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The French Exception on the European Migration Scene

A century and a half ago, Victor Hugo, a staunch advocate of a “United States of Europe,” saw borders as a synonym for servitude:

“Wealth and life have a synonym: circulation. The first of all servitudes is the border. A border is a ligature. Cut the ligature, erase the border, remove the customs officer, remove the soldier, in other words, be free...” (Hugo 1869).

Today, Hugo would be surprised to discover that, in order to get elected to the European Parliament, candidates are promising less freedom of movement and more borders. The main far-right party in France, the Rassemblement National (RN; National Rally), for example, proposes “a double border, French and European: controlling national borders and establishing a border at the gates of Europe.”¹ Other parties have followed suit, arguing that European freedom of movement can only be preserved by reinforcing external borders and combating illegal immigration.

Those who support more borders may feel that France is too attractive to foreigners. Is this perception accurate? Where does France stand compared with other European Union member states: is it more or less attractive for intra-European migrants? And for non-EU nationals?

This article builds on two statistical observations and suggests a new analytical lens for migration studies. The first is that, compared with other major European countries, France attracts fewer migrants, both European and non-European. This is a trend that has remained stable over the last two decades. The second observation is that there is an administrative “French exception” which remains little-known: France issues the highest number of orders to leave the territory in Europe. On the basis of these two observations, we seek to open a debate on international indicators of migratory “attractiveness”: since countries with similar proportions of foreigners can behave very differently towards them, we argue for the introduction of a “repulsiveness” indicator.

France: a country that holds little attraction for migrants

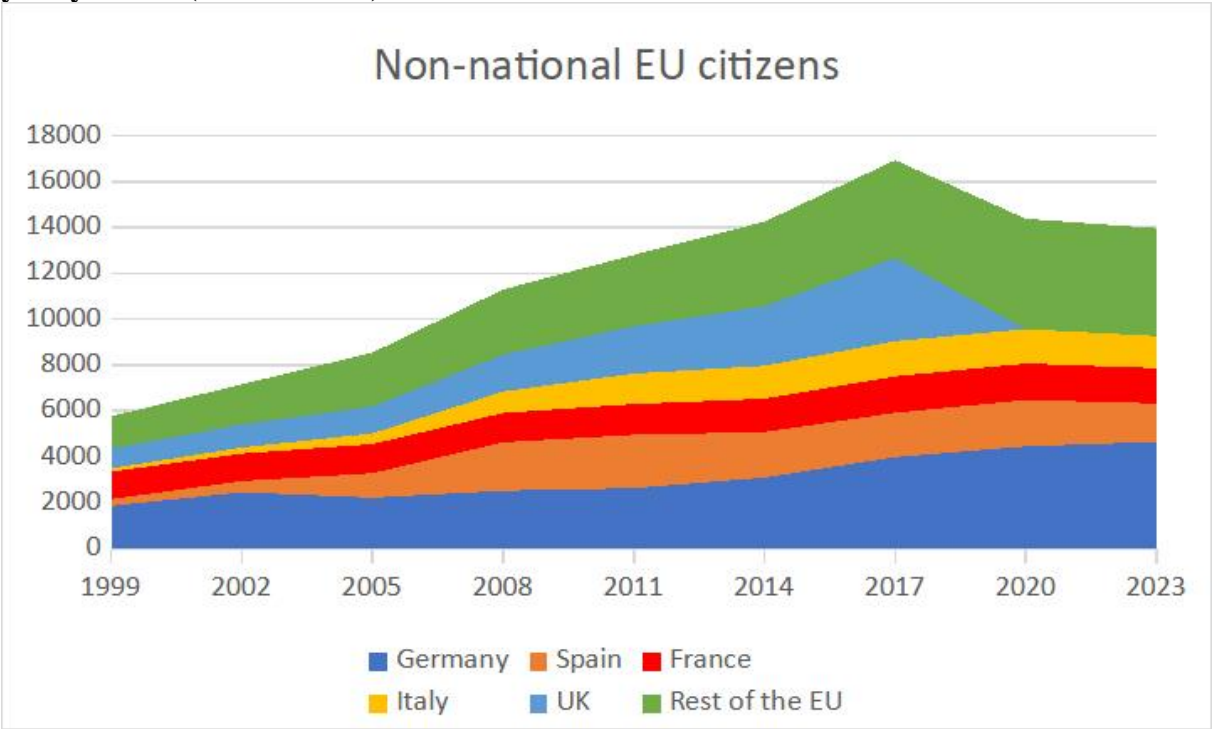
While the 1957 Treaty of Rome established freedom of movement for work purposes, the 1992 Maastricht Treaty enshrined freedom of movement as the cornerstone of “European citizenship.” Indeed, the right to free movement for European citizens is a bundle of three individual rights: the right to cross borders between member countries without a passport, the right to settle there without the prior authorization of the destination country, and the right to be treated as a native citizen by the institutions of the host country (with the exception of access to certain political rights and civil-service posts) (Recchi 2015). This right was used by a limited number of people in the decade following the Maastricht Treaty: mainly students, pensioners,

¹ Rassemblement National, « La France revient, l’Europe revit », Programme pour les élections du 9 juin 2024.

and skilled workers. When 11 Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU between 2004 and 2013, however, free movement changed Europe’s migratory landscape, enabling millions of “new Europeans” to study and work in the continent’s more developed economies (Recchi and Salamońska 2015).

Have these “new Europeans” found France attractive enough to settle in? When we look at the numbers of all European citizens residing in an EU country other than their own, as a result of free-movement rights, France’s situation appears almost unchanged for a quarter of a century. There were 1,195,000 citizens of other EU countries living in France in 1999, and 1,539,000 in 2023 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Non-national EU citizen residents in the largest EU member states (1999–2023), yearly stocks (in thousands)



Source: Eurostat (collected progressively by Ettore Recchi).

Interpretation: numbers of non-national EU citizens residing in France grow very modestly, as the red band has almost the same size all over the period, while the other countries’ bands become wider.

Notes: EFTA citizens are included, since they enjoy freedom of movement across the EU. Data for Malta and Cyprus are not available. Data for France in 2005 are interpolated from nearby years. Data for Spain in 2023 do not include EFTA citizens from 12 countries (Austria, Czechia, Cyprus, Estonia, Croatia, Hungary, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia, and Slovakia), while the number of Swiss citizens living in Spain is from 2021. The most recent numbers for Denmark, Poland and Croatia are from 2022; for Greece, from 2021.

This stability and relative low level of European migration to France (barely +17% growth in 24 years) contrasts sharply with the dynamism of all the other major EU countries (including the UK, before Brexit): in 2023, there are almost 10 times more European citizens in Italy than

a quarter-century ago, almost seven times more in Spain and three times more in Germany (Figure 2, first column). The reasons for this disparity constitute a stimulating and complex research topic, which this short article cannot address in detail. We merely raise the question of the low attractiveness of France for intra-European migrants, a topic that is never mentioned in debates on immigration, whether political or academic.

Figure 2. Growth of non-national residents (EU citizens and third country nationals) in the largest EU member states from 1999 to 2023 (indexed to 100 persons in 1999)

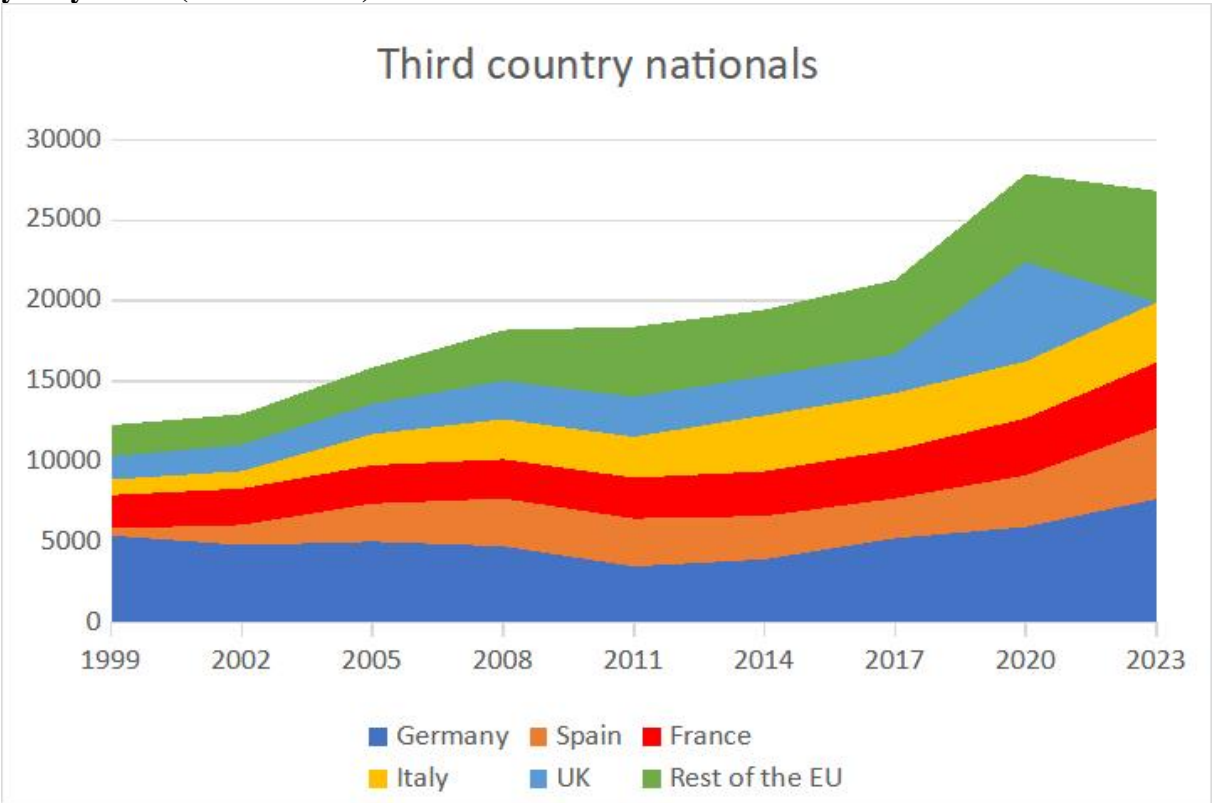
	<i>EU citizens</i>	<i>Third-country nationals</i>
Germany	307	142
Spain	682	972
France	117	197
Italy	994	386
UK*	398	429
Rest of the EU	368	355

Source: processed data from Eurostat.

* 2017 for EU citizens and 2020 for third-country nationals.

A similar observation applies to non-European nationals (Figure 3): their proportion has increased much less in France than in other European countries in recent years. A notable exception is Germany, the only major European country where the percentage of non-European citizens has increased less than in France (Figure 2, second column). To properly interpret these data based on the criterion of nationality, however, naturalizations must be taken into account. While naturalizations are negligible in the case of EU citizens, they can be significant in the case of non-EU citizens. Indeed, naturalizations have become much simpler and therefore more numerous in Germany in recent years, contributing to a statistical decrease in the number of foreigners, thus making this analysis less salient than that of foreigners with European passports.

Figure 3. Third-country citizen residents in the largest EU member states (1999–2023), yearly totals (in thousands)



Source: all data from Eurostat, except Spain in 1999 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística), Italy in 2002 (Ministero dell’Interno), and France in 2002 and 2006 (INSEE; 2002 is an estimate based on nearby years).

Interpretation: The number of third-country national residents in France grows less than in Spain, the UK, Italy, and the rest of the EU, since the thickness of the red band is almost the same over the whole period.

In all cases, whether for EU nationals (2.3%) or non-EU nationals (6.0%), the proportion of resident foreigners in France remains lower than in other major European Union countries (Figure 4)².

² For non-European immigrants, this proportion only exceeds that for smaller countries as a whole, but this is because the latter includes Eastern European countries, where the figures are minimal.

Figure 4. Proportion (in %) of foreign resident population in the largest EU member states in 2023 (EU non-national citizens and third-country nationals)

	<i>EU citizens</i>	<i>Third-country nationals</i>
Germany	5.5	9.1
Spain	3.5	9.2
France	2.3	6.0
Italy	2.4	6.3
UK*	5.4	9.2
Rest of the EU	2.7	3.9

Source: processed data from Eurostat.

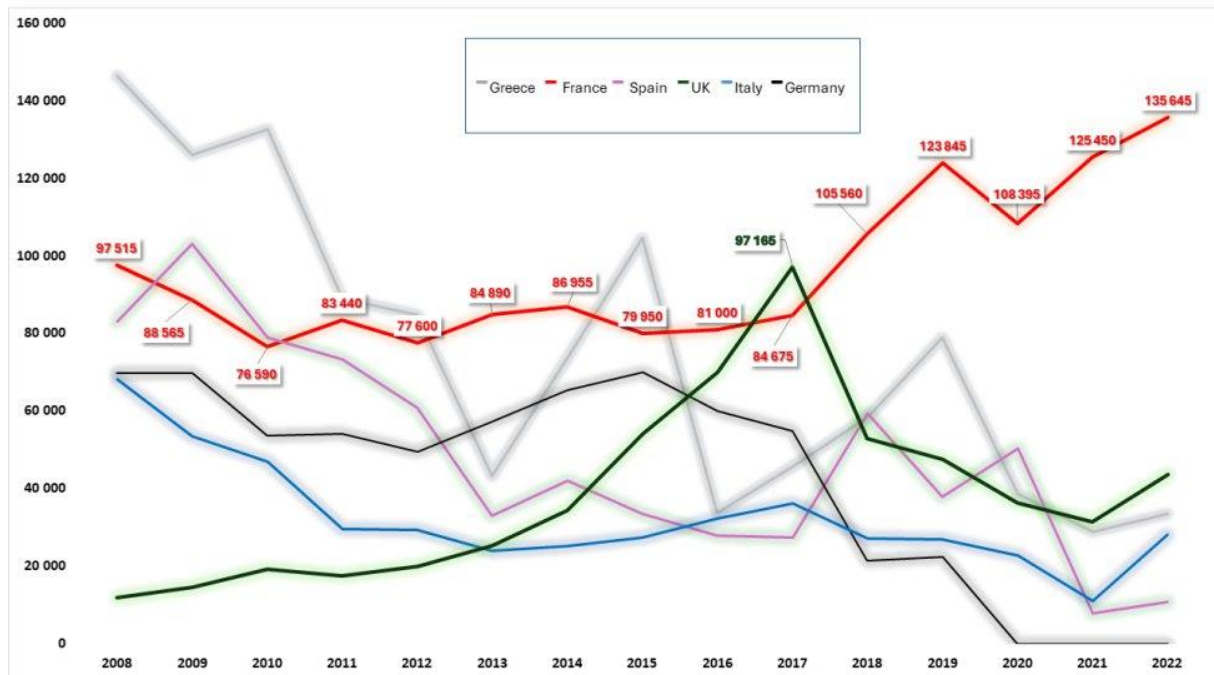
* 2017 for EU citizens and 2020 for third-country nationals.

The French exception: exceptionally repulsive

For several years now, France has held first place in Europe for the number of orders to leave the territory delivered (Figure 5). Not only does the French administration produce the highest number of such orders, it also accounts for a third of all the orders issued by 30 European countries.

This high administrative productivity, which has risen sharply over the past seven years, is not explained by an increase in the number of arrivals. As Figure 5 shows, each year France delivers far more than the 97,000 orders to leave the territory issued by Germany at its peak in 2017. However, Germany recorded 1.5 million foreign arrivals in 2015, and then over 700,000 in the years that followed. If the ratio between the number of orders to leave the territory and the flow of arrivals were similar in France to the ratio seen in Germany during those “crisis” years, France should have seen almost a million new entries every year. This is clearly not the case: at its peak, the number of non-EU citizens entering France each year was just over 250,000.

Figure 5. Third-country nationals ordered to leave in the six EU countries that issued the most expulsion orders (Eurostat, 2008–2022)



Source: Eurostat (2024) https://doi.org/10.2908/MIGR_EIORD.

This foreigner-rejection policy reached a particularly dramatic climax in 2020. While the health crisis paralyzed the entire world, the immigration authorities in France worked without respite: over the course of the year, they issued more than 108,000 orders to leave the territory. At the height of the pandemic, it was forbidden to go out in the streets, transport was at a standstill and borders were closed, but civil servants, no doubt working from home, produced an average of 300 letters a day to force foreigners to leave the French territory.

This “French exception” goes unnoticed in election campaigns. Many political leaders are more concerned with the rate of execution of orders to leave the territory than with the actual number of orders issued. But when the number of orders issued is on the rise, as it has been for the past seven years, an increase in the number of removals can result in a drop in their execution rate. For example, from 2016 to 2019, the number of removals rose from around 11,000 to over 14,000, even though their rate of execution fell from 14% to 12%. This is due to the very sharp rise in the number of orders issued (from 81,000 to 123,000), a phenomenon overlooked in the public debate on irregular immigration.

One of the reasons for the particularly high number of people ordered to leave lies in French law, which requires that any refusal to renew a residence permit may be accompanied by an order to leave the territory. For example, access to employment is conditional on obtaining a work permit through a complex and demanding procedure. Refusal of a work permit means refusal to renew the residence permit, and consequently the risk of being ordered to leave as a consequence of requesting a work permit (Caplan and Dumitru 2017). Work permits can be refused for a variety of reasons: a graduate who finds a job in a field that the authorities deem to be different from his or her studies may be refused a work permit and become illegal (Jamid 2018). In general, successive legislative changes multiply the criteria that foreigners must meet to remain in a legal situation, and thus *de facto* increase refusals to renew residence permits and the number of people ordered to leave the country.

The case for an Index of Repulsiveness

We now understand why assessing a country's attractiveness in terms of foreign presence is unsatisfactory. Consider the Global Attractiveness Index, recently promoted by the European Commission (Saisana *et al.* 2022). This composite indicator includes, alongside trade and financial indicators³, three aspects of the movement of people: the number of tourists, the proportion of foreign students among the country's young people, and the proportion of immigrants in the population.

This vision of attractiveness, despite the complexity of the data it synthesizes, can create an erroneous image of a country's relations with foreigners. Two countries with the same proportion of foreign students may behave very differently towards them. Conversely, a country that has a low attractiveness score "in spite of itself" (for reasons of geography, climate, level of economic development or language) should not be mistaken for a country that is better off in these respects, but which is making efforts to limit the presence of foreigners by engaging in policies of bureaucratic harassment, "hostile environment" or expulsion.

In terms of its number of foreign students, France could be considered highly attractive. However, a foreign student who works more than the 60% legal time limit can have his or her stay permit withdrawn and ordered to leave the country⁴. Attractiveness is indexed to the number of students but does not take into account the fragility of their legal situation, or the administrative threats they face.

An index of repulsiveness would capture the efforts a country is making to reduce the number of foreigners. It is true that some attractiveness indicators, such as those recently constructed by the OECD, are more sensitive to the impact of red tape: they include, for example, the waiting time to obtain a residence permit and how easy it is for a spouse to get a job (Tuccio 2019; OECD 2023). However, it would be important to construct separate indicators of attractiveness and repulsiveness, in order to distinguish the effects of ineffective bureaucracy from those of a hostile policy.

Whether in terms of attractiveness or repulsiveness, our data highlight the "French exception" in the European migratory landscape. Those who are free to move to France don't want to, and those who would like to stay can't. As Paul Valéry's beloved 16th-century Italian saying goes, "et così il mondo mal va" ("this is how the world goes wrong" Duchesne-Guillemin 1967)⁵.

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³ Attractiveness is defined in four dimensions: openness, innovation, efficiency and endowment (economic and human capital). Openness is seen as a measure of a country's efforts to promote the circulation of human and economic resources with other countries.

⁴ See art. L-432-9 of the French Code on the Entry and Stay of Foreigners and the Right of Asylum.

⁵ The full saying is: "Chi po non vo, chi vo non po, chi sa non fa, chi fa non sa, et così il mondo mal va" ("Who can doesn't want, who wants can't, who knows doesn't do and who does doesn't know, so the world goes wrong"). According to Duchesne-Guillemin (1967), Valéry loved this saying, found on an ashtray. It is, in fact, an inscription on a house in the town of Ascoli Piceno, probably written in 1529.

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Further reading

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