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EU2022.CZ



EMN Czech Presidency Conference

EU and Labour Migration: Needs, Strategies and Challenges

Concept Note

05-06 October 2022

Prague, Czech Republic

RATIONALE AND AIMS

Labour migration is a topic that has been receiving increasing attention at the European level over the last few years. The political discussions are not only related to the challenges associated with **labour mobility** and the creation of **common admission and procedural standards**. The issue of **cooperation with countries of origin of migrant workers** has been increasingly brought under the spotlight. Special focus is put on the topic of enhancing the success of the European Union **in the global competition for skilled workers**.

A wide range of different **strategies** are implemented by the Member States of the European Union in creating national migration policies, and in **identifying the migration needs** in such a manner so as to fill the existing **labour shortages** as best as possible. Various challenges associated with the presence of migrant workers in host countries lead the Member States to focus their attention to further develop responsive **pro-integration measures**. Modern technologies provide the EU and its Member States with effective tools, allowing them to explore **innovative solutions for labour migration management**, but these technologies also simultaneously reshape the global labour market and transform the traditional forms of labour.

In the last three years, labour migration policies of Member States had to adapt to **unexpected and unprecedented events** that had profound and game-changing impacts on the European labour market and created new kinds of challenges. First, the outburst of the **COVID-19 pandemic** at the beginning of 2020 and the related global restrictions on the international movement of persons led to the temporary **reduction of admission procedures** to only essential workers and a provisional extension of the stay of migrant workers already admitted. The limited inflow of new migrant workers has shown that many key sectors of national economies are dependent on acquiring, and subsequently retaining, not only **highly qualified foreign specialists** but also large numbers of foreign workers performing **less-skilled professions**.

Only two years later, the **Russian military invasion of Ukraine** on 24 February 2022 deeply shocked the whole European Union and the entire world. Since then, Member States have been exposed to a mass influx of more than 5 million **refugees fleeing from Ukraine**. In response to this development, the European Union activated the **temporary protection scheme** for the first time in its history. The stay of its beneficiaries who received access to employment in the Member States will probably have a long-lasting influence on national labour markets and recruitment strategies of employers. Exceptional events such as the Ukrainian refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably draw the attention of all responsible policymakers to the question of whether existing labour migration management systems are sufficiently adaptive, flexible, and resilient.

The aim of the conference is to bring together a wide group of leading experts in order to exchange information and opinions, share best practices and gain a new perspective on the issues mentioned above.

I. Labour migration pathways

The European Union has long been consistently striving to strengthen its position in the global competition for talents and skills and raise the attractiveness of the European labour market to qualified migrant workers. Although much work has already been done in this field, a lot more of it seems to be ahead of us since the competition intensifies. The **Skills and Talent Package** that was presented by the European Commission in April 2022 represents the latest contribution to this continuing effort.

The Member States traditionally receive migrant workers from non-EU countries through demand-driven migration systems according to the required skills or economic sectors with labour shortages. Due to the differences in the structures of economies and labour markets among the individual Member States, a wide range of different strategies are implemented at the national level in creating efficient migration systems. The fundamental task of each system is to **identify the migration needs** (the target volume and structure of labour migration inflow) and to design the most practical **tools for receiving foreign workers** and filling the existing labour shortages. Successful development of sustainable labour migration policies capable of finishing these tasks requires **close cooperation between the public and private sectors**; a partnership in which the role of the government is not limited to setting the regulatory frameworks for admission of migrant workers and the private sector's role is not limited to their recruitment.

Migrant workers may engage in shortage occupations only if effective job matching mechanisms are in place and the host countries address **obstacles to migrants' access to essential jobs** without lowering existing professional standards. At present, the **recognition of the migrants' qualifications** for the purpose of their access to regulated professions is the focus of intense interest at the European level, with an emphasis on the need to develop more flexible mechanisms for verifying informal skills. In addition to that, one of the main obstacles in the migration process commonly mentioned by employers includes the uncertainty of whether the selected foreigner will meet the conditions for receiving a residence permit or whether their foreign qualification will be recognised in the host country. One of the ways of mitigating this risk is to create instruments that would allow some of the **criteria for eligibility** to be verified already before a residence application is filed in instances where migrants have previously expressed their interest to be employed in the host country. At the EU level, the possibility of developing the **EU Talent Pool** brings potential progress in this respect.

Similar challenges recently occurred when Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection started to enter the labour markets of EU Members States without possessing official documents proving their professional qualifications.

In the aforementioned contexts, the EMN conference will attempt to answer some of the following questions:

- **What are the most effective methods of identifying short-term and long-term migration needs? Which actors may play a seminal role in this process? What benefits may arise from deeper involvement of the private sector?**
- **What monitoring and analytical tools could be used to evaluate the effectiveness of migration tools with respect to satisfaction of the labour market needs? How can we further improve skills matching mechanisms that are currently in place?**
- **What are the main obstacles to efficiently fill labour shortages with migration and what are the effective ways of eliminating such obstacles? What is the added value of recognition of migrants' qualifications as an element of the immigration procedure?**
- **How will current initiatives, such as the Skills and Talent Package, contribute to attracting skills and talents to the EU? In which directions should we focus our efforts further?**
- **What might probably be the most important short-term and long-term impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the EU labour market? What lessons for designing labour migration policies should we learn from major events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the mass influx of Ukrainian refugees?**

II. Cooperation with non-EU countries

In demand-driven migration systems, the satisfaction of the labour market needs depends on the success of the **recruitment of foreign workers**, which typically takes place in the territories of their countries of origin. When acquiring foreign workers, a number of states choose close bilateral **cooperation with selected countries of origin of migrant workers** and create migration projects for the defined target groups of their citizens. At the EU level, high expectations are currently being put on the extension of the concept of these migration partnerships and on the creation of an EU framework for cooperation with countries of origin and the destination countries (**Talent Partnerships**) as a part of the operational pillar of a sustainable EU policy on legal migration.

The cooperation schemes always have to be seen from the perspective of the country of origin as well as from the perspective of the host countries and they should address specific needs on both sides. Bilateral cooperation needs to be managed by considering that for the **source countries of labour migration**, the departure of their citizens is always a combination of benefits (e.g. remittances), costs (e.g. brain drain), and challenges (e.g. reintegration of migrants into the labour market after their return).

There are also fundamental differences between the **approaches of countries of origin to regulating the recruitment of their citizens to work abroad**, and these differences need to be taken into account not only in establishing possible bilateral cooperation but also in creating the host country's migration policy with respect to the protection of migrants as well as the prevention of security risks associated with migration. The actual recruitment of foreign workers in various countries of origin may take on a highly institutionalised form, consistently regulated and monitored by authorities of these countries (licenses for job placement services, exit visas, etc.), but it can also happen through informal contact networks.

On the part of the **countries hosting migrant workers**, cooperation with third countries brings a similar combination of benefits and costs. Attention has to be paid to issues concerning the protection of workers' rights or portability of social benefits but also to potential risks such as social dumping, overstaying, or re-migration of admitted workers to the other Member States. A wide group of actors including state administration bodies, local and regional authorities, and social partners shall be involved in the implementation of mobility projects and talent partnerships in host countries.

Therefore, with reference to the aforementioned facts, the EMN presidency conference will examine, for example, the following questions:

- **What added value would bilateral or multilateral partnerships with selected countries of origin bring to the EU and the national level?**
- **What has been the overall experience with cooperation schemes so far and what good practices should we follow?**
- **Should the state play a more active role in acquiring workers from third countries?**
- **Which main promises, expectations, concerns, and challenges are associated with partnerships from the perspective of countries of origin and host countries?**
- **What are examples of good practices used by the workers' countries of origin for regulating the recruitment of workers?**

III. Migrant workers in the territory of the EU

Labour migration helps satisfy the host countries' demand for their labour force and brings evident benefits, but the presence of migrant workers (and their reunified families) may also bring certain challenges and put additional demands on public services, especially in places with a large migrant population and a high concentration of economic activities. In this respect, the impacts are felt particularly by regional and local governments. The experience shows that targeted **pre-departure assistance and post-arrival integration measures** (particularly the existence of a functional network of assistance, consultancy, and education services for the migrants newly arriving in the territory of the host country) are of crucial importance. The same applies to the close **cooperation of the government authorities with the municipalities impacted by the presence of migrant workers and their families** in developing the infrastructure, supporting a problem-free coexistence between foreign workers and the local majority society, and preventing potential negative sociocultural phenomena.

As the Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027¹ emphasises, effective integration policies tackling obstacles regarding access to education, housing, and health need to be put in place to facilitate overall inclusion and better labour market integration. An active approach from the employers of foreign nationals who brought foreign workers to the territory of the host country in seeking and implementing suitable solutions, as well as an active approach on the side of the migrant workers themselves, is necessary.

Employment of migrant workers must go hand in hand with the **protection of employee rights**, work safety, equal treatment at work, and equal remuneration. These issues are traditionally addressed by **trade unions** that are indispensable participants in the debate on

¹ Communication on the Action plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027, COM (2020) 758 final, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0758&qid=1632299185798>, last accessed on 3 August 2022

labour migration management. At the very practical level, trade unions are also well familiar with various challenges arising from language barriers and cultural differences that may occur at workplaces in the process of inclusion of migrants in work teams of local employees.

In many Member States, Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection will, to some extent, address shortages in the labour market. Their immediate presence in the host country and their free or simplified access to employment make them highly attractive to employers willing to recruit foreign workers. As a result, admission of workers from other third countries may temporarily be reduced in favour of employment of Ukrainians provided that there is a match between jobseekers' skills and shortage jobs. This applies especially to the Member States where a big Ukrainian diaspora already existed before the Russian invasion of Ukraine and where many refugees are therefore expected to remain also after the war ends.

Reacting to the situation of Ukrainian refugees, the European Commission invited the Member States to support the **pilot project** on accelerated development of the portal and database of the **EU Talent Pool** to serve the purpose of mapping the skills of beneficiaries of temporary protection and matching their professional profiles with job offers from European employers.

Therefore, the following questions will be asked during the conference:

- **What set of services needs to be offered to the arriving foreign workers?**
- **What precautions can be taken to tackle various challenges that may arise with the arrival of migrant workers to local communities in the territory of a host country? What infrastructure upgrades need to be ensured in connection with the arrival of migrants in places with a high concentration of population?**
- **What are the good examples of efficient involvement of actors like local and regional authorities, non-governmental organisations, social partners, or migrant-led organisations in preparing and implementing the necessary measures aimed at smooth integration of migrant workers, maintaining positive public perception of immigration, and efficient monitoring of the working and living conditions of migrant workers?**
- **What is the approach of trade unions towards the challenges associated with the presence of labour migrants in host countries and what role they may play in tackling these challenges?**
- **What are the examples of good practices used in cooperation between the central government and the local government in the area of integration of migrant workers and strengthening of local infrastructure?**
- **What are the employment opportunities for Ukrainian refugees in the Members States? Which labour matching tools and mechanisms could be used? Which long-lasting consequences of the integration of beneficiaries of temporary protection into the labour market can we expect?**

IV. Talent attraction and impact of new technologies on labour migration

Digitalisation and robotisation processes will bring about profound structural changes in the labour market in near future. These trends are already generating a considerable number of jobs in the field of **information technologies**, which employers from well-established companies as well as start-up companies are unable to fill with employees from the domestic workforce. **Coders and other workers in the IT sector** are already among the **shortage professions** that are in the highest demand in the EU labour market and are also the professions, which are most often represented among the accepted high-skilled migrants. The global competition for such workers presents a big challenge for the entire European Union.

Nevertheless, the development of information technologies allows employers and Members States to explore the use of the innovative digital tools and solutions **to attract qualified**

migrant IT specialists, start-up founders, or entrepreneurs, and recruiting skilled migrants of all professions from any part of the world. There is enough evidence that success in this field combined with targeted policies supporting businesses, hubs, and incubators may give rise to a dynamic business environment in which companies thrive and generate economic gains.

The workers in the IT sector typically perform work involving skills acquired through working experience, not through formal education, for which the relatively rigid systems of host countries for recognising qualifications acquired abroad are not sufficiently prepared. The revision of the EU Blue Card Directive is an example of positive progress at the EU level towards the admission of such foreign workers by the Member States.

The trend of information technology development also brings new specific phenomena into the sphere of labour migration, such as the phenomenon referred to as “**digital nomadism**” (e.g. migrants living in one country but working in another). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to strengthening the trend of remote work, including work performed at a home office abroad, in many professions not directly related to the IT sector.

Last but not least, the use of information technologies also brings extensive possibilities to the process of permitting residence and employment for foreign workers (digitalisation of the admission procedures).

Concerning the trends and challenges mentioned above, the EMN presidency conference will attempt to respond to the following questions, among others, in the discussion:

- **What actions can help boost our success in the global competition for skilled information technology experts?**
- **What are Member States’ good practices in supporting innovative entrepreneurs and start-ups?**
- **What are the existing examples of innovative best practices regarding the use of information technologies for attracting and recruiting talents?**
- **In what way it will be necessary to adapt the migration systems to the new forms of work, which are being brought by the development of modern technologies?**