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Is irregular migration the source of economic distress?

It is hardly surprising that societies seek simple explanations for complex problems during periods of economic strain. In recent years, this tendency has increasingly converged around the issue of migration.

As housing prices rise, rents erode household incomes, wages lag behind inflation, and feelings of social unease intensify, these developments are often grouped under a single heading: irregular migration.

This narrative is not unique to Turkey. In the United States, migration was placed at the centre of economic debate during the Trump administration.

Across Europe, anti-immigration political movements have linked a wide range of issues—from housing shortages to perceptions of crime—directly to migration.

Even in countries such as Canada and Australia, which manage migration through structured and points-based systems, similar arguments have gained traction.

Migration has thus become a universal “shortcut” for explaining the multi-layered challenges of modern economies.

The appeal of this shortcut is evident. Explaining structural distortions in housing markets, widespread informality in labour markets, the inflation of asset prices by financial systems, or the political reluctance to intervene in these areas requires sustained and often uncomfortable analysis.

Migration, by contrast, is visible, quantifiable, and politically targetable. Yet this is precisely where the analytical problem begins: is irregular migration the cause of economic pressures, or does it merely lift the veil on systems that were already fragile?

How economic insecurity becomes a migration debate

Housing markets provide perhaps the clearest illustration of this dilemma. Over the past decade, housing prices and rents in many countries have risen far faster than incomes.

While this trend is frequently attributed to population growth, a closer examination of price dynamics reveals a different picture.

Housing has long ceased to be merely a means of shelter. It has become one of the central pillars of household wealth—and in many countries, the most important one.

This transformation carries significant political consequences. A decline in housing prices would mean a perceived loss of wealth for millions of voters.

As a result, governments tend to avoid policies that could trigger sharp corrections in housing markets.

Constrained supply, incentives for investor demand, credit expansion, and tax policies together create a system designed to keep prices elevated.

Within such a framework, migration is less the source of price increases than an additional force accelerating an already upward-biased market.

A similar pattern of misattributed causality can be observed in labour markets. Claims that migrants depress wages—particularly in low-skilled occupations—are widespread.

Yet the primary drivers of wage pressure are often not migration itself, but high levels of informal employment and weak enforcement mechanisms.

> In many countries, empirical evidence linking migration to higher crime rates is weak or inconsistent

In economies where these problems predate migration flows, migration merely makes existing vulnerabilities more visible.

Where labour inspections are strong, the wage effects of migration tend to be limited; where enforcement is weak, the problem deepens. The decisive factor, in other words, is not migration but the state's regulatory capacity.

Debates around crime and public order follow a comparable logic. In many countries, empirical evidence linking migration to higher crime rates is weak or inconsistent.

Nevertheless, perceptions of insecurity often rise alongside migration. During periods of economic uncertainty, demographic change tends to amplify fears, and perceptions of crime can increase even when crime rates are stable or declining.

This suggests that economic and social anxieties are being symbolically projected onto migration.

Cross-national comparisons further clarify this pattern. In the United States, housing prices began rising long before migration became central to political debate.

In Canada and Australia, migration is predictable and rules-based, yet housing crises are severe.

In Europe, countries with strong tenant protections and robust rental regulation have absorbed migration pressures more effectively, while those that weakened such protections have experienced rapid deterioration in housing affordability.

In Turkey, a system that prioritises homeownership while leaving tenants relatively unprotected has become more fragile in the presence of migration.

Migration as accelerator, not cause

Taken together, these examples suggest that migration is not the fundamental source of economic stress. Rather, it functions as a factor that accelerates and exposes existing structural problems.

Blaming migration may be politically expedient, but it also serves to postpone more difficult yet necessary reforms - Emre Alkin

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Efforts to treat housing less as a speculative asset, to combat informality in labour markets, to restore balance between tenants and property owners, and to strengthen integration policies are often sidelined by migration-centred debates.

Perhaps the more pertinent question, then, should be asked in reverse. Is irregular migration generating economic stress, or are systems that struggle to manage economic stress turning migration into a crisis?

Without an honest engagement with this question, it is difficult to see how housing challenges can be resolved or social tensions meaningfully reduced.