

Towards a harmonization of European Statistics on International Migration

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Immigration and emigration flows measured in the European Union vary considerably from one country to another. But statistics are not always established in the same way, making comparisons difficult. Xavier Thierry explains that these variations reflect differences between countries in the definition of what constitutes an international migrant, and in the data sources used, i.e. surveys or administrative records.

How many migrants enter or leave the European Union each year? Where do they come from, and where do they go? There is no simple answer to these questions. Indeed, according to Eurostat, we do not know the number of entries (immigration flows) or departures (emigration flows) in 2005 for seven of the 27 EU member countries, including France. When figures do exist, they are not always reliable or comparable between countries. Yet it is difficult to devise and assess migration policies without accurate statistics [1].

◆ What is a migrant? A definition that varies between countries

There are three types of tool for observing international migration: population registers, residence permit records and statistical surveys. Census data are also sometimes used, though more rarely. Twenty of the 27 EU countries have a population register (1). These municipal records of births, deaths and changes of residence are constantly updated and should, in principle, provide a record of international migrant flows. All

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(1) The seven countries with no population register are Cyprus, France, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

persons entering the country to establish residence are required by law to register their arrival in the municipality of residence, and likewise to register their departure. But not all immigrants do so, however, and the registration rate varies according to the incentives provided and to national cultural traditions. In general, population registers provide a more accurate record of arrivals than of departures, and of foreign migrants than of native ones. France, on the other hand, uses immigration data from administrative sources (Box), while the United Kingdom conducts surveys at the national borders, which are adjusted using administrative data to correct for the small sample size [2].

Alongside the variety of tools employed, the very definition of an international migrant differs between countries. The same is true for immigration and emigration flows, and for flows of nationals and foreigners, including EU citizens. An immigrant is any individual who takes up usual residence in a new host country. The term does not apply to persons visiting a country for leisure or work-related reasons. In some countries, certain categories of new residents whose presence is deemed temporary or uncertain are also excluded. This is practically always the case for undocumented foreigners, who are not counted directly, it is frequently the case for asylum seekers, who are not considered as immigrants until their application

has been accepted, and more rarely for students. French inflow statistics sent by the national statistical office (INSEE) to Eurostat only cover non-EU nationals, and exclude those who are in these three categories (Table).

In most countries, foreign entrants are required to register if their stay exceeds a minimum period, which varies in length between countries. It is one year in the UK and Sweden for example, six months in Italy and the Netherlands, and three months in Belgium and

Austria. In Germany and Spain, immigrants are counted as such from the first few days of residence, so the number recorded is larger. In Poland, it is not the length of stay which counts, but whether or not the entrant is recorded in the municipal register as a permanent resident permit holder. In France, the figures on the number of immigrants sent to Eurostat are based on reason for admission and not on length of stay [3], though the relevant data are available (Box), and INED regularly produces statistics of this type [4].

Table – International migration statistics sent by national statistical offices to Eurostat for the year 2005 (7 most populated EU countries)

	Population (early 2005) (millions)	Entries ⁽¹⁾ (immigrants) (thousands)	Departures ⁽¹⁾ (emigrants) (thousands)	Main information source	Length of stay requirement	Main immigrant categories included			Specific immigrant categories that may be included			
						French nationals	Foreign nationals		Asylum seekers	Undocumented foreigners ⁽²⁾	Students	
							From an EU country	From a third country				
Germany	80.5	707	628	Population register	No requirement	•	•	•	•		•	
France	60.6	135 ⁽⁴⁾	- ⁽⁵⁾	Medical examination (ANAEM ⁽⁶⁾)	No length of stay requirement, but reason for admission ⁽⁷⁾			•				
United Kingdom	59.9	496	328	Border survey	At least one year	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Italy	58.5	326	65	Population register	Variable ⁽⁸⁾	•	•	•			•	
Spain	43.0	719	68	Population register	No requirement ⁽⁹⁾	•	•	•	•	•	•	
Poland	38.2	9	22	Population register	No length of stay requirement, but reason for admission ⁽⁹⁾	•	•	•				
Netherlands	16.3	92	83	Population register	At least 6 months	•	•	•	• ⁽¹⁰⁾		•	

(1) These statistics are not comparable between countries since the categories of individuals counted as immigrants or emigrants and the information sources used for registration differ from one country to another.

(2) Non-EU foreigners who obtain refugee status or who are later regularized are subsequently counted in the immigrant flow.

(3) Migrants are counted whatever their length of stay.

(4) Using the international definition of a migrant (length of stay at least one year, all reasons for admission and all nationalities, including European and French nationals) the immigration flow estimated by INED is 254,000 (Box).

(5) INSEE supplies a figure to Eurostat for entries but not for departures (see Box).

(6) Agence nationale de l'accueil des étrangers et des migrations (National Agency for the Reception of Foreigners and Migration).

(7) Since length of stay is not recorded during the medical examination, the reason for admission is the criterion currently used.

(8) The length of stay requirement is different for entries and departures, and varies by migrant's nationality. It is at least six months for non-EU entrants, and there is no requirement for other entrants.

(9) Migrants are counted according to their reason for admission. Only persons with a permanent residence permit are counted.

(10) Asylum seekers are counted after six months of residence.

◆ Ongoing harmonization under the aegis of the United Nations and the European Union

For many years, the OECD and the United Nations have been seeking to harmonize the statistics produced [5]. In their latest recommendations, published in 1998, the United Nations propose that all entrants whose period of residence is at least one year be counted as long-term migrants, whatever their reason for admission. Faced with the slow pace of

progress in implementing these recommendations, the European Union issued a regulation in 2007 which is applicable to all member countries (2). It is based on the United Nations criterion, i.e. a period of residence of at least one year (3).

(2) Regulation (EC) No. 862/2007 of 11 July 2007 on community statistics on migration and international protection.

(3) The United Nations recommendations introduce the concept of *short-term* migrant for periods of stay between three months and one year, though this was not included in the regulation.

Measuring international migration flows in France

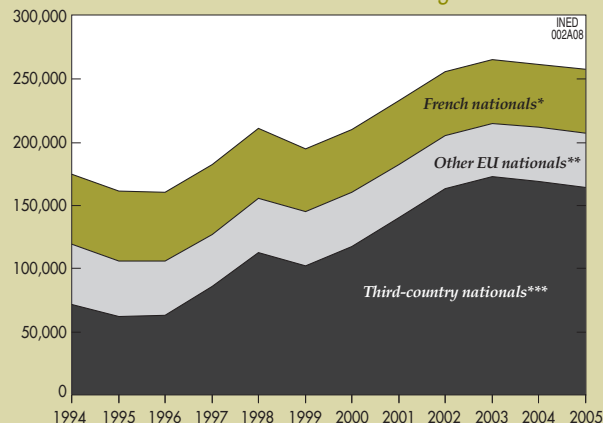
Various bodies produce international migration statistics in France, but they are incomplete, as they concern foreign entrants only, and ignore departures of foreigners and movements of French nationals. Three types of data are available for measuring foreign immigration: obligatory medical examinations at the *Agence nationale de l'accueil des étrangers et des migrations* (national agency for reception of foreigners and migration, ANAEM), asylum applications received by the *Office français de protection des réfugiés et des apatrides* (office for protection of refugees and stateless persons, OFPRA) and the records of residence permits granted by local government authorities (*préfecture*). The statistics supplied by France to Eurostat are based on the figures of the ANAEM and OFPRA, which cover entries of non-EU nationals only (as do residence permit records since 2004) (Table) [3]. Entries of temporary or seasonal workers, asylum seekers and students are not included. INED, for its part, uses residence permit records to produce more exhaustive statistics based on length of residence (at least one year). It also estimates entries of EU nationals. The method, applied since 2000, involves counting the number of foreign nationals obtaining for the first time a residence permit of at least one year, in accordance with international recommendations. As a result, certain students are also included in the count. However, as foreigners with a one-year residence permit may leave before their permit expires, entry flows have been recalculated on the basis of an effective presence of one year, confirming the results obtained with the method based on one-year permits [4]. This statistic has been determined on a consistent basis since 1994 and can be used to track changes since that date. In 2005, the number of foreign immigrants to France was 208,000 (including 40,000 EU-15 nationals), compared with 120,000 in 1994 (Figure 2).

The census also provides two sets of data which can be used to study migration: the year of arrival in France (excluding overseas territories) of all foreign-born persons, and the country of residence on a previous date for all residents, including those born in France.

Since the introduction of an annual census survey in 2004, the first question provides, in theory, an annual means to count the foreign nationals who arrived during the previous year. However, for a variety of reasons, their numbers are under-estimated in these surveys. The most useful information obtained from the census concerns the characteristics of new entrants, notably their family situation, employment status and educational level. These characteristics tend to be reported more accurately in the census than in residence permit applications. Conversely, records of residence permits granted provide more reliable information on the number of authorized entrants, since it is in the interest of all foreign nationals to obtain a permit.

The previous country of residence reported in the census can be used to estimate the number of native French people returning to France or entering for the first time (i.e. French citizens born abroad), information not provided by residence permit records.

Figure 2 – Immigration flows to metropolitan France based on the international definition of migrant



* Flows of French nationals are based on census data (INSEE).

** Flows of EU and Swiss nationals are estimated for the years 2004-2005 (INED).

*** Flows of third-country immigrants by nationality are available on the INED website (www.ined.fr).

(X. Thierry, *Population & Societies*, 442, INED, February 2008)

In the 1999 census, 500,000 persons reported living abroad in 1990, implying an annual average of 55,000 "entries" (1). The same calculation, based on an annual census survey, gives a slightly lower figure (46,000) for the years 1999-2003. Failing more precise data, these are the figures added to the number of third-country entrants. Thus, the immigrant flow in 2005 is estimated at 254,000 persons (2). This new estimation is much higher than the non-exhaustive figure of 135,000 given in the table habitually used for international comparisons.

The number of emigrants is difficult to estimate due to the lack of statistical sources, be it on departing French nationals or on foreigners leaving the country after a period of legal residence. Various solutions could be tested in the short term to satisfy the requirements of the European regulation and to give more credit to the annual estimate of net migration [6]. The French national health insurance files would be a potential source of data [7]. To estimate departures indirectly, one solution might be to conduct a periodic survey of the population residing in France, with questions on close relatives who have gone to live abroad. It would be inexpensive if associated with an annual census survey. Covering a large population sample, it would provide the most effective tool for counting the number of departures, thought to be relatively low in France.

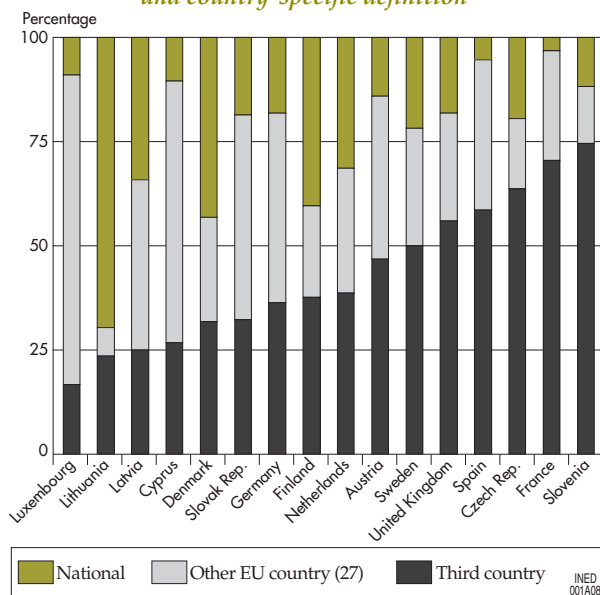
(1) This is a minimum estimate, since it does not include the most mobile individuals (those who arrived and then left, or those who left and came back within the nine-year interval), or those who acquired French nationality abroad then came to France.

(2) Including 165,000 non-EU third-country nationals, i.e. 65%.

It also specifies that statistics must be supplied for all migration flows, be it entries or departures, be it third-country or European nationals (including nationals of the country concerned), and be it for whatever reason (family formation or reunion, work, study, asylum, etc.).

The European regulation is simply a first stage in the harmonization process, representing a compromise document that takes account of both administrative constraints and national interests. It does not interfere with the traditional statistical practices of each country for recording international migration or changes of residence in general. In particular, the countries which currently do not have a population register are not required to create one. However, the obligation to supply comprehensive statistics should lead to improved administrative record-keeping and easier access to data for statisticians while promoting the development of new observation systems.

Figure 1 – Breakdown of immigrants in 2005 by nationality group and country-specific definition



(X. Thierry, *Population & Societies*, 442, INED, February 2008)

Source : Eurostat, except for France (estimation INED)

◆ Can migration flow statistics be compared?

With the statistics currently available, the breakdown of immigration flows by major groups of countries of citizenship is only possible for 16 countries out of 27 (Figure 1). The number of third-country immigrants exceeds that of EU-27 immigrants (including nationals) in only 5 countries, including France, where almost two-thirds of entrants in 2005 were third-country immigrants (Box).

Yet the migration flows from different countries are not truly comparable. For example, the difference between flows to Germany (707,000) and the United Kingdom (496,000) is probably smaller than it appears, since the former country has a much broader statistical

definition of immigration than the latter (Table). A comparison between France and neighbouring countries based on incomplete data supplied to Eurostat for France (135,000) would be meaningless, since the other countries provide complete data on all immigrants. A more exhaustive estimate, in compliance with international recommendations (resulting in an estimated flow of 254,000) reduces the gap between countries, but does not place France ahead of Italy (326,000), much less Spain (719,000). It is nonetheless difficult to draw categorical conclusions on the respective situations of countries with different definitions of the term immigrant.

The poor quality of migration statistics is an obstacle to comprehension and to political action. To ensure that the new European regulation serves its purpose, national governments will need to reform their administrative and statistical rules. Major changes are awaited in France.

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ABSTRACT

The immigration and emigration statistics of the different European Union countries are difficult to compare. Each has its own definition of an international migrant, sometimes including asylum seekers and students, for example, and sometimes not. The minimum length of stay also varies, ranging for just a few days in Germany and Spain to one year in the United Kingdom and Sweden. The data sources differ likewise. Countries with population registers rely mainly on this source, while those with no register make use of other tools, such as border surveys in the United Kingdom, administrative records of medical examinations or of residence permits in France. To improve the comparability of statistics, the European Union has issued a regulation recommending that countries count all migrants whose length of stay is at least one year, whatever their reason for admission.