and this could result in relations between settled communities and migrants, asylum seekers and refugees being badly poisoned. Having said that, we do not think it is all gloom and doom. Over 100 thousand people marched in London under the banner of "Refugees Are Welcome Here".

We should also make it clear that the RECC does not take a position on the EU Referendum, nor is it our role to do so.



Who is providing greatest shelter for Syrian refugees?

Millions of people have been caught between ISIS and the Assad regime. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, many more made homeless or in fear death. This has led to a massive movement of people out of Syria and the regions of Iraq controlled by ISIS. Where are they all going? You might get the impression from the newspapers and the television that they are all coming to Europe, but this is not true. The majority of them are going to the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. These are poor countries that already provide shelter for millions of refugees. There are 3 million refugees in Turkey, 2 million in the Lebanon and a similar number in Jordan. Over a million of these are due to the recent humanitarian crisis. Most of these live in chronically overcrowded refugee camps with problems of sanitation. Far fewer have tried to go to Europe despite Europe having far greater capacity to support them.

Will migrants and refugees put an unbearable strain on Europe?

It has been shown that in general migrants put in more than they take out of the countries in terms of taxes, benefits, wages, services provided and so forth. However, this is not likely to apply in the short term to the numbers fleeing a humanitarian crisis. It is in the nature of such a crisis that it will provide a strain on resources. But the strain will be far less than that bourn by the developing countries of the Middle East. Back in the late 1930s the British Government decided not to open the doors to adult Jewish refugees and many Jewish children too despite the Kinder Transport. They would undoubtedly have placed a substantial strain on our services. But instead they perished in the Holocaust.

At the end of the Second World War there were at least 10 million refugees in Europe – some estimates suggest nearly 40 million. Europe absorbed these. The Balkan Wars in the 1980s and 1990s gave rise to 3.5 million refugees in Europe. Europe did not go under.



How long have people been drowning in the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean Sea trying to get to Europe?

The tragic drownings of refugees and migrants have been getting public attention for about 3 years and many people have only known about these tragedies over the last year. However, in reality for over a decade hundreds of migrants and refugees have been drowning every year but there was little publicity. People from North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa fleeing poverty, war, the combined impact of global warming and de-forestation creating deserts in their land - have been making their way to the Spanish enclaves in Morocco and other places where it was relatively safe to cross the Mediterranean near the straits of Gibraltar where passage into Europe is quite narrow. The Spanish authorities increased their patrols so migrants had to seek more and more dangerous routes and more people drowned. Soon naval patrols by other Mediterranean countries were increased and the drownings escalated. These were joined by patrols by Frontex, the pan-European border patrols. At the same time more refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan were making their way through Turkey and risked the crossing to Greece across the Aegean Sea.

Then, after the civil war in Libya, more people were taking greater risks across wide stretches of the Mediterranean and the drownings increased. Finally, as a result of the situation in Syria described above drownings went from the hundreds to the thousands per year.

Does everybody want to come to Britain?

Some say that migrants and refugees want to come to Britain because we are a 'soft touch' in terms of benefits etc. The current crisis clearly shows that this is not the case. The vast majority want to go to other countries like Germany, Scandinavia, etc. Only a few have set their hearts on the UK. Migrants who specifically want to come to the UK might make their way to Calais where they have been brutalised in order to discourage them getting across. There are only about 6000 people in Calais. Their reasons for coming are various; some speak English, some have family or communities here. It is becoming increasingly hard for anyone to claim benefits these days and certainly even more difficult for migrants and asylum seekers. There might be a small number who have been misinformed about the situation in Britain but there cannot be many people who would risk drowning, being killed hanging on under lorries, being frozen to death in a refrigerated lorry, just because of a tall story about Britain's benefits regime.



Does the European Union believe in freedom of movement for all?

No. The European Union (EU) is committed to freedom of movement of Europeans. Those countries signed up to the Schengen agreement, have opened their borders with each other so that people can go through these unchecked. However, at the same time they have tried to increase the external borders creating a 'fortress Europe', the result being that the vast majority of people going through the internal European borders are European. The current humanitarian crisis has challenged this to some extent but countries are busy re-enforcing the external borders of Europe. The recent agreement between the EU and Turkey makes it abundantly clear who can and cannot be granted freedom of movement.

Does freedom of movement in the EU mean access to the labour market across Europe?

Not always. When a number of Eastern European Countries joined the EU, existing EU members had the choice to allow their workers access to the labour market or not. The British Government decided to allow free access to the labour market whereas France, Germany and other countries did not. The decision of those countries not to allow access led to far more Polish workers coming to Britain than had been expected by politicians and civil servants. This led too much wringing of hands although there is no evidence that on balance this was a bad thing.

What is the relationship between the EU and the security of British borders?

Less than some people think. We have just seen above, that the EU did not force Britain into allowing access of Eastern European workers to enter the labour market. Britain is not a signatory to the Schengen agreement and does not have open borders. On the other hand Britain cannot exclude EU citizens other than in exceptional circumstances. It used to be the case that Britain could not deport EU Citizens but over the last few years the Government has developed legal instruments to do this – removing people 'for not exercising their treaty rights', which basically means being homeless and jobless, often the most vulnerable of our European visitors such as Roma people.



Do EU migrants undermine wages and conditions of work in Britain?

It is often assumed that because people come from a place where wages are much lower and conditions worse that those people will work for much less. However, the very reason that many people move to another richer country is precisely to earn more. And when they get to the richer country they need more money because the cost of living is higher. However, the EU has a policy upheld by the European Court of Justice (not to be confused with the European Court of Human Rights which has totally separate from the EU) that employers can pay wage rates corresponding to the levels in their countries of origin. So, for example, an employer can pay a Romanian brick layer in the UK the rate for the job in Romania. This is quite unjust – it exploits the Romanian worker and undercuts the workers who were born in Britain. Those who believe in equality and justice, whether they are pro or anti EU, oppose this ruling.

The Emergency Brake

One of the consequences of the negotiations between Britain and the EU linked to the Referendum process is that Britain will be allowed to withdraw in-work benefits from 'foreign' EU workers for up to 4 years and the rule applied for seven years if migrants are putting too great a strain on UK resources. This has been called "The Emergency Break". It seems extraordinary looking around the rest of Europe and certainly countries outside Europe, that the UK can be regarded as an emergency case allowing it to apply these special rules.

Landlord Checks

There have been lots of new laws coming into force as a result of the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2015 and there is a further large tranche on its way with a new immigration bill. The RECC is not the organisation to present an analysis of these. However, we do want to make a comment of one element which is of particular concern to us as an equalities organisation and this is the requirement of landlord checks. It is now a legal requirement that a landlord checks the immigration status of a prospective tenant and refuses to house anyone without the right to reside in the UK. If they do house 'illegal immigrants' they will be fined and, under recently proposed legislation, criminalised.

Landlords are not experts in immigration law, a bundle of legislation which is highly complex for even solicitors to understand. The inevitable consequence of this is that many landlords will take the view that they will not take the risk of housing someone with a dark skin, whose first language isn't English, who were born in another country – easier to take on a white English speaking person without a foreign accent to stay out of trouble with the Home Office. This will lead to racial discrimination, which, of course, is against the law.

CONCLUSION

We are living in dangerous times; a conjunction of austerity, a humanitarian crisis giving rise to a great displacement of people and a referendum in which migration issues are centre stage. It is a time when people look for scapegoats. Migrants and refugees are an easy target. So we call on opinion formers to appeal to people's compassion and reason, not to sow hatred and propagate divisive myths. We hope that these briefing notes will arm people with arguments against prejudice.

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