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# People power: why we need more migrants

EVENT REPORT



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## Watch the debate [here](#)

**Giles Merritt**, Founder of Friends of Europe and author of a new book, entitled “People Power: Why we need more migrants”, wants to “ring an alarm bell and try and wake people up to the need in Europe for more people”.

During a Friends of Europe debate on 2 February 2022, Merritt told participants that it is “very simple. Europe is shrinking and getting old.”

“I don’t claim in the book to have a magic wand for the many problems surrounding migration,” he said, “but I do believe it’s a problem we have to solve. It’s become a toxic political issue, but that doesn’t mean we can allow ourselves to just ignore it.”

By mid-century, there will be 33mn fewer people in the active workforce, with 40% of the EU population over-65 years old.

For a long time in Europe four workers could support one pensioner, but in the last four to five years this figure has decreased to 2.9. The European Commission, backed by the International Monetary Fund, estimates that this figure will eventually decline to 1.7.

“This is obviously unsustainable,” said Merritt. “The forecasts are terrifying. We don’t have any chance but to have more Europeans to replace the many retiring people of my generation, who instead of being taxpayers are becoming tax users.”

He explained how although it is said that we must become more fertile, fertility has sunk to 1.5 children per couple. Computerisation also does not provide the solution.

“Robots don’t pay taxes,” he said. “Until we can fix these problems, we’re back to people.”

Merritt referenced a report by former Spanish prime minister, Felipe González, which said that by mid-century Europe would need 100mn immigrants.

“His report was quietly buried,” claimed Merritt. “It was too toxic and embarrassing for European governments to want to talk about it.”

He continued: “There are problems associated with immigration – some practical, others are cultural. But these are problems we have to fix. We can’t just ignore them, we have to explain to European voters why we need to bring people in, and we have to stop the hypocrisy of European governments saying we need legal migration and then halving work visas and migrants as has happened in the last 10 to 15 years.”

“We can do nothing – we can keep telling ourselves we’re saving European culture. Fine, but we’re condemning our children and grandchildren to really low living standards. As our workforce shrinks, our ability to maintain an open-minded society will shrink accordingly.”

Merritt’s assertions received support from the other speaker, the former president of Lithuania and former European Commissioner for budget and administration, **Dalia Grybauskaitė**.

“Europe needs more labour in any way we can receive it, and migration is one of the methods to increase our labour market,” she said.

She described how the term is now largely related to criminality, smuggling and illegal immigrants, and this relates to the recent “weaponisation of migrants” conducted by Russia and Belarus.

Grybauskaitė explained how this “weaponisation” results from the European, US, and NATO sanctions after the invasion of Crimea and was organised by Russia in retaliation, adding that the same occurred after the re-election of Belarusian President Lukashenko.

“Dictators will use this periodically,” she insisted. “This spoils the objective scientific research towards increasing our labour market and towards legal migration.”

Whilst stating that regular immigration can be “solved on a state-by-state basis”, she also highlighted the shortcomings in the EU’s own immigration system, notably the lack of a “regulated Schengen border code”.

“We need more people,” she said, “but the political system is still sensitive.”

“Integrating legal immigrants is absolutely clear, but how to manage it and make it possible?”

### Demolishing myths and changing trends

“My favourite myth is the one that immigrants come to sponge off European social benefits and taxes,” Merritt continued.

“The reality is that immigrants contribute far more to our tax income than they take out. Immigrants around the world seem to be outperforming long-term residents as contributors to the economy and society.”

Grybauskaitė referenced how her country had “lost a lot of [their] population to Europe, but at the same time, [they] received migration from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. Somehow it is balanced”.

Lithuania is now a “desired country”, she said, whereas “previously it was the opposite”.

She emphasised how the degree to which Lithuania’s door was open to immigrants was dependent on their “capacity to integrate into [the] labour market and their qualifications”. The former commissioner explained how Lithuania is still a “transiting territory because of [its] standard of living”, referencing how Vilnius does not support housing as Germany does.

In response to a remark from the moderator, **Laszlo Andor**, Secretary General of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and former European Commissioner for employment, social affairs and inclusion, that Spain did its “fair share” of accepting migrants, Merritt went on to explain what made that country different.

“Spain opened its gates very wide, but most of these immigrants were from Latin America, spoke Spanish, and were therefore much easier to integrate,” he said.

### Political signals

The introductory remarks sparked a lively Q&A session with members of the audience.

In response to a series of questions from participants, Merritt stressed that the problem around immigration begins “right at the top”.

“Senior politicians don’t send the signal that we need a new mindset,” he said. “We need to better train newcomers and make a bonfire of silly red tape.” He gave the example that in some European countries it is difficult for a migrant to open a bank account.

Europe’s politicians must persuade voters that their children’s future wellbeing is at risk, and that more immigration is a key solution. The demographic deficit demands an EU strategy, and the first step is a common migration policy. The barrier is political opportunism in some EU states and fearfulness in others.

“We need to see much more political courage from the European Commission,” Merritt said, adding that the new pact on migration and asylum, which was expected to be a hard-hitting review, risks being diluted.

“A European approach on an asylum pact will be very difficult,” warned Grybauskaitė.

“Incentives will be left to EU member states on a case-by-case basis, so it depends on the political willingness of the country. As with climate change, nobody wants to pay for it, but that’s where NGOs can be influential because politicians usually reflect what the public thinks.”

Merritt countered by saying that there are “strong realpolitik reasons why the Commission should be doing more”. He called for the EU institution to do what it used to do and look 10 and 25 years into the future.

He explained how the new EU member states, particularly the Visegrád states, are both the most opposed to migration and the most economically vulnerable to demographic change.

This will call into question the solidarity of the EU, Merritt said, which will come down to what western Europe will do for eastern Europe. The EU may crumble or even collapse as a result, he concluded.

### The EU neighbourhood

Responding to a question on the EU’s neighbourhood policy, Merritt told an anecdote of a Moroccan economics minister who said to one commissioner three or four years ago that “your choice is very simple – either you buy our tomatoes, or you let our people pick your tomatoes.”

“That sums up the choice for how we treat our southern neighbours,” Merritt said. He also called for an overhaul of EU development policy which has been “inadequate, grudging and unquestionable. It’s high time we opened up the whole question of what we’re going to do for Africa and the Arab world.”

Grybauskaitė’s view is that the EU’s neighbourhood policy is focused more on political than economic relations, while there is more talk about development assistance than

political cooperation.

“We need to invest more into economic development and democracy building in these countries,” she said. “I don’t believe in exporting democracy, but we need to be more serious about economic development in the south and east.”

### Private sector

“The private sector has somehow been pushed out of the discussion,” said Merritt, who went on to argue that Europe should provide tax breaks to companies for bringing in and training people.

“This is much easier than trying to set up elaborate education and training establishments,” he said. “It is more efficient and more likely to work. The absence of tax is the key to our problem as it gets worse.”

“Businesses are important actors. Politicians listen to them,” agreed Grybauskaitė. “For politicians, it’s a serious point of reference.”

### The problem of integration

Answering a comment from the floor, Merritt admitted that we “all know racism is a big problem”.

“If you ask any of the right-wing populist parties what motivates their policies, they’ll tell you – race,” he said.

“How do we integrate young people from Africa and the Arab countries who don’t speak our languages very well or who have a different religion?” he asked.

He suggested that Europe should encourage the women to join their families once they are settled, which would in turn “raise the birth rates and quell criminality”.

### Concluding remarks

“We need to make it worth people’s while to think positively about bringing newcomers in,” concluded Merritt.

“Immigration won’t fix problems urgently, but it is urgent to start a long-term strategic approach now.”

“The anti-immigration narrative is only increasing in Europe, and there are reasons for it,” stated Grybauskaitė. “We do have an academic understanding that we need immigration, but the way will be painful, sensitive, and long.”

Andor ended the discussion by quoting António Vitorino, Director-General of the UN International Organisation for Migration, who said that we “urgently need a rational debate on migration based on robust evidence that does not avoid complex and thorny issues”.

“Today it has indeed been a rational debate,” continued Andor, “and we did not refrain from the thorny issues by recognising that this issue is complex and requires a lot of analysis and discussion, but also responsible policymaking at the level of the European Union.”

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