

---

# EU Migrants and the Welfare State

Interview with Jean-Michel Lafleur

---

**Carlota Moura Veiga and Inês Vidigal**

Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia (CIES-IUL), Lisboa, Portugal

---

OEm Conversations With 16

April 2020

---

Jean-Michel Lafleur is Research Professor at the University of Liège and the Associate Director of its Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies (CEDEM). He is also a Research Associate with Belgium's National Science Foundation (FRS-FNRS). He currently holds a Starting Grant from the European Research Council (ERC) to work on a project entitled "Migration and Transnational Social Protection in Post-crisis Europe".

---

**Título** Os migrantes da UE e o Estado-providência

Jean-Michel Lafleur é Professor na Universidade de Liège e Director Associado do seu Centro de Estudos Étnicos e Migratórios (CEDEM). É também investigador associado na Fundação Nacional da Ciência da Bélgica (FRS-FNRS). Actualmente é titular de uma Bolsa Inicial do Conselho Europeu de Investigação (ERC) para trabalhar num projecto intitulado "Migração e Protecção Social Transnacional na Europa Pós-crise".

**Keywords** Migration, Welfare state, Europe, EU free movement, Electoral participation.

**Palavras-chave** Migrações, Estado-providência, Livre circulação de pessoas na UE, Participação eleitoral.

**Observatório da Emigração**

Av. das Forças Armadas, ISCTE-IUL, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal

Tel. (CIES-IUL): + 351 210464018

E-mail: [observatorioemigracao@iscte.pt](mailto:observatorioemigracao@iscte.pt)

[www.observatoriodaemigracao.pt](http://www.observatoriodaemigracao.pt)

**Observatório da Emigração (OEm) – Professor Jean-Michel Lafleur is a research professor at the University of Liège and the deputy director of the centre for ethnic and migration studies. He’s also a research associate with Belgium's National Science Foundation. He currently holds a starting grant from the European research Council to work on the project entitled "Migration in Translational social protection in post crisis in Europe". Thank you very much for accepting our invitation and to come here to talk us about your project “EU Migrants and the Welfare State: Control or Protection?” that you're going to present this afternoon. You are here today exactly in the context of the ten-year conference of the Emigration Observatory, but before deepening on the on this subject, we would like to know a little bit more about your professional background and how you gain interest in the subject of migrations. Could you tell us a little more about it?**

**Jean-Michel Lafleur (JML) –** Absolutely. So I hold a PhD in political science and sociology from “SciencesPo” in Paris and the University of Liège in Belgium, and my research interest was related to the topic of migration, concerns particularly, issues of citizenship and political participation. So, my early research project really focused on the ability of immigrants to continue being politically active or politically impactful on their home country.

So, in particular I focused on questions of what we call external voting that is the right to vote of immigrants in the election of their home country and try to demonstrate why states are implementing such types of policies all over the world. And what is the impact of that kind of policies on the electoral results and on the policies and politics of those countries.

**OEm – You talked about the political participation of immigrant communities, but that's a topic that divides many people. There is not a consensus. Do you have any position on whether immigrants should have the right to vote or not?**

**JML –** I think it's in the interest of democratic societies to be as inclusive as possible and to make sure that people who live in a country, who very frequently also work and or study or seek protection in a country, actually do have a say on the way the country in which they live, are running. Now, it's not unreasonable to ask for conditions to access this voting rights because, of course, we cannot imagine a situation in which tourists will come for a few weeks to another country, would have a same as politics, but we need to find ways, and many or several European countries have find intermediary solutions in which after X amount of years of residence in a country and respecting some criteria, people are invited to vote and I think this really helps a sense of belonging of the immigrants in the local communities in which they live and I think it also helps local governments to take policies that are more reflective of the composition of the population.

**OEm – Now you're holding a grant for the Migration International Social Protection in post-crisis Europe. This is a topic that came after your PhD, not during, because during you're studying the political contents of immigrants.**

**JML** – Indeed. So, during my PhD and my postdoc I really focused on these questions of political participation, but in recent years, I've decided to reshuffle the direction of my work and to do something different. I was particularly struck around the time of what some have called the asylum crisis by the controversies in different parts of Europe about access of immigrants to welfare, access to health, access to different kind of benefits and really triggered my interest as to, really try to understand better what are these conditions of access and what other country that we can consider, maybe better examples than others when it comes to include immigrants in their welfare systems.

**OEm – So this new project of yours, it focuses, especially on the excess of immigrants to social protection and the role of sending States in this area. Are there any data or conclusions that you can share with us?**

**JML** – Yes, absolutely. So, the idea of the project is that when we talk about migration and social protection, very often we tend to present immigrants as a burden, as a cost for the welfare state in which they reside. Of course there are different studies including studies from European Commission and the OECD that have already questioned this assumption for many years showing discussing in other ways: the fiscal impact of migration. But one thing that was missing, we perceived with our project, was that we tend also to see immigrants as beneficiaries of protection, of social protection or welfare only from the country in which they reside, when in fact, in many cases, they have histories of contribution, social contribution in different countries - it can be a previous country of residence or it can be the country of origin or the same country of origin might have specific policies to help this citizens living abroad. But all these policies are kind of under the radar because of our focus on the so-called cost of migration for the receiving welfare state. So we've really looked into that and we've really identified a series of interesting results, namely that states that may be on the first sight might be very active with regard to their citizens abroad, because maybe they have special institutions to deal with this population, or they have extensive voting rights for these populations, are not necessarily those who are most protective in terms of social protection for the citizens abroad. And part of the reason for that is that protecting citizens abroad is not necessarily a diaspora policy, is not necessarily a policy that states develop with the idea of protecting citizens abroad. Actually states might be protecting the citizens abroad without even realising it simply because they've designed their welfare states in a way that make residence in the country not necessarily such a crucial criteria in order to access those benefits, as compared to other countries.

**OEm – So, without spoiling the presentation for this afternoon, could you tell us a little bit more about this point? You talk about control or protection when talking about EU migrants and the welfare state?**

**JML –** Absolutely. So, when we started the project, we were struck by a new practice that was implemented in different parts of Europe, or rather a policy, which consisted in removing the residents' permit of EU citizens who make use of welfare entitlement in the country in which they reside. Particularly in the country in which I were, Belgium. Belgium since 2011 has implemented a very strict policy by which people who receive the integration income and are EU citizens who live in Belgium for less than five years, run a serious risk of losing their right to live in Belgium. So, over several years Belgium has issued thousands of removal of residence permit, mostly to citizen of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Romania and Slovakia, but also to citizens from southern Europe, such as Italy or Portugal, which were also concerned with this Belgian policy. And so what we are trying to show, partly also in this research, and what I'll talk about this afternoon, is that there is a trend among particular North-western European member states to use social protection policies as a way to select the type of EU citizens they accept to have in their country. Of course in a space like the EU, where there is freedom of movement, restrictions to movement of population are very difficult to implement because we have made a political decision to allow the circulation. But as migration becomes an increasingly controversial topic, we see that different EU governments, different EU member states governments, are using welfare policies to actually select kind of higher skilled or more useful type of EU migrants for the labour market, and try to exclude those who, at some point of their migratory career may need the help and of the welfare system of their country of residence.

**OEm – In 2016, you published a book on South North migration in times of Crisis. What led you to focus on this topic?**

**JML –** Well around the early 2010's when the crisis really got worse in different parts of Europe, including in southern Europe, we started to see a new movement of population within the EU. Again, in my in my home country, in Belgium, we saw that migration flows from Greece to Belgium, or from Italy, double, or in some years, even tripled, which really indicated an intensification of flow from southern Europe, and Portuguese migrants also concerned by this movement to Belgium. Of course Belgium has a long history of migration from Southern Europeans and Portuguese in particular, but we thought that this migration was slowing down and with the economic crisis, we saw that these flows were increasing again and that really triggered our interest as too well, first of all one way driving them, of course, we had the intuition of the economic crisis was a strong push factors, but we were also wondering how their social economic integration in Belgium was going to occur in a completely different

context than the post-war context, in which most of the Italian migration had occurred in Belgium, for example. So we were really curious to know as to whether Italian immigrants who were in Belgium for many years would help the newcomers to integrate and to find jobs etc, and we were also curious to know as to whether the Belgian population, which today has a relatively positive image of Southern European immigration, would still have that positive image as more people were coming from Southern European countries in a time when Belgium as well was going through an economic crisis. So that's really the driver of this research project.

**OEm – One of the study countries of your book is Portugal. Portugal has a slightly different migratory context from the other Southern European countries. Were there any facts about Portugal emigration or the Portuguese emigration that surprised you?**

**JML** – Well, I guess one of the lessons I've learned working with Portuguese colleagues on this project was also this idea that, even though they are periods of stronger and weaker movement in the emigration history in Portugal, it has never really stopped being an emigration country. Of course, it has for several decades also become an immigration country, but people have not completely stopped leaving the country, and I think that makes it quite an interesting, and maybe not unique, but certainly a special case within Europe of a country that has become, at the same time a very attractive place for non-European migrants, but also for some type of EU migrants, such as retirees who are very interested in coming to Portugal, and at the same time is also attracting certain types of non-EU migrants that I said earlier.

**OEm – So, focusing on your book, you talk about the fact that the principle of free movement by which the European Union's bound does not apply equally to all European citizens. Could you elaborate on that a little further, because one of the cases that you point out is the United Kingdom, which in times of crisis was the biggest destination for Portuguese emigration.**

**JML** – Well, so the argument that we are trying to develop in the book is that because of the evolution of welfare policies in different North-western member states of the EU, there are certain "EU Free Movers" who can move more easily than others. The mobility of people in situations of retirement, or people who are students, is usually not very contentious, not very controversial of course for Europe. But then on the contrary, the mobility, especially when it's temporary short-term mobility of people who are maybe lower skilled migrants, or people who come to occupy jobs in which there is high competition in the labour market. We perceive that this sometimes creates tensions or resentment among the local population. And therefore, we see that in certain situations, states have adjusted to this and have made it harder for certain types of migrants that they consider undesirable to come and settle in their country.

**OEm – Thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to, to address our or talk to us about?**

**JML –** No, thank you very much for your invitation and I look forward to doing some discussion this afternoon.

**OEm – Thank you very much for your interview and for your work and for being here with us to celebrate this 10-year anniversary. Thank you.**

[Interview held in Lisbon, on November 27th, 2019,  
edited for publication on April 2020.]

# OEm

## Observatório da Emigração

O Observatório da Emigração é uma estrutura técnica e de investigação independente integrada no Centro de Investigação e Estudos de Sociologia (CIES-IUL), do ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa –, onde tem a sua sede. Funciona com base numa parceria entre o CIES-IUL, o Centro de Estudos Geográficos (CEG), da Universidade de Lisboa, o Instituto de Sociologia (IS-UP), da Universidade do Porto, e o Centro de Investigação em Sociologia Económica e das Organizações (SOCIUS), da Universidade de Lisboa. Tem um protocolo de cooperação com o Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros.

---

<b>Série</b>	OEm Conversations With, 16
<b>Título</b>	EU Migrants and the Welfare State: Interview with Jean-Michel Lafleur
<b>Autores</b>	Carlota Moura Veiga and Inês Vidigal
<b>Editor</b>	Observatório da Emigração, CIES-IUL, ISCTE-IUL
<b>Data</b>	April 2020
<b>ISSN</b>	2183-718X
<b>DOI</b>	10.15847/CIESOEMCW162020
<b>URI</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10071/20346">http://hdl.handle.net/10071/20346</a>

---

**Como citar** Veiga, Carlota Moura and Inês Vidigal (2020), “EU Migrants and the Welfare State: Interview with Jean-Michel Lafleur”, *OEm Conversations With*, 16, Lisboa, Observatório da Emigração, CIES-IUL, ISCTE-IUL. DOI 10.15847/CIESOEMCW162020

---

[www.observatorioemigracao.pt](http://www.observatorioemigracao.pt)



### Parceiros



Centro de Estudos Geográficos  
IGOT - UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA



### Apoios



REPÚBLICA  
PORTUGUESA

MINISTÉRIO DOS NEGÓCIOS ESTRANGEIROS



COMUNIDADES  
PORTUGUESAS