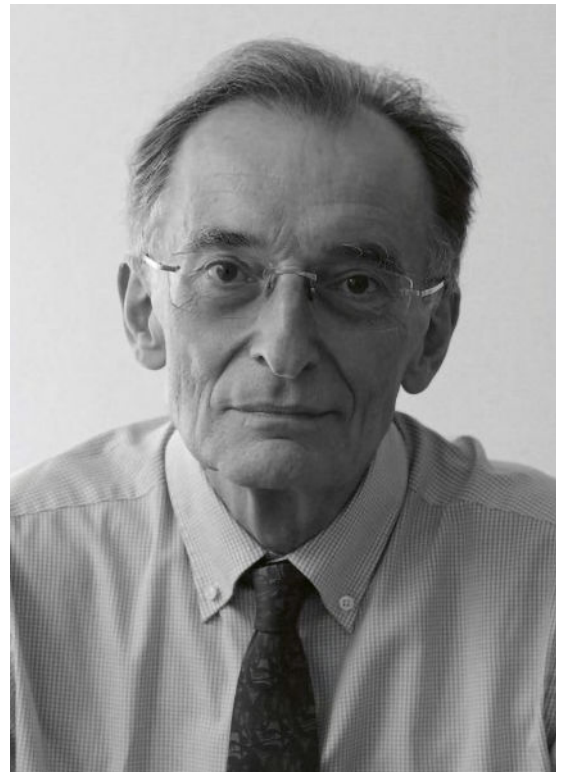


# IMMIGRATION: DON'T FALL INTO THE TRAP

By Jean-Louis De Brouwer,  
President of the Egmont Institute



A divisive subject if ever there was one, immigration, is generally considered to be one of the defining issues of any election. This postulate seems to apply universally, whatever the geographical context or polling level concerned.

At first glance, this is no different when it comes to the European elections on June 9. Both the findings of various surveys on voting intentions and the results of recent elections in certain member states support the hypothesis of a shift in the center of gravity of the European political system. And the perception of an unsatisfactory response to the challenges posed by immigration is no small part of the reason.

The absolute necessity of preventing such a development was, moreover, one of the main arguments of the political and institutional players determined to reach an agreement, whatever the cost, on the Asylum and Migration Pact. This has now been achieved, and the European Union, in the decisive moments of a legislature that is undoubtedly historic in many aspects, has at least equipped itself with a political framework capable of reassuring public opinion, worried by the apparent inability to manage a phenomenon that is increasingly perceived as uncontrollable.

Nothing is less certain. We will not go into the many uncertainties surrounding this complex legislative package. Unclear, it leaves many grey areas as to the conformity of its measures with fundamental rights. Its implementation will take a long time (two years) and will require considerable resources, particularly budgetary. It will rely on cooperation between institutions and Member States, which in the past has often been haphazard, and above all it presupposes the restoration of a particularly damaged sense of trust and solidarity between them.

The Commission has understandably welcomed a system that secures external borders by organizing rapid procedures for processing applications for international protection, and by providing for forms of solidarity between Member States<sup>(1)</sup>. Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling that this is a technocratic response to a societal need, and even an excellent communication campaign in the run-up to June 9 will be difficult to remedy.

More worryingly, certain political forces, including those who supported the agreement, already seem to be calling into question the validity of this hard-won accord. Beyond the outright refusal to apply the agreement, they are pointing to its inadequacies and the need to "go further".

But to go where and to do what? Undertaking a new legislative effort at the end of an exhausting journey would be nonsense. The aim, then, could be to consolidate the Pact's effectiveness through political initiatives designed to complement it. In addition to strengthening border controls and combating criminal networks of smugglers, most of these concern relations with third countries. These may take the form of vague "agreements" aimed, under the guise of a multi-sector partnership fueled by massive financial transfers, at securing the cooperation of these countries both in controlling migration in transit on their territory and in implementing a return policy, with more than disappointing results. Other avenues would involve exploring the possibility of outsourcing responsibility for receiving and processing applications for international protection. Added to this would be greater openness to "chosen" migration, more essential to meet the needs of an economy with a skills shortage, or even to cope with the consequences of an inevitable demographic transition.

What if we are debating the wrong issue? An opinion survey conducted in January 2024 in twelve member states (including France) by the European Council on Foreign Relations is revealing in this regard<sup>(2)</sup>. On the one hand, it shows that immigration is only secondary to economic uncertainties, past and future pandemics, climate change and the war in Ukraine in people's perception of the crucial issues of the day. On the other hand, it would appear that the "centrality" of the immigration debate is above all an effect of the effective political "marketing" of nationalist and populist parties, who have made it one of their main selling points.

“...THE MAJORITY  
OF MIGRANTS  
ARE PART  
OF LEGAL  
SCHEMES...!”

The facts bear out this analysis: the majority of migrants are part of legal schemes (work permits or family reunification), and those detected as staying illegally have not, for the most part, fraudulently crossed the European Union's external borders. What is more, tightening border controls has no direct effect on reducing migratory pressure<sup>(3)</sup>. And let us not forget that the European Union takes in only a very limited proportion, on a global scale, of populations fleeing persecution or natural disasters, and that few lessons have so far been learned from the formidable capacity to

welcome, overnight, Ukrainians fleeing Russian aggression.

This could be a trap that political parties advocating better migration management should avoid falling into, otherwise, as the saying goes, voters will prefer the original to the copy. At a time when democracy is at its peak when elections are being held, every player must focus on the real priorities - often influenced by the national context - of those called upon to vote (and hope that

many of them turn out to vote). Being clear and educational about immigration is part of this approach, without making it the focus of the debate. But this is a difficult exercise, given the "toxic" nature of the subject and the raw sensitivities involved. And we dare not even mention the impact that the slightest incident linked to migration could have in certain member states just a few minutes before the vote. ■

(1) Achieving a balance on migration: a fair and firm approach, Communication from the European Commission, 12.3.2024.

(2) A New Political Map: Getting the European Parliament Election Right, Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, European Council on Foreign Relations, March 2024.

(3) EU Migration and Borders. Key Facts and Figures, European Parliamentary Research Service, briefing March 2024.