

# THE POWER OF CROSS-BORDER LABOUR MARKET IMMOBILITY<sup>1</sup>

HENK VAN HOUTUM & MARTIN VAN DER VELDE

University of Nijmegen, PO Box 9108, 6500 HK Nijmegen, The Netherlands. E-mail:  
Henk.vanHoutum@mailbox.kun.nl & M.vandervelde@mailbox.kun.nl

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we critically address and interrogate the issue of cross-border labour mobility in the European Union. Despite fifteen years of policy stimulation, cross-border labour movements are still exceptions and not the dominant pattern. It is argued that it is a further understanding of the concept of *immobility* more than mobility that should be at the core of the research on cross-border labour markets. It is the critical awareness of the power of immobility that may help to contextualise and understand the non-existence of a flourishing and fluid international labour market. It is postulated that the bordering of our orientation and (id)entity is preventing the existence of a large-scale cross-border or transnational labour market in the European Union. The social border produces a difference in the imagination of belonging and as such it produces an attitude of *indifference* towards the market on what is perceived as the 'Other side'. The avoidance of uncertainty and wish to border oneself and identify with an existing socio-spatial category then become important motivators for non-action. This idea runs counter to the Cartesian worldview of human action, which has found its present translation in the rational agent in mainstream economics, which still motivates European Union labour market policy-making. What is suggested here is the inclusion of the attitude of nationally habitualised *indifference* that may help to explain why most workers do not even consider seeking work across the border.

**Key words:** Labour market, spatial immobility, borders, identity, threshold of indifference

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## INTRODUCTION

Right from the start of the European Union (EU) encouraging, stimulating and governing cross-border mobility has been one of the essential aims. Whether the efforts of the EU since then have been the essential trigger or the developments were only the mere accommodation and consequence of global trends remains ambiguous, the fact is that the mobility of goods, money, and information has increased considerably across the Union. However, the cross-border mobility of that other 'production

factor', labour, has surely not risen to the same extent. Why is it that people when it comes to cross-border labour mobility in the European Union are relatively immobile? In scrutinising this issue, this paper contributes to a growing debate on cross-border labour immobility by focusing on the nationally, socially constructed attitudes of workers. In particular we seek to explain the power of immobility of workers in the EU. In the conclusion the possible consequences for EU labour market policy are examined if no longer mobility, but immobility is indeed accepted as the dominant mode of practice.

## CROSS-BORDER LABOUR MOBILITY

In the EU, increasing cross-border mobility<sup>2</sup> is seen as an important instrument in reaching some kind of optimum in the perceived and desired functioning of the labour market:

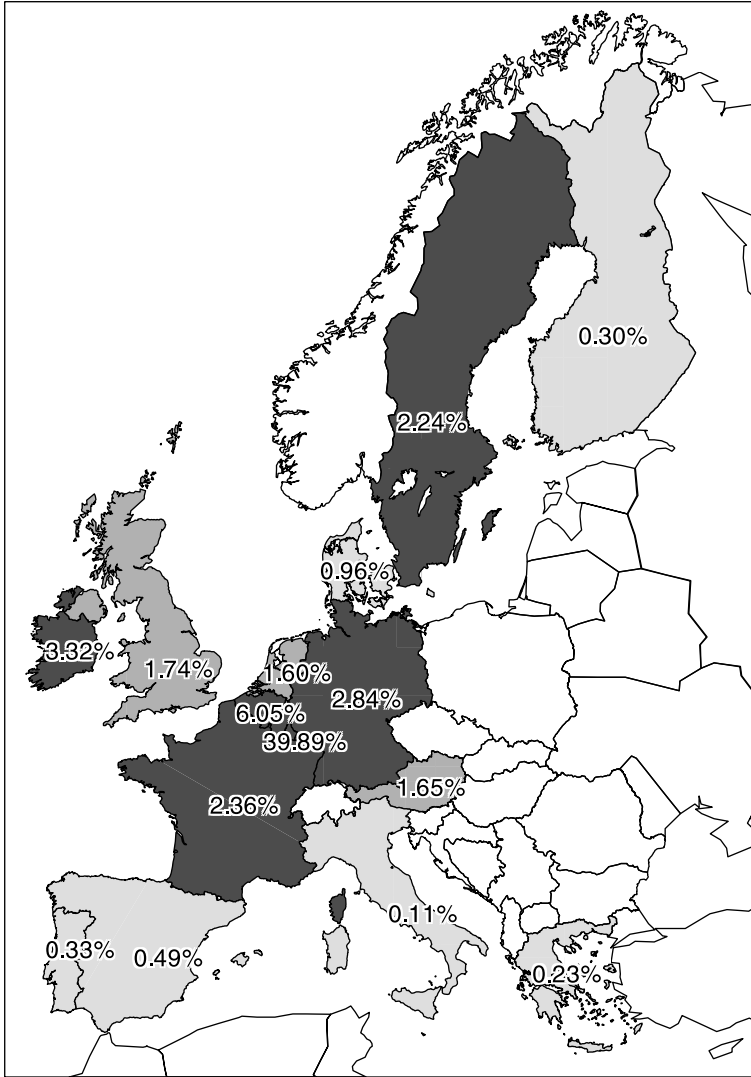
The creation of more genuine European labour markets – removing barriers, reducing adjustments costs and skills mismatches – will increase the efficiency of labour markets overall. This would in fact reduce pressures to migrate for those *who do not want to move*, while creating genuine opportunities for those *who do wish to be mobile*. (European Commission 2001a: 5; emphasis by we)

To establish a European labour market, the European Commission in their document 'New European Labour Markets, Open to All, with Access for All' (European Commission 2001a), announced the formation of a 'High Skilled Task Force'. This *Task Force* was installed with the mandate to identify the main drivers and characteristics of the 'new labour markets', particularly focusing on skills and mobility (European Commission 2001b); to identify the main barriers to further development; and to come up with initiatives leading to 'new labour markets, open to all, with access for all'. The fact that this initiative is still necessary after 45 years of 'freedom of movement' within the European Union is remarkable (Vandamme 2000). In the subsequent Commission's Action Plan for Skills and Mobility (European Commission 2002), a plan, which builds on the recommendations of the Task Force, information on qualifications and mobility is given a key role. It is assumed that cross-border mobility is dominantly held back by (market-)imperfections and the lack of transparency and knowledge, an assumption that is still dominantly based on rational-choice theory. In this theory it is postulated that human kind is inherently seeking the highest profit possible for his/her labour and will move to no matter where as long as it pays off. As a result, harmonising and synchronising the rules and regulations for workers between the member states in the EU has been a top priority over the past decade or so. Up till now, however, the efforts on labour market harmonisation have not been a sufficient measure for workers to become spatially mobile in corporeal terms across the EU.

The vast majority of the workers in the European Union is still largely mobile only within its own nationally-bounded labour market (Fischer *et al.* 2000, p. 32). The numbers on cross-border mobility are almost negligible. Labour Force Survey findings show that in 2001 the national labour markets of the countries of the EU accommodated a little over 3 million workers from other EU-countries. This means that 1.7 per cent of the total active population is from other EU countries (Eurostat 2002). Although this share has witnessed a steady increase from 1.6 million in 1983 (Kiehl & Werner 1999), the general level is clearly still not impressive. Certainly when one takes into account that new member states have acceded the EU since that date. This does not stand in comparison, if this indeed can be compared to for instance the situation in the United States, where the cross-state border migration in percentage of the total population is almost five times as high. When broken down to the national level in the EU considerable differences can be witnessed, but the general picture that prevails is one of low mobility (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> We may put these low figures into further perspective, when we take into account that within the countries with over two per cent non-natives often the largest groups are Portuguese, Italians and Greeks, which may be explained by the influx of 'guest labourers' in the 1950s and the 1960s, certainly not the effect of more current measures to encourage labour mobility.

Despite the policy measures for more information and transparency now taken, it is not likely that this picture of low share of 'transnational' workers is going to change radically in the foreseeable future. According to the European Opinion Research Group (2001) only 22 per cent of the respondents expect to move house within the next five years. Only eight per cent expects to move to another EU country. So out of the total EU-population less than two per cent expects to move to another EU-country within the next five years.

These figures only refer to residential migration,<sup>4</sup> not commuting. However, including cross-border commuting does not add much to change the general picture. In 1999 only about 0.2 per cent of the total workforce in the EU commuted to other member countries (European Commission 2001c). Even when we confine our focus to



Source: Eurostat (2002) and authors' own calculations.

Figure 1. Share of foreign-born workers from other EU countries in the active population.

border regions, cross-border commuting is not a major factor. When we define the border region as the NUTS-3 regions (the smallest administrative region for which Eurostat provides statistical data) located immediately at a national border only 1.5 per cent of the labour force can be characterised as cross-border commuters. Of a total workforce of 34 million, only 500,000 commute to another country (MKW 2001).<sup>5</sup> When this total is broken down over the regions along the inner borders of the EU, once

again considerable differences can be witnessed (see Table 1). Despite some national differences, as Table 1 shows, the general pattern prevails that cross-border commuters in the EU only make up a small percentage of the total work force in a country.

#### THE THRESHOLD OF INDIFFERENCE

The debate on labour market mobility, despite all its logical beauty and internal refinements,

Table 1. *Cross-border commuters and share in total regional employment.*

Border Region	Number of commuters	Share in total regional employment(%)
Belgian-German	6,300	0.67
Belgian-Dutch	22,900	0.67
Belgian-French	24,400	0.88
Danish-German	2,500	0.76
Danish-Swedish	3,000	0.13
German-French	61,700	2.50
German-Dutch	33,100	0.76
German-Austrian	21,000	0.96
Spanish-French (incl. Andorra)	4,100	0.17
Spanish-Portuguese	4,000	0.15
French-Italian (incl. Monaco)	27,900	1.10
French-British	2,700	0.28
Irish-British	11,500	1.42
Italian-Austrian	1,900	0.22
Finnish-Swedish	900	0.41
Luxembourg (with Belgium, Germany and France)	79,200	4.73

Source: MKW (2001) and authors' own calculations.

is beginning to resemble the classic scientific trap in which the modellers have forgotten about the dominant modes in actual practice. The dominant mode of practice as we explained above, of 98% of the workers, is *cross-border immobility*. Of the total EU-population somewhat less than two per cent migrated across a border and approximately 0.2 per cent of the working population is commuting across a border. Consequently, when one starts reasoning based on a model of a single European market, what almost inevitably follows then is an overestimation of the potential mobility of workers. This is exactly what has been happening in recent European policy and academic debates. What has been overestimated (and perhaps also overs(t)imulated) is the action and willingness to move; what thereby is drastically underestimated is the non-action. We believe that starting at the other end of mobility, that is, comprehending the persisting power of international labour immobility, might take us further in understanding and explaining the non-existent cross-border labour market in the European Union. The mobility-eagerness that is built in rational-choice economic theory, which still motivates recent EU labour plans, has been subjected to much criticism from various quarters

of social studies. The assumptions on human rationality are increasingly regarded as untenable. Its power is based on an old-fashioned epistemology of exogenous preferences and unworlly human psychology (Nooteboom 1992, 1993). The importance of the social construction of human rationality is severely underestimated. Human beings are associational creatures, both consciously and unconsciously so. There is no such faculty as pure reason that functions as a detached, objective and dispassionate observer (Van Houtum, 1998, 1999). Rationality, in its practical form, is often nothing more (or less) than a socially conventionalised response to an actual situation (Van Houtum, 1998, 1999). Rationality is therefore not just bounded because of the restricted capability to gather all relevant information, but also the social environment. Therefore we see it necessary to encompass a broader sociologically and geographically inspired vision on the power that spatial belonging (still) has in the analysis of labour (im)mobility.

#### THE 'RATIONALITY' OF BELONGING

The principle of situated (socio-)spatial belonging, the longing to be a member of a spatial (id)entity, must primarily be understood as a

collectively constructed imagination, a socially produced belief in a common destiny and/or origin (Anderson 1983). The urge people express and perform to belong, to create (and defend) their 'own space', to separate, to differentiate and to demarcate is hence understood here as socially constructed (see also Paasi 1996). Much internalisation and habitual compliance of societal norms and rules occurs in the absence of manifest obligation or violence. Rather, these values, norms and knowledge attain a taken-for-granted quality. They form an internalised, normalised and compliant everyday practice, an *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990, 2002; De Certeau 1994; Foucault 1991; Hillier & Rooksby 2002). This is not to say that individual actors necessarily uncritically agree with the practical make up of these values, norms and knowledge in society. Yet, these structures may be partially or totally common to those who have been the product of similar social conditions. The social production of the nation, so significant still in our era, is a vivid and real representation and possible implication of the power of the bordered and bordering *habitus* of people. The nation still functions as an intuitive structure and embodied sense of place. It is this structuring power of the national *habitus* that (still) contextualises human rationality. This is not to say that the belief in and compliant subjectification to the nation is the same for everyone, but the still prevailing power of the construct of the nation in our society is hard to deny. The national borders are designed to and still function as a performance of a fictitious yet for many appealingly easing purity of 'we here' and 'them there'. National borders thereby produce an imagined mental nearness to the members of one's nation and an exclusion of and mental distance to non-members, the 'strangers' (Van Houtum 1999). Apparently still, this mechanism of distanciation helps to gain control in order to achieve comfort,<sup>6</sup> *ease* in one's daily life (Van Houtum 2003). The nation creates a social focal point, a selection of social priorities. The space beyond a nation then becomes a space of withdrawal, of mental 'emptiness', often resulting in a conservative tendency towards cross-border activities (see also Strüver 2002; forthcoming). That what is beyond the constructed differentiating border of comfort (*difference*) is socially made legitimate to be neglected (*indifference*) (Van

Houtum & Van Naerssen 2002; Van Houtum 2002).

The intrinsic implication of such bordering attempts is that the labour market across the border may be physically near, but is perceived as distant and interpreted as there, not here, the 'other side'. The avoidance of uncertainty and wish to border oneself and identify with an existing socio-spatial category then become important motivators for non-action. The market across the border in the 'there of them' is irrelevant, something that can be neglected for the daily social practices 'here among us'. This provokes an attitude of *indifference* towards the market on the 'other side'. This idea runs counter to the above described Cartesian worldview of human action which has found its present translator in the rational agent in mainstream economics (Bourdieu 2002). Instead, what we suggest here is to include the attitude of nationally habitualised *indifference* that may help to explain why most workers do not even consider migrating or commuting across the border. The majority of the literature dealing with migratory and commuting movements however considers only those actors that have entered some kind of decision phase already. This rational choice-based view of the labour market is not doing justice to what we believe is the dominant practice: 'passiveness'. The power of the national *habitus* engenders that not everyone is willing to enter the phase in which a optimally-informed decision on action is made based on the size and content of labour market differences. This leads, what we would like to refer to, a *threshold of indifference* (see Figure 2).

What this scheme<sup>7</sup> tries to elucidate are the spatial 'dynamics' of which one of the possible outcomes is mobility on the labour market. A decision to leave a certain job or position is however not made frequently; and if someone decides to take up another job (in other words to become *occupationally* mobile), this does not automatically imply some kind of cross-border *spatial* mobility (Van der Velde 1999). In the context of this contribution, in which we focus upon cross-border spatial mobility, the 'other place', the 'there' across the border might be 'non-existent' in the mindset and therefore not included in the decision process at all. In general terms if there is no active attitude to make and value difference there will be no active

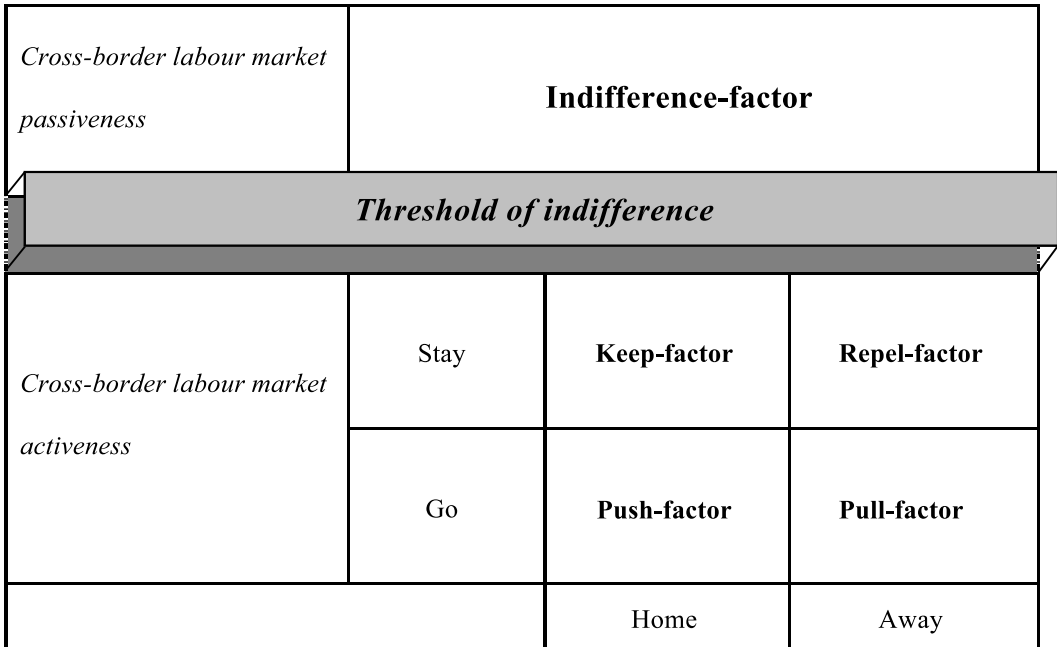


Figure 2. *The threshold of indifference.*

decision-making with regard to that specific place. When the majority of the workers does not surpass the threshold of indifference, only a small group will ‘enter’ the bottom part of the scheme, the active attitude part in which cross-border mobility is taken into full consideration. This bottom part of the scheme symbolises what is the dominant theoretical scheme on which much of EU labour policy is built, and which is usually referred to as ‘rational’ decision-making. This decision-making process is based on an evaluation of the characteristics and opportunities of the present (*home*) and a possible new location (*away*), after which a decision is made to become mobile (*go*) or stay put (*stay*) (see Straubhaar 2000). Hence, what we would bring forward here and like to add to the debate on mobility in the EU is that labour immobility is not so much a confined rational or irrational choice. To a large extent, it escapes such a strict economic choice-reasoning. Not commuting or not migrating across a border is not merely a matter of failing to recognise opportunities because of existing differences, but must rather be considered as a matter of

habitualised *indifference* towards the ‘other side’, the ‘market’ across the border.

**UNBOUNDING THE NATION**

Feelings towards ‘them’ and ‘us’ and consequent practices are crucial in understanding labour immobility. In this sense borders play an important role as socially constructed frameworks of familiar habitualised locales where possibilities on the ‘other side’ are for most people of no importance in the decision to be mobile on the labour market. With respect to a durable place of work, the nation is often still conservatively and defensively incorporated in our minds, in our bodies. It is our practical logic, our *modus operandi*. We (still) act according to this social structure and hence we tend to reproduce it (Bourdieu 2002). What is more, it can be ascertained that over the past decade or so in the EU, despite, or maybe even because of the urge that is felt to integrate, the national political sensitivity and inclination towards and practices of bordering, have been put more fiercely on the agenda.

National governments are in a process of encouraging nationalism, i.e., by underlining the national and regional advantages compared to other places, and stressing national cultural differences, when strategically promoting their (id)entity. When put in the perspective of supply and demand on the labour market, this promotion is among others aimed at attracting possible employees, which could resolve the bottleneck of the postulated mismatch between demand and supply in the labour market. The importance of transparency of (nationally differing) rules and harmonisation on the labour market, one of the essential focus points within the European Union, is thereby put in a different perspective. Rules' transparency and harmonisation may be important but certainly not sufficient to change the attitude on cross-border mobility. In the process of cheering one's own nation in the EU, the national worker is immersed in a sea of nationalistic rhetoric, grounding a conservative social focal point of the community, which surely does not add to stimulating cross-border mobility of workers. This is not to say that individual actors necessarily uncritically agree with the discursive make up of society. Yet, by publicly accepting the political emphasis and importance of (new) national (and regional) identities in an evermore-integrating European Union, the habitualisation of the 'here' becomes more important, where it concerns individual decision making processes. Hence, policies of national (and regional) governments may very well have an unintended counter-effect where it concerns the goals of overarching EU-policies. Therefore, it is not a further politicising of the European harmonisation of presented and performed differences of which we expect the highest results in terms of cross-border labour mobility, but a denationalisation of the issue of labour-market differences on the national level. Policies aiming at encouraging mobility therefore should not stress the specificity of the home nation, but first of all be aimed at opening up national confinements and at downplaying performative national differences. Borders are more than performative lines of differences, more than dark ends of the 'here-land', and more than representations of an either/or politics. Ontologically, borders also figure the crossing, the el(ev)ation, the expectation, the amalgama-

tion, and the additional. It is these transient borders that we aim and hope for in European labour market politics. For a true cross-border labour market to perform more effectively, we need to revise our nationalistic difference politics first.

#### Notes

1. We thank the participants of the HWWA Workshop 'Border Regions: Frontiers in Economic Research, Practical Experiences and Political Perspectives', held in Hamburg, 16–18 June 2002, for the opportunity to present an earlier version of this article and their helpful comments. We would also like to thank our colleagues Barbara Hooper and Olivier Kramsch for their constructive and inspiring critical remarks on an earlier version of this contribution.
2. Mobility on the labour markets has at least two different meanings, both of them are important when trying to understand the functioning of this market, *occupational mobility* and *spatial mobility*. The first one aims at changing ones actual job-position. This may involve getting a different/better job within the same organisation, changing to another employer in the same sector, or a different employment sector altogether, but also getting employment after a period of unemployment for instance. Put differently, occupational mobility is the outcome of the question: *which* jobs are workers taking? The second interpretation of labour mobility involves the spatial component or *spatial mobility*, this involves the physical-distance dimension of occupational mobility. In other words, *where* are workers taking a (new) job?
3. The extreme high share witnessed in Luxemburg can be explained by the exceptional position as a strong economy neighbouring relatively deprived regions in Belgium, France and Germany.
4. In addition, temporary (non-residential) migration, such as workers for holiday jobs or temporary work in the construction industry, are not included either.
5. MKW has included the outer-border-regions with Norway, Switzerland, Andorra, Monaco, San Marino and Liechtenstein in this figure. Cross-border commuting to Switzerland from the bordering EU-countries is quite high, which of course raises the average.
6. Comfort derives from the Latin word *comfortare*, which translates as to strengthen, to ease.

7. It is important to realise that we regard this scheme by no means as static or unchangeable. No category is fixed. Attitudes as well as borders and the valuation of the different 'stay' – and 'go' – factors are open for socially induced changes.

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