Immigration in focus

Anti-immigrant hostility is a major concern around the world, yet this topic failed to reach this year’s Top 10 trends. José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, explores the reasons why.

"Racism and xenophobia, intolerance and Islamophobia are on the rise," warns José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission. "They foster division and create suspicion and hatred between communities. In recent years, we have even seen a mounting wave of harassment and violence targeting asylum seekers, immigrants, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities in many European countries."

One need not look far to see that President Barroso has a point. In February 2014, the Swiss population voted – albeit by a tiny majority – to reintroduce stringent quotas on immigration from EU countries. A few months later, in May 2014, anti-immigrant parties made significant gains in the European elections. In July, pro- and anti-immigration demonstrators clashed in Murrieta, a town in southern California, over the arrival of illegal immigrants – mainly children – at a border control station.

These examples highlight the fact that anti-immigrant sentiment is a growing, global concern. But while this trend was ranked highly by respondents to this year’s Survey on the Global Agenda, ultimately settling in 13th place, it failed to reach the Top 10 trends.

This result seems all the more surprising for the fact that this issue has clear points of intersection with other trends that did appear within our final 10. Indeed, it is possible that it is this proximity to other issues – and the reciprocal interaction with them – that led to ‘Rising anti-immigrant sentiment’ being overlooked.

For a start, let us consider the first two trends on this year’s list. Persistent jobless growth and deepening income inequality have arguably contributed to fears that an influx of immigrants will exact further pressure on scarce and poorly paid jobs; the immigration discourse in Switzerland focused on the strain placed on jobs and salaries across the country.

Equally, the effects of immigration and increased population growth on social and health services and the environment have long been – and continue to be – cited as a reason for curbing the movement of people between countries. These perceived points of friction will likely persist as healthcare takes on an increasingly key
role within our economies, as observed by the last entry in our Top 10.

Anti-immigrant discourse is hardly confined to economic and societal concerns, however. Several of our trends, ‘Intensifying nationalism’, ‘Lack of leadership’ and ‘The weakening of representative democracy’ suggest a fluctuating sense of national identity, and perhaps even a dissatisfaction with traditional styles of governance. At the very least, these trends can be seen as reflecting a political environment in which anti-immigrant sentiment can flourish, as voters turn from traditional parties towards more extreme political options. The results of last May’s European elections underscore this shift all too well.

For President Barroso, anti-immigrant sentiment can only be diffused with strong leadership, and with an approach that acknowledges the challenge of the situation, as well as its opportunities.

“International migration is a reality,” he says. “In an open world, where developed, underdeveloped and emerging economies are integrated on an unprecedented level, they act almost like communicating vessels, where goods, services, knowledge, information and indeed, people, naturally flow from one part to the other.”

He continues: “The benefits of diversity are clear, but often underestimated. Our open societies cannot do without it. The fact that Europe needs migration to address its demographic challenge is equally clear. But there is a worrying lack of political courage and leadership on these issues.”

Tackling anti-immigrant sentiment will, he believes, necessitate a firm approach to migration itself. The European Commission has proposed establishing a common set of standards for external border control and strengthening Frontex, the agency for border security. Barroso believes that these measures will help European governments to handle the challenges of irregular migration, promoting solidarity between member states.

“Such solidarity is only possible if public support for legal migration continues,” says Barroso, “if we tackle any abuses yet never compromise our values of openness, tolerance, respect for the rule of law, and human dignity for all.”

“In times of globalization, social crisis and cultural uncertainty, these values, which literally form the heart of what the European Union is all about, can never be taken for granted. Europe is far more than a market – it is a community of values, founded on human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity.”

Of course, these principles should not just apply to the European Union, but to the entire world. These are values which should be universal, and by safeguarding and promoting them, we can simultaneously eliminate the harm caused by discrimination. The problem of intolerance – and finding a solution to it – is of global concern.