

## THE IMPACT OF RECENT CRISES ON INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

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**Abstract.** *Actuality: International migration is an integral part of the global economy. Growing disparities in development, the segmentation of labour markets, the global jobs crisis revolutions in transportation and telecommunications, are some of the factors that have generated, worldwide, an unprecedented number of migrants (in 2020: almost 300 million, of which 169 million are migrant workers and who remitted over 702 billion USD). The economic-financial crisis and Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on migration patterns and processes around the world. Globally, there was a reduction in migration flows, which also led to a slowdown in the growth rate of remittances. Purpose: Comparative analysis of the effects of the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the Covid-9 pandemic on the size and structure of international migrant flows in major regions of the world, at EU level and in Romania. Method: The descriptive statistical analysis was used mainly for visualising and synthesising information deducted from data regarding the international migration. The classification analysis was used in defining a typology of the size and structure of migratory flows, and the factorial analysis was used in creating some indices to compare the effects of crises on the structure and size of migratory flows. Results: realising a comparative analysis of the economic and social effects of recent crises on the structure and size of migratory flows, both at the EU and national level.*

**Keywords:** migration, great recession, health crisis, structure and size of migratory flows, impact

**JEL:** F22, G01, K37, O15

**UDC:** 314.15+338.124.4

**Introduction.** The Report for 2003 of the International Labour Organization stated that: “No country of the world remains unaffected by international migration flows. They are all either countries of origin, transit or destination for migrants, or all three simultaneously. Like other flows, whether financial, commercial, or flows of information or ideas, the rising tide of people crossing frontiers is among the most reliable indicators of the intensity of globalization.”

Migration is the essential and inevitable component of economic and social growth, for the benefit of both the individual and the society.

Migration is multidimensional and complex and includes: labour migration as the main component of migration flows in the 21st century, family reunification, migration and security, combating unregulated migration, migration and trade, rights of migrant workers, health and migration, integration, migration and development.

The OECD Report for 2010 on international migration highlights the fact that in 2008, the group of the most important source-countries remained relatively stable, having geographic proximity as a decisive factor for choosing the country of destination both in Europe as well as beyond its borders. Likewise, the same report indicates the fact that in 2008, migration dropped by 6%, thus recording the first year of decline in terms of migration phenomenon, after 5 years of an average growth of 11%.

Nevertheless, Europe registered a significant change with respect to origin countries, with consideration of migratory flows intensification from the Eastern European countries that became members of the European Union.

Spain, the Czech Republic, Italy and Ireland registered the highest migratory flows drops (approximately 25%), while Denmark, and Portugal registered growths of over 40%.

The 2008 migration decline was noticed in particular in terms of free movement and in the field of discretionary labour migration, which dropped by 21% and 7%, respectively. Year 2009 was characterized by the accelerated decline in relation to labour force migration and by a slight growth of over 3% of family migration.

With respect to temporal migration, it dropped, thus the number of workers that entered the OECD countries dropped in 2008 by approximately 4.2% compared to 2007, while over 2003-2007, on average, the growth was 7%.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, the states faced an exceptional public health challenge, which forced them to take increasingly stricter measures. In this context, the management of migratory movements has become increasingly complex thus leading to the need to adopt measures to ensure that migrants are not disproportionately affected, either by the pandemic itself, or by the various measures legitimately adopted by states to address it.

While the long-term consequences of COVID-19 pandemic on the structure and size of migratory flows are difficult to predict, the immediate impacts are already visible, for example, when the processing of visa and residence permit applications has in many cases been impeded or suspended, with consequences for those migrants who were already in the country. Also, the sharp slowdown of the economic activity had a strong impact in many sectors of activity, with negative effects both on the workers who were already experiencing unemployment or low incomes, as well as on migrant workers in terms of renewal and/or maintenance of work and residence permits.

In addition, migrants may be differently affected by the direct and indirect economic consequences of business disruptions due to COVID-19 pandemic, as companies are more reluctant to have temporary contracts in place, they tend to be concentrated in sectors more sensitive to business cycle fluctuations (constructions, retail services).

**The impact of crises upon the migration phenomenon.** The economic and health crisis effects upon migration are complex and difficult to quantify, because:

- there are different migration forms, some migrant categories are allowed access with labour purpose, while others are allowed for family reunion, or as applicants for asylum. In the countries where the migrants number is tightly related to the family reunion and to humanitarian criteria, the impact of an economic crisis upon migration can be lower than in the countries where the main form of migration is the economic migration;
- the countries where labour force migration is significant, the crisis effects vary according to migrants' profiles and their economic positions. Thus, in certain countries the migrant workers can be more concentrated in sectors (for example the construction and services sector) that are more vulnerable to the crisis effects than other sectors;
- the migrant types may represent an important variable, given that a significant percentage of female workers is concentrated in sectors less affected by the crisis (i.e.: healthcare and social assistance services);
- the unemployment rates among migrants may be significantly high especially in the countries where there is a high percentage of migrants aged up to 25, thus reflecting in fact the difficulties encountered by the young in finding jobs over recession periods;
- the number of illegal migrants (difficult to quantify or monitor) may be influenced by the economic/health crisis. It is possible that illegal migration registers an increase over crisis periods because the unemployed in the poorer countries seek for jobs abroad;
- the economic crisis may affect the relations between the host country and the migrants, including the relations with the origin country. Over the economic crisis periods, the attitude of the host country towards the migrants may be influenced by preconceptions if the migrants are considered to occupy the jobs of the local workers. In the origin countries where the money remittances represent an important percentage of the gross domestic product, a drop of remittances and an unorganized growth of voluntary repatriations may have a devastating effect upon the conditions of life;
- what is specific to the health crisis is that the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and labour mobility manifests as three interdependent crises:
  - ◆ *a health crisis*: people on the move have limited tools to protect themselves against this virus (living or working conditions, often poor or crowded, limited/no access to health services due to legal, linguistic, cultural or other different barriers);
  - ◆ *a socio-economic crisis* affecting migrants with poor livelihoods, in particular those working in the informal economy without access or with limited access to social protection measures;
  - ◆ *a protection crisis*: closing borders or other movement restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19 have a severe impact on the rights of many people on the move who may be in deeply dangerous situations.

Over 2001-2008, the foreign nationals population in the EU member states-27 was up by 9.5 million, from 4.5% to 6.2% from the total EU population.

The majority of foreign citizens living in the EU still consists in those coming from outside the EU, although their share in the total foreign population in the EU decreased from 66% in 2001 to 63% in 2008. In 2008, 37% of the foreign citizens living in the EU-27 were citizens of other EU Member States, with the most significant increases recorded in Ireland, Spain and Cyprus. Thus, the percentage of foreigners from the population over 2001-2008 grew from 3.9% to 12.6% in Ireland; in Spain, it grew from 2% to 11.6%, and in Cyprus, the figures went up from 8.8% up to 15.9%.

The percentage of foreign nationals from the total of the population also grew in other EU-27 member states, such as Romania, France, Slovenia, Lithuania, Greece, Portugal and Italy. Nevertheless, the rising number of foreign immigrants in these countries was mainly owed to the growth in number of the immigrants from outside the EU. 75% of the total number of foreigners in the EU-27 live in five countries: Germany, Spain, United Kingdom, France and Italy.

According to data from the World Migration Report (2020), the number of *international migrants* in mid-2019 was estimated at around 271.64 million people (including refugees and asylum seekers). The latest available estimates indicate that in 2017 there were about 164 million *migrant workers* worldwide, representing 64% of total migrants worldwide in the same year. The differences in the definition of labour migrants, the methodological changes in the data collection and processing, and the source of data cause the figures relating to this category of migrants to be underestimated (Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers, 2018).

Conflicts and natural disasters triggered 33.4 million new internal displacements in 145 countries and territories in 2019: 8.5 million people due to conflict and violence and 24.9 million people have left their places of origin due to natural disasters.

*The global refugee population* amounted to 25.9 million people at the end of 2018 and was at the highest level ever recorded. Of these, 84% are in countries located around their countries of origin.

People on the move in vulnerable situations are particularly exposed to the COVID-19's impact on health. Many live or work in crowded or unhealthy conditions where COVID-19 can spread easily. Their access to health can be compromised, given that access to health services or other basic services (housing, water and sanitation, food, social services and education, social protection) is limited or lacking.

***Changes in the structure and size of migratory flows during the crisis period of the early 21st century.*** The European statistics indicate the fact that the **number of immigrants** registered slower growths, or, in some cases, significant drops over the economic crisis period, especially in the case of the EU member states where the main migration flow consists in the labour force migration:

- the number of residence permits issued in Spain grew by only 7% over 2008-2009, compared to 13 % in 2007;
- the net migration in the United Kingdom amounted to 118000 at the end of 2008, by 44% lower than at the end of 2007;

- the net migration in Italy was 21% lower than over the first nine months of 2009, compared to the same period of the previous year;
- The immigrant flow to Belgium has increased from 101872 in 2006 to 109926 in 2008.
- immigration flows have been slower or even declining in Latvia;
- in Austria, the residence permits requests filed in by the qualified migrants dropped by 37% in 2009.

Even though drops of migratory flows were registered, the net migration remained positive in many of the main countries that recruit labour force in the EU, thus suggesting that the immigration flows continued, even though they were slower over the economic crisis period. Therefore, the economic crisis has not led employers to abandon recruitment altogether, with employment in certain economic sectors (e.g. in the UK, the education sector and the National Health Service continued to recruit migrant workers).

The labour force market fluctuations over the considered period led to the increase of the number of repatriated migrants. However, this phenomenon is characteristic to the European Union migrants. The migrants coming from outside the EU prefer to remain where they are than to come back to their origin country, due to the fact that their return may lead to complications both from an economic as well as a social viewpoint. Likewise, the return in the EU after the end of the crisis period may be even more complicated as regards the restrictions on visas and/or labour permits.

The statistic data upon migration within the European Union highlighted a change of the migrant structure by sexes. Thus, over 2008-2009, in Italy and Ireland more women migrated than men. This phenomenon may be associated with the decrease of men employment possibilities in sectors affected by the crisis (constructions, for example).

As regards illegal migration over the economic and financial downturn period, the European statistics do not hold convincing proof upon the real evolution of this phenomenon.

The General Report for 2009 of the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the European Union Member States (Frontex) indicates that in 2009, the EU member states and the countries signatories of the Schengen Treaty reported a total number of 106,200 recordings of illegal border trespassing at the EU external borders. This accounts for a 33% drop compared to 2008 and refers to drops reported at the level of maritime borders (-23%) and of terrestrial borders (-43%).

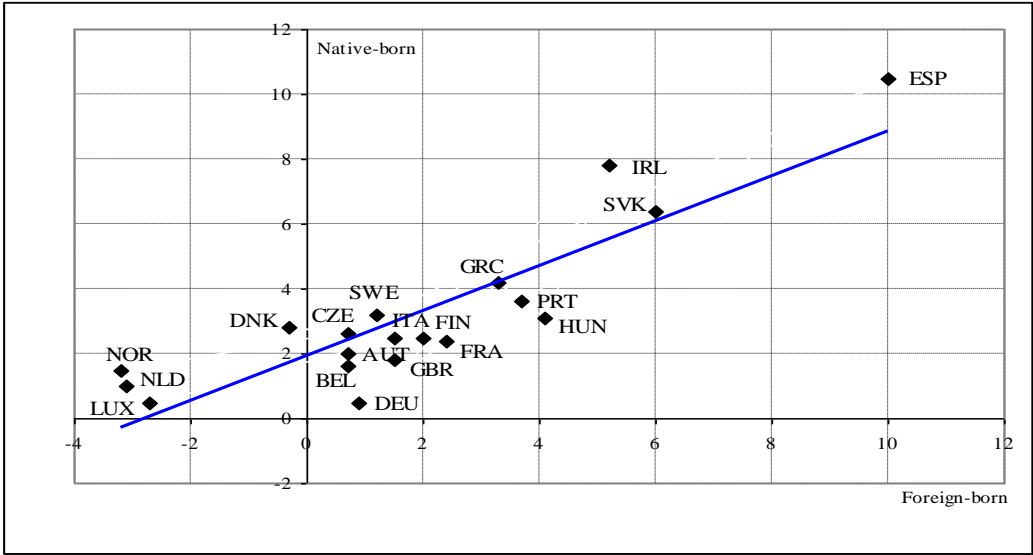
If prior to the economic and financial crisis's debut, the labour force occupancy rate at the level of the EU was nearly 70%, in 2009 it dropped to 64.6%. The unemployment rate went down to 7% in 2008, but it grew to 8.9% in 2009 according to Eurostat.

In this context, the employment of migrant workers deteriorated over 2008-2009. Between 2008 and 2009, migrants were among the first to be laid off in most EU countries. In the European Union, the migrant workers' occupancy rate deteriorated in 2008 and slightly improved in 2009.

In the European Union, there were countries where the migrant workers' occupancy rate was higher than that of natives. Thus, in Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxemburg, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain (only in 2008), the migrant workers' occupancy rates were higher by up to 9.6 percent (in Luxemburg) compared to the ones of native workers. Even though in most of these countries in 2009 the differences between the migrant workers and native worker's occupancy rates went down, in Hungary the difference went up to 10.3 percent in favour of the migrant workers.

As regards unemployment rate, according to Eurostat, it grew at the EU-27 level from 7% in 2008 to 8.9% in 2010.

Unemployment rate among native citizens was, in most of the analysed countries, lower than among migrants. The OECD statistics (International Migration Outlook, SOPEMI 2010) show that in Norway and the Netherlands, in 2008, unemployment rate among foreign citizens was slightly under the unemployment rate among native citizens, and in Hungary they were equivalent. Year 2009 is characterised, however, from the unemployment rate viewpoint, by its increase both among native citizens, as well as among foreign citizens. The only countries where a drop of the unemployment rate was registered among the native citizens in 2009 compared to 2008 are: Denmark (by 0.3%), the Netherlands (by 3.1%), Luxemburg (by 2.7%) and Norway (by 3.2%) (Fig. 1).



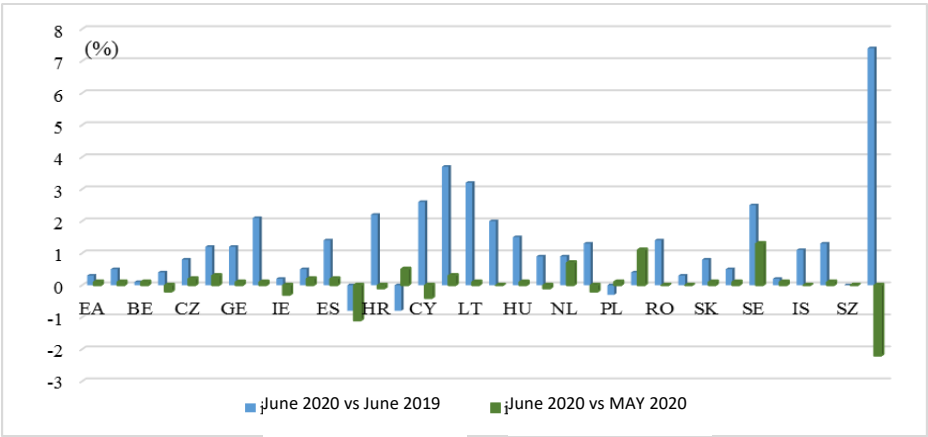
**Figure 1. Change in unemployment by place of birth between 2008 and 2009**  
*Source: International Migration Outlook, SOPEMI 2010, OECD.*

The major increase of the unemployment rate among migrants in some European Union member states may be determined by several factors. One of them is the relative concentration of migrants in the sectors that are very sensitive to the economic cycle.

The data provided by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) Technical Report, the European Commission's Science and Knowledge Service, indicate that the share of EU or non-EU migrant workers in total employment differs depending on the key

occupations separating low and high-skilled professions. Thus, migrant workers account for 13% of the workers in key areas in the EU (Fasani and Mazza, 2020), with the highest percentage of migrant workers occupying jobs requiring low qualifications: cleaning workers and janitors (38%), mining and construction workers (23%), drivers and mobile installation operators (20%) and domestic workers and caregivers (19%). In higher education professions, the share of migrants varies between 8% among education professionals and 14% among IT&C professionals.

Given that, in June 2020, the month in which the measures to be imposed to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic began to be phased out in most Member States, the unemployment rate continued to rise, reaching 7.1% at EU level. The comparative analysis of the unemployment rate in EU countries from June 2020 to June 2019 shows that only France, Poland and Italy registered lower values (Figure 2), while the analysis of the unemployment rate evolution in June 2020 as compared to May of the same year indicates a slight increase of this indicator in many countries in Europe, except for Bulgaria, Ireland, France, Croatia, Cyprus, Malta, Austria and the USA (Fig. 2), where a slight reduction in the number of the unemployed was noted.



**Figure 2. The gap between the unemployment rate of June 2020 and June 2019 and May 2020, respectively**

Source: Unemployment statistics, Eurostat, [www.eu.europa.eu](http://www.eu.europa.eu).

**Young migrants** are exposed to greater risks, because they are seldom less qualified than the native young and they may become victims of discriminatory employments. During the economic and financial downturn in Ireland, for example, the occupancy rate of emigrants with the age comprised between 15-24 dropped by 15 percentage points, twice the one of the native young. Even though in some countries the differences are smaller, young immigrants are still confronting with the difficulties of the labour force market compared to the native young (for example, in Denmark, Spain or United Kingdom). The situation was more balanced in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway. Since 2009, the unemployment rate of young people of foreign origin grew, with record levels in Spain and Sweden, of 40.8% and 35.7% respectively.

Worldwide, in 2019, there were about 1.273 billion young people aged between 15 and 24. Of these, about 429 million young people were employed, 68 million were unemployed, 507 million young people were enrolled in the education system and 267 million in the NEET category. In this context, young people in general and migrants in particular become even more vulnerable under the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, in June 2020, 2.962 million young people (under 25) were unemployed in the EU, raising the youth unemployment rate to 16.8%, up from 16.2% in the previous month.

Following the economic downturn, some migrant workers, in order to avoid long unemployment periods, turned to sectors that were less affected by the downturn or they chose to perform independent activities. This way, from the data provided by Instituto Nacional de Estadística in Spain the percentage of migrant labour force in agriculture and services grew by 15% in 2009 compared to the previous year. In the Czech Republic, the labour force occupancy offices received requests for employment in agriculture (1688 persons) and in the services sector (1020 persons). Likewise, the number of requests for the authorisation of independent activities increased (from almost 77,500 in 2007 to approx. 88,000 in 2009), authorisations that confer the migrants the residence right, without the need of requiring a labour permit. In their greatest part, these requests were submitted by the migrants outside the European Union.

The number of individual enterprises held by foreign nationals from outside the European Union also grew in Italy in 2009 by approx. 15,100 compared to 2007 (data provided by Instituto Nacional de Estadística).

At EU level, workers on temporary contracts account for 11% of all people employed in 2019, a share that varies widely between member states: it is close to zero in Eastern countries such as Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Romania, and over 20% in Spain. These were the most affected by the measures adopted following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The socio-economic consequences of the economic and health crises have particularly affected those *migrant workers and refugees from the informal economy* with low wages, where decent work and social protection measures are excluded.

This phenomenon is particularly widespread in agriculture and rural sectors, where over 80% of the employees on account are informal, as well as all family workers (where women are overrepresented). According to the International Organization for Migration (World Migration Report, 2018), in developing countries, over 90% of agricultural workers are informal. They are already among the poorest workers and are often employed seasonally, occasionally or temporarily, making them even more vulnerable to economic shocks brought about by economic/health crises.

Assessing the impact of the economic and health crisis on the structure and size of migratory flows in the EU-27 Member States is difficult because data on the stock of migrants on their territory have not yet been published in many countries. Also, even if the number of foreigners has declined across the European Union, these changes can hardly be attributed to the economic or health crisis, given that there are other factors that can lead to changes in the stock of foreign citizens, such



as the number of births, deaths, the level of immigration and emigration, as well as the acquisition of citizenship.

**Conclusions.** The data available up to the present moment indicate the fact that the economic and health crisis had a significant impact upon migration and upon migrants in Europe, and its effects are not the same in all countries.

The analysis of migration data published by various international bodies in the field has allowed several conclusions to be drawn:

- the economic and financial downturn determined the drop of foreign nationals in the EU-27 member states;
- over the economic downturn period, the immigrants number registered slower growths, or, in some cases, serious drops;
- over 2008-2009, in certain countries, the emigrants number grew, but not necessarily to the same extent in which the number of immigrants dropped;
- under the downturn impact, the migrants labour force market varied and still varies depending on the country. The major growth of the unemployment rate among migrants in some EU member states may be also determined by other factors, different from the economic crisis (for example, the relative concentration of migrants in the economic sectors that are very sensitive to the economic cycle, or birth rate, death rate, obtainment of citizenship etc.);
- the structure by sex of the migrant labour force was affected by the downturn;
- the global medical crisis has had a disproportionate impact on migrants, depending on their vulnerability. This is determined by several factors: the legal status in the host country, the sector of activity, the type of employment contract they were able to sign with their employer until the pandemic, the eligibility of migrants and the existing procedures for obtaining support over the pandemic period;
- the category most affected by this crisis is that of migrants without formal employment contracts, who, from the first day of quarantine, remained unemployed with no source of income, without access to unemployment or social benefits provided by host countries during the crisis for legally-established migrant citizens and workers (except for Ireland);
- for other categories of migrants, the suspension of their professional activity has led to a sharp drop of incomes. In this context, many of the migrants have identified several possible ways of survival in the medium and long term, namely: either the (temporary) change of the sector of activity to one less affected by the pandemic, the change of the host country and the reorientation to a country where there is a higher demand for the skills held by the migrant, or the return home.

The two crises of the early 21st century had significant implications for migrants, migration and migration policy. At the same time, their very different global/European/national context and circumstances mean that it can be difficult to directly apply the lessons drawn from these previous crises on the verge of a new crisis.

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