

*This paper is part of a series of short “think pieces” by IOM’s Migration Research High Level Advisers on the potential changes, impacts and implications for migration and mobility arising from COVID-19. Designed to spark thinking on policy and programmatic responses to COVID-19 as the impacts continue to emerge globally, the papers draw upon existing and new evidence and offer initial exploratory analysis and recommendations.*

## COVID-19 and the transformation of migration and mobility globally

# Why COVID-19 does not necessarily mean that attitudes towards immigration will become more negative

James Dennison and Andrew Geddes<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Rather than turning against immigration, attitudes towards migrants across Europe have gradually become more positive year-on-year for the last 20 years or so. There is little to suggest that the COVID-19 crisis will dramatically undermine or reverse this long-term trend.

Also, and again perhaps counter-intuitively, we suggest that a key effect of the crisis will be less, not more attention being paid to the immigration question. This does not mean that the issues associated with immigration become less important, but that citizens and governments will prioritize other concerns: economic reconstruction and States’ finances, as well as their health-care and education systems. Migration will clearly interlink with these concerns, but our point is that the migration issue itself seems likely to be less exposed to direct public debate, which can lead to a period of “quieter” immigration politics that can create space for innovations. However, these innovations – and effective communication about them – should be tailored according to attitudes as they are, and as they have been changing, rather than efforts to fundamentally remake attitudes. Attitudes to immigration are also more nuanced than binary “pro” or “anti” positions.

We focus on Europe, because developments there provide a powerful test of attitudes towards immigration in the context of the current COVID-19 crisis, although similar trends are evident in other major destination countries, such as the

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United States of America.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, looking at how previous recent crises affected attitudes to immigration provides immediate grounds to doubt that the COVID-19 crisis will necessarily lead to increased anti-immigration sentiment. European countries experienced powerful shockwaves after the 2008 global financial crisis and, perhaps even more relevantly, the so-called migration crisis after 2015. Yet, following both the 2008 and 2015 crises, attitudes towards immigration maintained their favourable direction.

### **The drivers of attitudes**

At first glance, these might seem improbable assertions about the effects of the pandemic: more favourable attitudes and less direct political attention to immigration. After all, a devastating global pandemic could trigger some of the psychological predispositions that have been associated with anti-immigration attitudes, such as valuing security and personal safety,<sup>3</sup> or having a moral foundation based on authority and in-group loyalty.<sup>4</sup> Gamlen observes that during times of crisis, immigrants are often used as scapegoats, and asserts that anti-immigration sentiment is on the rise.<sup>5</sup> However, we can also observe that the pandemic has unlocked conflicting tendencies: citizens in locked-down countries have seen daily news coverage showing migrants playing a disproportionate role in overstretched health-care provision, as well as everything from agricultural work to restaurant delivery.

To unravel and make sense of these potentially contradictory forces, we must first consider how attitudes towards immigration are formed, and then draw from data on attitudes in Europe to look at how they have been changing and why.

To begin with, we look at the underlying factors that shape attitudes towards immigration. Decades of scientific research has shown the importance of early life experience in the formation of social and political attitudes,<sup>6</sup> with a particularly key role played by the experience of education. Once established, attitudes can be resistant to change and also become an important aspect of a person's identity to which he or she feels an emotional attachment. Telling people that they are wrong, that they are mistaken, do not understand or are ignorant, can be counterproductive and harden views. Similarly, communicating in ways that could be seen as naturalizing or even seeking to impose particular perspectives, values and worldviews on people who do not share such a value orientation are also likely to be counterproductive. People who hold more progressive and cosmopolitan worldviews and those who hold more conservative worldviews may well talk past each other on the immigration issue, fuelling polarization.

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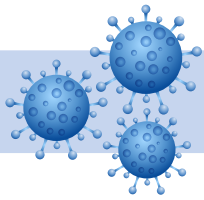
2 Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor, 2019.

3 Davidov et al., 2008.

4 Day et al., 2014.

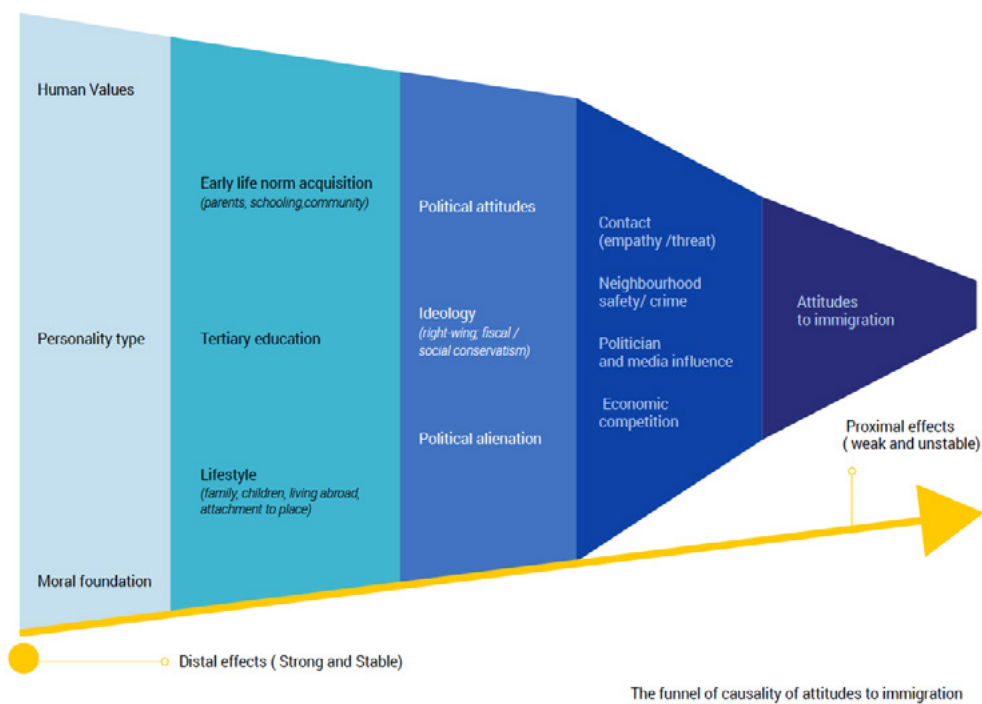
5 Gamlen, 2020.

6 See for example, McLaren et al., 2020.



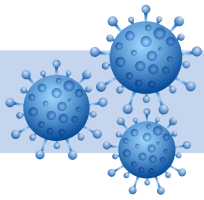
We can contrast *distal* effects on attitudes that are deep rooted and difficult to shift with more immediate *proximal* effects, such as media coverage. We capture these in the “funnel of causality” below that was developed by the Observatory of Public Attitudes to Migration (OPAM) at the European University Institute. As can be seen, distal factors to the left of the diagram are strong, stable and likely to be resistant to change. Proximal factors such as media effects are more likely to channel and potentially intensify existing views and beliefs than to change them.

Figure 1. The funnel of causality of attitudes to immigration



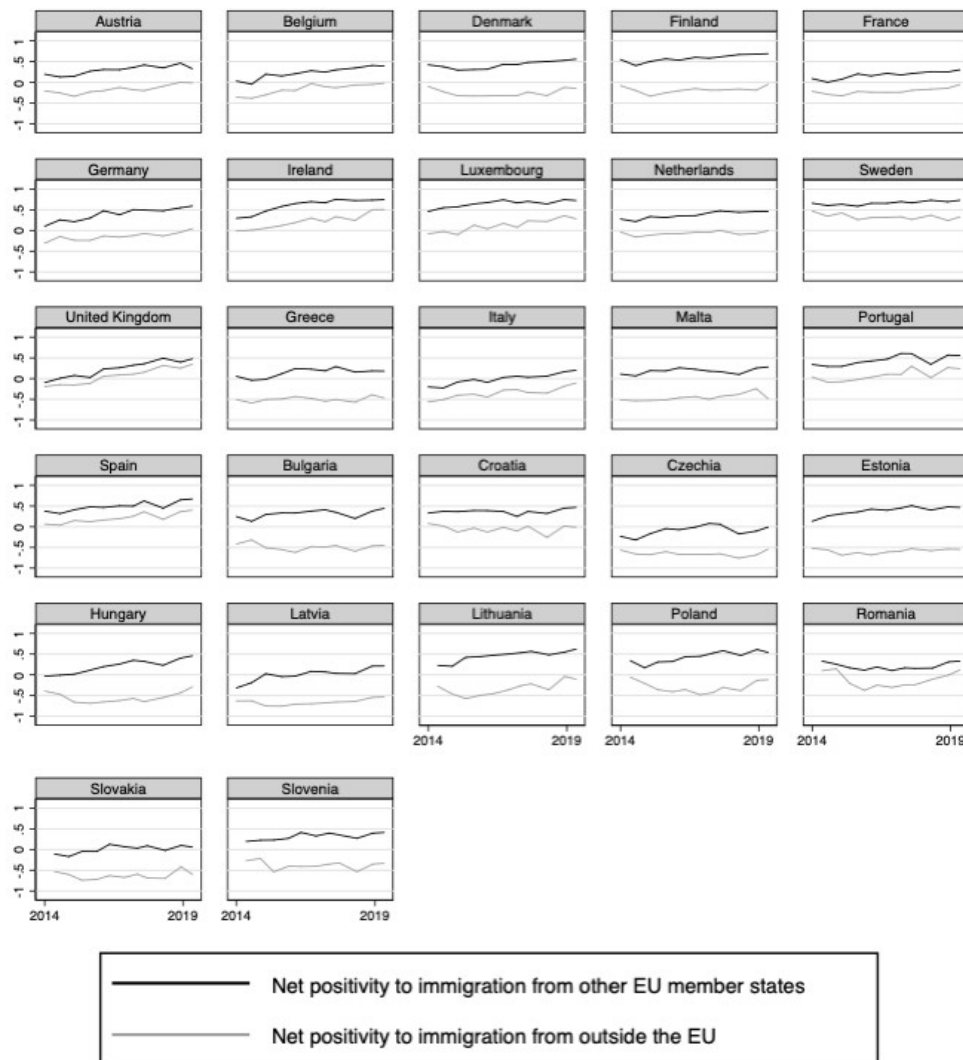
Source: OPAM, 2019:31.

We now look more closely at attitudes towards immigration across Europe. The most authoritative pan-European surveys – such as the European Social Survey (ESS) between 2002 and 2018 – show that attitudes towards all types of immigration in most European countries have become markedly more positive in recent years, or at least less negative, on a range of attitudinal types, including preferences to types of immigration, perceived effects of migration and desired migration policy. Figure 2 presents data from a separate source, the Eurobarometer survey, which reaches a similar conclusion when asking two questions with respect to the European Union (EU) since 2014: “Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you. Immigration of people from outside the EU/ other EU member states.” The face-to-face Eurobarometer survey has a multistage, random probability sample design, and is carried out twice yearly (and occasionally three times), with each survey having around 1,000 respondents in each of the 28 Member States.



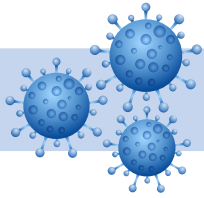
We group the Member States largely along regional lines – North-West Europe, Southern Europe and the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). As we can see, there has been a consistent and considerable increase in positivity towards both types of immigration in every Member State since 2014. Though in other surveys, such as the ESS, countries such as Hungary, Poland, Italy and Austria do not demonstrate such unequivocal increases, it is highly likely that positivity is increasing across most of Europe to most types of immigration, or at least negativity is falling.

Figure 2. Net positivity to immigration, respectively from within and outside of the European Union, by Member State 2014–2019



Notes: Net positivity is measured as the proportion answering “very negative” or “fairly negative” subtracted from the proportion answering “very positive” or “fairly positive” to the question “Please tell me whether each of the following statements evokes a positive or negative feeling for you. Immigration of people from outside the EU/other EU member states.”

Source: European Union, n.d.



Theoretically, this is surprising, because fundamental political attitudes, such as identifying as left- or right-wing, tend to be fairly stable across the life course,<sup>7</sup> and, at the aggregate level, across time.<sup>8</sup> What change there is often results from generational shifts, with the old dying and younger generations that were socialized in different contexts – particularly relevant, given the changes over recent generations in the heterogeneity of European societies – entering adulthood. However, attitudes towards immigration have been becoming more favourable so quickly that it seems unlikely to be *just* the result of a higher proportion of citizens who were socialized in heterogeneous contexts. It may be that people are *genuinely* changing their minds about immigration. This may be because the issue of immigration has been highly prominent and, as a result, new information has become widely available to citizens, allowing them to make more nuanced judgements. Alternatively, it could be the result of effective pro-migration strategic communication, in the wake of the initial growth of the radical right. As immigration rates fall and other issues are increasingly deemed more important, which as we explain in the next section is likely to happen, attitudes towards immigration are more likely to stabilize, or may even fall back into negativity.

### Issue salience

This does leave a puzzle: how can public attitudes towards immigration become increasingly positive during the same period that voting for the radical right has increased? A key reason for this is that the rise of the radical right was not driven by a broad backlash against immigration, but by heightened concern about the issue from those opposed to immigration, particularly during and after the 2015 “migration crisis”. This means that there can be opposition to immigration among specific and particular groups while, more generally, attitudes to immigration become more favourable.

As shown by Dennison and Geddes,<sup>9</sup> vote shares and opinion polling for the radical right has generally tracked the public issue salience of immigration, measured as the percentage of citizens listing the issue as one of the most important affecting their country. Dennison validated this relationship at the individual level; demonstrated a similar relationship regarding the salience of “Europe”; discounted the effects of most other issues; and also showed that the salience of immigration typically followed immigration rates.<sup>10</sup>

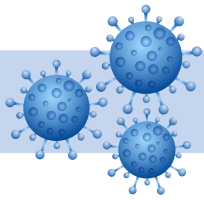
In figure 3, we present updated data regarding the salience of immigration, as well as two now-prescient issues, because of the COVID-19 pandemic: “health and social security” and “unemployment”. Since 2005, the Eurobarometer survey has asked a

7 See for example, Peterson et al., 2020.

8 Kustov et al., 2019.

9 Dennison and Geddes, 2018.

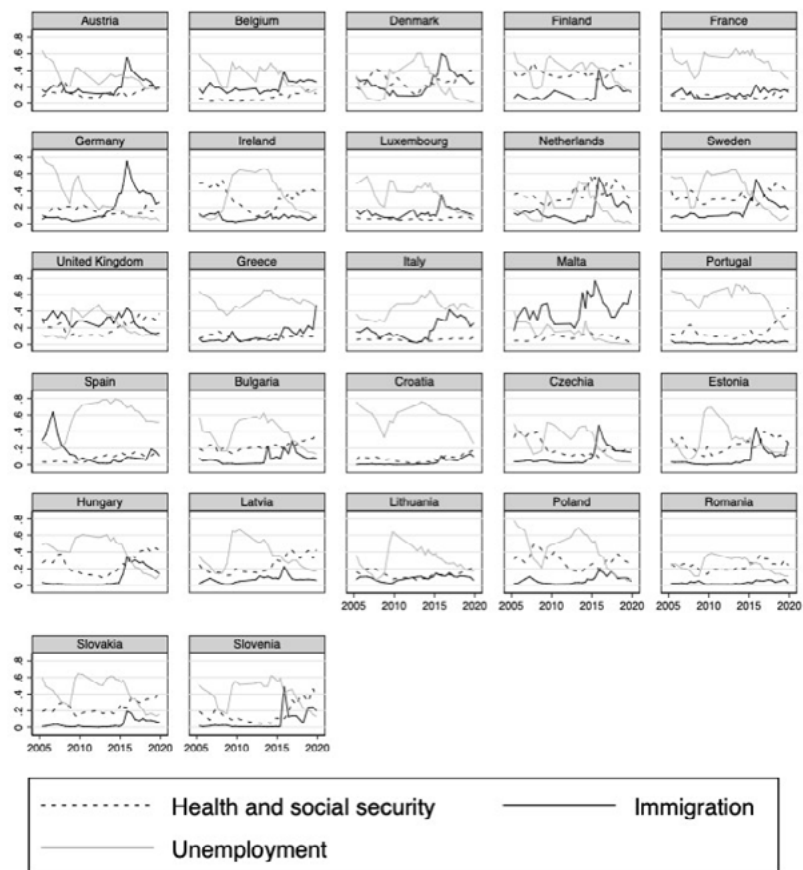
10 Dennison, 2019.



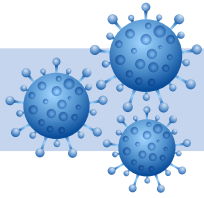
representative sample of every country in the European Union, “What do you think are the two most important issues affecting your country?” Respondents are offered around 14 responses, which have changed occasionally over time.

In North-West Europe, with the exception of Ireland and France, immigration reached a high peak of salience around the time of the so-called migration crisis in 2015 and 2016 and has only partially declined since. In Southern Europe, as well as France and Ireland, immigration was either entirely overshadowed by the salience of unemployment, as in Portugal, or, in the cases of Greece, Italy and Spain, emerged later. In the CEECs, there tended to be a notable uptick in the salience of immigration in 2015, albeit smaller than in North-West Europe and quickly declining. Overall, the relationship between the salience of unemployment and immigration is negative, so should the former increase, we can expect the salience of immigration to fall. Notably, in almost every Member State, the salience of “health and social security” had already been increasing rapidly since 2018, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, as both eurozone-crisis concerns about mass unemployment and post-“migration crisis” concerns fell.

Figure 3. Proportion of Europeans naming “health and social security”, “immigration” and “unemployment” as one of the two most important issues affecting their country, 2005–2019



Source: European Union, n.d.



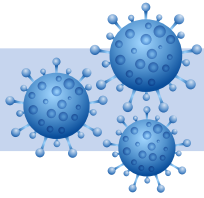
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, national polling has already shown the salience of immigration falling rapidly, replaced by health concerns. Furthermore, immigration rates are likely to remain lower than they were prior to the pandemic, further dampening the salience of the issue.

All that being said, the pandemic and responses to it mean that economic and welfare issues will dominate the political agenda for years to come. Even if governing parties are discredited on the issues of health or economics, there is little reason to think that citizens will turn first to the radical right to pick up the pieces. Unless European radical right parties can change tack fast, their future is highly contingent on just how long the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it dominate politics.

### **Conclusions**

Attitudes towards immigration in Europe have become more, not less favourable over the last 20 years. Even major shocks such as the 2008 financial crisis and the so-called migration crisis after 2015 did not lead to deviation from this important, long-term trend. What has changed and varied is issue salience, but the salience of the immigration issue has declined in Europe and is likely to decline further, given the need to focus on other priorities. Rather than intensifying the focus on immigration, we would expect to see “quieter” immigration politics.

It is important to understand attitudes as they are, as well as the key role played by issue salience in shaping political attention. Interventions – such as communications designed to flank innovations in policy and practice – should be attuned to attitudes as they are. It is unlikely, unrealistic and perhaps also vaguely sinister to think that peoples’ attitudes can or should be fundamentally changed. Rather, innovative communication is more likely to be effective by addressing attitudes as they are. For example, this means thinking about ways of communicating with people holding more conservative value orientations, who may be prepared to support immigration, but are not likely to be convinced by appeals made in progressive and cosmopolitan terms.



*Important disclaimer:* The opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IOM. The inclusion or presentation of material does not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of IOM, or of any of its members or partners.

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