



# REMINDER

ROLE OF EUROPEAN MOBILITY AND ITS IMPACTS  
IN NARRATIVES, DEBATES AND EU REFORMS

## D10.6: A Summary of Findings on Perceptions of EU And Non-EU Immigrants' Welfare Impacts

REPORT

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## **Deliverable 10.6: A Summary of Findings on Perceptions of EU And Non-EU Immigrants' Welfare Impacts**

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## Abstract

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Consequences can be severe for the future of the European Union when large portions of the population of a given Member State perceive immigration as harmful to the welfare state. Work Package 10 has provided an in-depth analysis of the various factors that determine these perceptions. We have showed that most people do not differentiate significantly between EU/non-EU or European/ non-European inflows (Blinder and Markaki 2018a; 2018b; 2019a), or their impacts (Markaki and Blinder 2019b). While identification with the EU helps explain preference for EU mobility over other inflows, subnational (racial and religious) identities are associated with a preference for European migrants over non-Europeans, but not with specific support for intra-EU movement. We also find that citizens' evaluations of the welfare effects of immigration do not reflect the realities of these impacts on national welfare states as much as expected (Markaki and Blinder 2019a). Perceptions of immigrants as net burdens more closely reflect differences in the demographic size of welfare recipients who are foreign born, rather than differences in their actual welfare costs or contributions in taxes. When analysing individual-level determinants of misperceptions, we found that respondents with higher levels of general political sophistication are more likely to view EU immigrants' welfare receipts in a positive light (Blinder and Markaki 2019b). However, higher political sophistication appears to work differently for people across the left-right ideological spectrum. Rather than converging towards the most accurate or moderate opinions, those with higher levels of political sophistication exhibit more entrenched views that lean further towards the extreme sides of impact evaluation (very positive/very negative).

## Introduction

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This document serves as a summary of research findings and key conclusions of Work Package 10. Our team examined people’s perceptions of the effects of international migration on national welfare programs. We aimed to ascertain which population groups and regions of the EU may be most susceptible to mobilisation by political actors campaigning for more restrictive welfare programs, who may use opposition to EU mobility to gain partisan support.

The report is organised in five sections, each corresponding to a project output. The first section takes a broad view across countries and over time to explore descriptive variation in Europeans’ perceptions of immigration and its impacts on welfare. The second identifies and attempts to explain the attitudes of “EU-only inclusionists”: EU nationals who support high levels of immigration, but only from within the EU. The third section compares public perceptions and realities of the total net fiscal impacts from immigration across 28 countries between 2002 and 2014. The fourth explores to what extent Europeans think that EU immigrants receive more in welfare benefits than the native-born, and whether perceptions are more positive or negative when it comes to EU or non-EU immigrants. The fifth section examines whether political sophistication and knowledge of EU institutions or ideological predispositions are more defining for evaluations of EU immigrants’ take-up in welfare benefits.

Our empirical approach relies on the statistical analysis of individual level survey and country-level data. We draw on a variety of sources for the databases in order to provide comparisons over time for most — if not all — EU/EEA/EFTA member states. For individual level data we include multiple rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS-2002/ESS-2008/ESS-2014), the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS-2012), and survey data across seven EU countries newly collected by Work Package 9 of the REMINDER project (Meltzer et al. 2019). For country-level data we also draw on population and welfare impact indicators from other REMINDER project teams (Nyman and Ahlskog 2018; Marchand et al. 2019).

## 1. Intra-EU vs. non- EU welfare impact perceptions across countries and time

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How do EU citizens view intra-EU mobility? Do they see it as a contributor or a drain on their national welfare states? And do they distinguish between intra-EU mobility and migration of non-EU “Third Country Nationals”?

We analyse public opinion data from over 30,000 nationals/citizens across 18 EU countries in 2002, and 19 EU countries in 2014. Descriptive statistics are used to highlight variation across countries, over time, and by type of immigration (EU/non-EU). We draw on the European Social Survey (ESS), in which respondents were asked whether they would allow ‘many’, ‘some’, ‘few’, or ‘no’ immigrants from within and outside Europe. Those who favoured inflows from either origin are identified as general inclusionists, while those who opposed inflows from either, as general restrictionists. People who differed in their preferred level of inflows between the two origins are identified as either Europe or outside Europe inclusionists, respectively (Blinder and Markaki 2018a).

About four out of ten respondents supported limiting immigration to few or no immigrants, regardless of European origin. Only approximately one in ten respondents (9% in 2002, 11% in 2014) differed in their immigration restriction preferences depending on whether immigrants from poorer countries come from within or outside Europe. Among those who distinguished between European and non-European origins, a very small portion were outside Europe inclusionists (2.3% in 2002, 2.1% in 2014). Support for restricting immigration from both within and outside Europe was highest in Hungary (80%) and Estonia (68%). Germany (26%) and especially Sweden (9%) showed the least support for general restrictions.

To tap into respondents’ perceptions of the welfare impacts of immigration, we rely on a question that asks whether, on balance, immigrants contribute more in taxes or take out more in services (i.e. benefits, healthcare, or other welfare services). We classify those who said that immigrants contribute more in taxes as having positive evaluations of the welfare impacts of immigration. Respondents who said that immigrants take out more in services are identified as expressing negative evaluations of the welfare impacts of immigration. We

find evidence that EU nationals who think that immigrants have a negative fiscal impact on the welfare state (i.e. consume more in services than they contribute in taxes) are much more likely to support restrictions to immigration inflows, by a margin of 30 percentage points.

However, the relationship between perceived welfare impacts and support for immigration does not appear to be linked to European origins: those who believe that immigration detracts from the welfare state are about equally likely to support restrictions on immigration from within Europe as from outside Europe. These dynamics have not changed over time since the first available data was collected in 2002.

## **2. Public Attitudes Toward EU Mobility and Non-EU Immigration: A Distinction with Little Difference**

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Why do some Europeans support immigration from within the EU, while rejecting immigration from elsewhere? In D10.2 for REMINDER (Blinder and Markaki 2018b), we focused on understanding the two groups that we label Europe-only and EU-only inclusionists: individuals who support substantial levels of immigration to their country from either within Europe or the EU, respectively, while favouring heavy restrictions on immigration from the rest of the world. What might explain this pattern of preferences?

Our analysis takes advantage of an experimental module in the European Social Survey to explore the demographic and country profile of EU citizens who tend to distinguish between their preferred levels of immigration inflows on the basis of the origin and skill-level of immigrants. We compared attitudes of nationals/citizens across 20 countries of the EU and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).

Only about one in ten respondents expressed a preference for inflows from within Europe while supporting restrictions from outside Europe. Similarly, when skills and origins are manipulated experimentally and respondents are asked about either EU or non-EU European immigrants, we found only a modest preference for immigration from EU

countries over non-EU European countries, all else equal. These patterns contrast with the normative position entrenched in EU institutions and rhetoric in which EU mobility is decidedly favoured over non-EU immigration. We find a modest preference for EU mobility over other origins and a strong preference for skilled inflows. Our results point towards a 7-10% increase in support for inclusion if asked about EU immigrants compared to other origins, which holds across skill levels. In contrast, the high-skilled advantage is estimated at about 28 percentage points. Support for allowing many or some immigrants is predicted at 73% for respondents asked about skilled EU workers, but 46% for those asked about unskilled workers coming from the same EU country (Blinder and Markaki 2018b).

Theoretically, our results highlight the explanatory power of both supranational and subgroup identities, and downplay the role of labour market position and cognitive mobilization hypotheses, staples of research on immigration attitudes and EU integration, respectively (Blinder and Markaki 2019a). Identification with the EU has real if limited estimated impact on specific support for intra-EU mobility, and in fact stands out as the only variable that specifically promotes EU inclusionism. EU identity is also associated with support for immigration in general. However, a preference for immigrants with shared subgroup identities, such as a Christian background, is linked to European inclusionism but not to a specific preference for EU immigrants over other Europeans. Therefore, support for European migration suggests a more ethno-cultural vision of European identity, in which European migrants are viewed more favourably because they are likely to be more similar on other dimensions of identity.

Meanwhile, our non-findings bear emphasis as well. We develop hypotheses around “cognitive mobilization,” a prominent concept in prior literature on support for the EU and its political projects. Cognitive mobilisation predicts that people who pay attention to politics will be more likely to absorb elites’ nuanced, elite-endorsed ranking of potential migration inflows. Less attentive citizens are thus expected to be more likely to miss these nuances, and to react to immigration in broader brush strokes. However, we find no evidence to support this hypothesis, although this may not be surprising given increased elite disagreement on EU issues. Further research might aim to determine whether this result reflects a lack of elite influence on disaffected citizens, or, instead, ongoing influence

by elites that are themselves more polarised on issues of immigration and Europe.

Our results also reaffirm the weakness of objective labour market position as an explanation for attitudes toward immigration, consistent with recent research and reviews. Low skilled workers are not particularly opposed to intra-EU mobility, the largest source of low skilled migrant inflows that they face. We thus provide further reason for economic explanations of immigration attitudes to shift away from the labour market hypothesis and towards theories emphasising broader fiscal burdens or perceptions of welfare impacts.

### **3. Comparisons of public perceptions and realities of immigration welfare impacts**

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Among citizens who wish to restrict immigration, recent evidence suggests that beliefs about the impacts of immigration on public finances may be a key determining factor. But are perceptions shaped by national realities of immigrants' net receipt in social support and contributions in taxes, or do they simply reflect pre-existing attitudes about immigrants and their deservingness?

Recent research shows preliminary support for the "fiscal burden" hypothesis. This explanation of immigration attitudes centres on economic factors, but focuses on the dynamics of welfare states. In this view, opposition to immigration stems from the belief that immigrants pose a fiscal burden to citizens, draining state coffers by receiving more in welfare state benefits than they contribute in taxes. But these accounts raise a critical unresolved issue, which was the central question of D10.3 (Markaki and Blinder 2019a): what are the sources of these public beliefs about fiscal impacts? In particular, in the realm of fiscal impacts, what is the relationship between perceptions and reality? It might be that fiscal realities shape perceptions of fiscal impact, which in turn shape policy preferences as the fiscal burden hypothesis suggests. Alternatively, these perceptions might simply serve to rationalise pre-existing attitudes. For example, theories of welfare chauvinism suggest that natives, motivated by some combination of intergroup bias and welfare reciprocity norms, may prefer to exclude foreigners from 'their' welfare states, regardless of their potential net positive or negative contributions.



Our analysis contrasts these two explanations by exploring to what extent a person's assessment of welfare burdens is more closely linked to how much immigrants contribute towards benefits received, or to whether or not recipients have been born in the country (Markaki and Blinder 2019a). While both can lend support to the broader claims of fiscal burden theory, each alludes to a different underlying explanatory factor: economic versus identity considerations.

We match survey data from three rounds of the ESS and one round of the EQLS on perceived fiscal impacts from immigration with country-level statistical estimates of fiscal impacts that distinguish between the effects of EU and non-EU immigrants. Our analysis compares the attitudes of over 130,000 citizens across 28 EU and EFTA (European Free Trade Association) countries between 2002 and 2014. To identify people's perceptions, we utilise survey questions that ask respondents to rank between 1 and 10 their view on whether immigrants on balance take out more in social support or contribute more in taxes (1, 'take out more' – 10, 'contribute more'). We use two alternative indicators of fiscal effects across countries and years, which we label fiscal exposure from immigration. The first indicator reflects how much, on average, immigrants receive in benefits relative to what they contribute in social security contributions and income taxes in euro per year (economic fiscal exposure). The second measures how many immigrants benefit from receiving-country welfare state payments relative to the native population (demographic fiscal exposure). We also account for systematic differences between welfare systems, using welfare take-up rates among the native-born population and levels of government spending relative to total national spending.

If perceptions of fiscal burdens reflect the economic realities of those burdens, then, at a minimum, we should find that EU citizens view immigrants' impacts on public finances more positively if they live in countries where immigrants' contributions are higher, and less positively in countries where contributions are lower. If welfare generosity leads to natives being more aware of the potential economic costs associated with immigration, then the link between realities and perceptions ought to be stronger in countries that are more generous in providing benefits and those that spend more. On the other hand, if more

generous welfare states lead to more generous natives, then citizens will be less threatened by immigrants' receipt of welfare support in those countries.

Our empirical results show a link between perceptions and realities of fiscal impacts, but it is modest and more supportive of the welfare chauvinism channel than of the traditional fiscal burden hypothesis. People perceive the net fiscal impact of immigration more negatively when more foreign-born households receive benefits, but not when net costs relative to taxes are higher. In this regard, find some support for the argument that citizens' attitudes are linked to concerns over the overall impacts of immigration on public finances. However, our findings suggest that citizens' perceptions depend less on the actual net value of immigrants' contributions towards the costs of what they receive, and more on the identity of who is receiving. Thus, our results make more sense in the welfare chauvinism framework, in which identity is more important than economic calculation.

Contrary to our expectations, the relationship between realities and people's perceptions do not differ substantially across welfare systems, with a few notable exceptions. The effects of economic fiscal exposure on perceptions diverge between countries that are above and below the median in welfare claimants among natives, which we use as a proxy measure of welfare generosity. Perceptions are comparatively more positive in countries where fewer natives receive benefits, in spite of higher costs in benefits received relative to taxes paid by EU households. This goes against the expectation that, in countries that are more generous towards their native population, this generosity will also be extended to immigrants.

Distinctions in the link between EU realities and perceptions of impacts suggests that EU immigrants' unrestricted access to public funds may drive the view that they represent the primary demographic competitors for these resources, rather than lessening feelings of economic competition due to special cultural or institutional ties. In simple terms, EU origin alone is not pulling any specific identity leverage in favour of EU claimants and their impacts. To the contrary, statistical results further support the welfare chauvinism hypothesis that the fiscal exposure from any group of foreign-born residents with potentially more access to welfare support in terms of status (EU immigrants) will likely

trigger more negative evaluations of fiscal impacts.

#### **4. Perceptions of EU and Non-EU Immigrants' Welfare Impacts: Who Receives More in Benefits?**

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Do Europeans think that EU immigrants receive more in benefits than the native-born? and to what extent are perceptions more positive or negative when it comes to EU or non-EU immigrants' receipts in welfare benefits?

In D10.4 (Markaki and Blinder 2019b), we use descriptive statistics to highlight differences in these attitudes between countries and demographic groups. We also contrast perceptions across countries with statistical estimates of immigrants' take up of welfare benefits relative to natives' to explore to what extent public opinion diverges from the realities of those impacts. We draw on newly-collected survey data for seven EU countries (2018): Germany, Spain, Great Britain, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Sweden (Meltzer et al. 2019), which we match with estimates at country level (Nyman and Ahlskog 2018; Marchand et al. 2019).

We find that about one in three respondents thinks that EU immigrants receive a little or much more than natives in welfare and benefits. Just below half of those surveyed thought the same for non-EU immigrants' receipt of welfare. When taking all countries into account, just under half of respondents thought that EU-born immigrants receive about as much as those born in the country in terms of welfare and benefits. Around a third of respondents thought the same when asked about non-EU immigrants' receipt compared to the native-born population. In total, the proportion of people with negative views of the impact of intra-EU migrants is smaller than the proportion with negative views of those coming from outside the EU. However, over 80% of respondents placed the effects of both groups at the same or similar levels, with more than half of all respondents giving the exact same evaluation. If we take into account those who position the effects of one group at least 3 or 4 categories away from the other (on the 1 to 5 scale), fewer than 5% distinguish between the welfare effects of EU and non-EU immigrants.

While there are some small differences in views across countries, the disparity is smaller between countries than it is across some demographic groups. The percentage of those saying that EU and non-EU immigrants receive much more in welfare than natives is higher among respondents with low education, those with negative views of the EU, and those who prefer to restrict immigration from poorer countries from both within and outside Europe (general restrictionists).

How do these perceptions compare to econometric and demographic estimates? EU-born immigrants' average cost in welfare benefits per euro per year is either a little or much lower than natives' in all of the countries considered in our analysis. Therefore, we contrast this average cost in welfare and benefits with the share of respondents who opted for the evaluation option saying that EU/non-EU immigrants receive either a little or much less than natives. While it can be broadly informative, it does not serve as a confirmation of a causal or statistical relationship.

Relatively fewer people in Sweden than in Germany or the UK say that EU immigrants receive less than natives. In Sweden, EU immigrants' benefits receipts were about 7.5% lower in average euro amount than natives'. This stands at 29-30% lower for Germany and Great Britain, and 40% less for Poland. Although few respondents identify these effects accurately, the relative ranking of countries in perceived impacts is somewhat consistent with the equivalent relative ranking in the average amount received in welfare (realities). The more it costs on average for the country to provide for immigrants' benefits compared to natives', the fewer people evaluate the impacts as positive.

To identify overestimations or underestimations of the relative size of EU population, we contrast respondents' perceptions of the percentage of EU-born in the population with country-level statistics (Marchand et al. 2019; Meltzer et al. 2019). About 68% of all respondents overestimated the relative size of EU population by at least 1 percentage point, and another 22% underestimated the percentage in their country. The remaining 9-10% either estimated the percentage correctly, or overestimated it by up to 1 pp. While maximum underestimation stood at around 5 percentage points, overestimation is notably higher. About 19% of respondents had overestimated the EU-born population in their

country by more than 20 percentage points (max of 99.4pp).

## **5. Perceptions of EU Immigrants' Impacts on Welfare: The Role of Ideological Predispositions and Political Sophistication**

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When European publics are asked to evaluate facts about EU immigrants' receipt in social support and overall welfare impacts, perceptions vary widely from person to person in ways that poorly reflect the realities of those impacts. What is behind this variation and who is most likely to express misperceptions? In D10.5 (Blinder and Markaki 2019b), we explored to what extent political sophistication or predispositions are more defining for people's evaluations of the welfare impacts of EU immigrants. We rely again on survey data collected by REMINDER's WP9 in 2017-18 across seven EU member countries; Germany, Spain, Great Britain, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Sweden (Meltzer et al. 2019).

Long-standing literature on the role of political sophistication argues that citizens do not have concrete knowledge of very specific pieces of political information or facts — such as the level of welfare receipts among EU immigrants relative to natives — but can rely on their broader political knowledge and exposure to public messages to infer the likely answer. Early iterations of this school of thought, also known as heuristics, expected that people with higher levels of knowledge and sophistication with respect to politics would be more competent and more likely to express accurate opinions. However, growing evidence suggests a more complex dynamic, wherein predispositions and ideological leanings condition the ways knowledge and information are processed. Under this framework, respondents will be more resistant to information that contradicts their predispositions and more likely to seek information that supports their views. As a result, higher levels of sophistication will not lead to more accurate perceptions but rather to more directional mistakes in line with a person's pre-existing views and biases. An alternative school of thought, the expressive responding explanatory framework, predicts that the most knowledgeable partisans will intentionally exaggerate their perceived level of EU welfare receipt in order to signal belonging to a respective side of a polarized immigration debate. Notably, both explanations lead to the same predictions for our purposes.

We expect that political sophistication will not lead to more accurate or moderate views. Instead, higher levels of political engagement and sophistication will be conditioned by broader ideological predispositions and lead to exacerbated biases. We identify higher political sophistication as a person's capacity to successfully recall fairly stable facts about politics and prominent recent events related to immigration (for example, identifying the Party membership of the head of state, whether a country is part of Schengen, and whether Free Movement is a fundamental right in the EU). While a few of the knowledge items refer to national politics, most are about international affairs and EU institutions. We also use an alternative proxy measure of sophistication based on general level of interest in politics.

Our findings suggest that respondents with higher levels of general political sophistication are more likely to view EU immigrants' welfare receipts in a positive light. However, higher political sophistication works differently for people across the left-right ideological spectrum. Rather than converging towards the most accurate or moderate opinions, those with higher levels of political sophistication exhibit more entrenched views that lean further towards the extreme sides of impact evaluation. Left-wing respondents with low levels of knowledge (0 correct answers) have almost double the chances of expressing the most extreme negative opinion about EU immigrants' welfare receipts, compared to those with high levels of sophistication and the same ideological position. On the other hand, those who identified as far-right on the ideological scale were the most likely to express the view that EU immigrants receive much more than natives in welfare and benefits and remained the most likely regardless of knowledge levels. Ideological centrists with higher levels of political knowledge were the most likely to express moderate views of EU welfare impacts, i.e. that EU immigrants receive about the same as natives.

The average effect of higher political sophistication holds for both alternative measures, i.e. the knowledge scale versus political interest, although the effect is less robust when it comes to political interest. Moreover, the intersecting dynamic between ideology and sophistication does not hold when level of interest in politics is used as a measure of political sophistication, suggesting that its differentiating ability is fairly limited compared to a more nuanced measure of sophistication based on multiple factual knowledge items.

## Conclusions

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Our findings have important political implications. The political project of the EU depends on broad acceptance of intra-EU mobility. Broadening support for the EU project requires that some portion of the public who generally feel negatively about immigration will make an exception for fellow EU nationals, or at least tolerate such an exception. Our results show the weakness of support for such an exception.

The vast majority of support for EU and European mobility comes from people who support immigration in general; fewer than 10% of ESS respondents support immigration from Europe while preferring to restrict immigration from outside Europe. When skills and origins are manipulated experimentally and respondents are asked about either EU or non-EU European immigrants, we found only a modest preference for immigration from EU countries over non-EU European countries, all else equal. Support for immigration from Europe can come from supranational identification with the EU, but can also arise from exclusionary versions of more parochial subgroup identities, particularly along religious lines.

Our work on the link between perceptions and realities of welfare impacts from immigration further shows that evaluations depend less on the extent of immigrants' contributions towards the costs of what they receive, and more on the identity of who is receiving. In this regard, our findings signal only a moderate explanatory potential for the notion that opposition to immigration stems from realistic material concerns over the public finance impacts of immigration, as identity considerations appear to underlie people's perceptions of impacts more than economic considerations. Moreover, any explanatory power of the fiscal burden hypothesis will be inseparable from more identity-based perspectives such as group threat theory and welfare chauvinism. In addition, perceived burdens respond similarly to fiscal exposure from intra-EU and non-EU immigration, providing further evidence that citizens' views do not make particular exceptions for intra-EU immigrants and their impacts.

Recent evidence from survey data collected for the project also supports these conclusions.

The overall share of people with negative views of EU impacts is smaller than the share with negative views of non-EU impacts. However, more than half of all respondents gave the exact same evaluation in both questions, and fewer than five percent of all respondents differed substantially in their evaluations of EU versus non-EU welfare impacts. Finally, higher levels of knowledge of politics, EU institutions, and recent events related to EU migration did not appear to lead to more accurate perceptions of EU welfare impacts. Instead, sophisticated ideologues evaluated the welfare impacts of EU immigrants in directions most supported by their predispositions.

These patterns contrast with the normative position entrenched in EU institutions and rhetoric in which EU mobility is decidedly favoured over non-EU immigration. Our tests indicate limited but real avenues for understanding EU exceptionalism. The only consistent predictors of specific support for intra-EU mobility involve support for, or identification with, the EU itself. Thus, increasing specific support for intra-EU mobility depends on generating increased EU identity among those who do not generally support immigration – a difficult task to be sure.

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# REMINDER

## ROLE OF EUROPEAN MOBILITY AND ITS IMPACTS IN NARRATIVES, DEBATES AND EU REFORMS

The REMINDER project is exploring the economic, social, institutional and policy factors that have shaped the impacts of free movement in the EU and public debates about it.

The project is coordinated from COMPAS and includes participation from 14 consortium partners in 9 countries across Europe



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