

Illegal immigration has been near the top of the political agendas of the member states of the Council of Europe for almost two decades. They are all worried about the scale of the phenomenon and the ways in which it is changing, as well as its effects on the countries involved, and are concerned that it should not exacerbate social tensions and conflicts. It is a major domestic policy issue for all of them. No government wants to give its electorate the impression that it has lost control of its borders, and this goes some way to explaining the eagerness to strengthen control mechanisms rather than bother about the root causes of the problem, which are to be found in the unequal development of north and south. The new factor over the last decade has been the often tragic nature of this type of migration, which increasingly often involves human deaths at sea, in lorries, on planes, or, notoriously, in the Channel Tunnel. Such events have in some cases had serious repercussions on public opinion. For example, the Dover tragedy, which saw the death of fifty-eight illegal immigrants, elicited strong emotional reactions throughout western Europe, as well as in China, where the immigrants had come from. There was a similar reaction to the two African teenagers who tried to reach the Europe of their dreams by stowing away in the undercarriage of a plane and whose story became all the more poignant when their letter explaining their choice was made public. But who remembers them now? One might even conclude that such tragedies have become so commonplace as to lose all impact, public opinion no longer being mobilised except to protest against the inconvenience caused by the “presence” of foreigners (Sangatte), rather than being moved by the deaths announced almost daily. The other lesson of the last decade is the change in how international migration is perceived. It is now accepted that it can no longer be dealt with simply in terms of relations between host countries and countries of origin. The acceleration of population movements at global level, the proliferation of channels of mobility, the repeated reactive movements, the accumulation within a single country of the functions of departure, transit and settlement, all require a new political approach to “international population movements”.