

Flo Van den Broeck, 18 May 2021

COVID-19 and lower skilled migrant workers: which lessons for Europe?

Background: the ones that are forgotten

During the COVID-19 crisis, migrant workers proved to be indispensable to keep European citizens healthy, fed and safe. Being at the frontline of the pandemic, however, they put themselves at great risk. Not only with regard to contamination due to unprotected work, but also in terms of job loss and wage reductions because of their temporary and informal employment. Although migrant workers have always faced a number of challenges, the current global health emergency exposes these structural inequalities even more.

Especially key workers in low-skilled professions such as personal care work, cleaning services and transport seem to be the victims, despite their crucial role in supporting European economies, public services and filling labour shortages these days. Because of their precarious residency and employment status, irregular and regular less-skilled migrants often have limited access to bodies that protect and monitor their employment rights and working conditions.

Although migrant labour demand in Europe is mostly concentrated on these low-skilled sectors, the labour immigration debate has in the last couple of years mainly focused on the need to attract more highly skilled migrants. By only focussing on facilitating highly skilled labour migration, Europe is missing out an important category of migrant workers that is already part of our societies. Even though EU labour migration directives put emphasis on guaranteeing equal treatment of these migrant groups, the allocation of rights and different degrees of equality are clearly driven by migrant's qualifications and attributed skill levels.

With this in mind, this paper will explore more in depth how this global health crisis exposes the EU's sectorial approach to labour migration and why it is so important to bring about change. To do this, the EU's funding and labour migration instruments will

be assessed, as well as the relevant labour market integration challenges and patterns.

Until now, little attention has been given to shaping labour migration, as in the last years the focus has largely been on controlling irregular migration flows. The importance of reconsidering labour immigration at all skill levels should however not be underestimated, as it will contribute to the recovery from this pandemic.

State of play

Highly skilled vs. lower skilled migrant workers

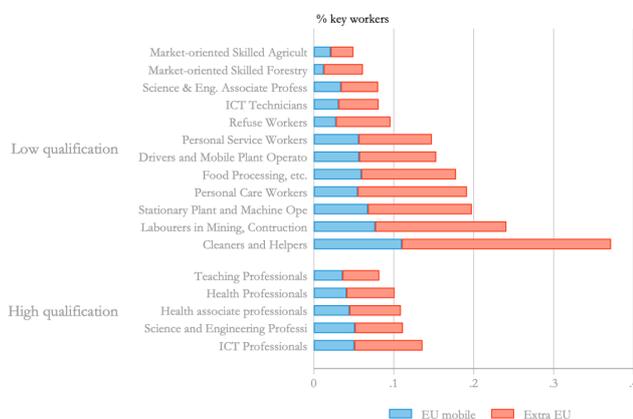
When zooming away from the broader EU policy setting, inequality among third-country workers is clearly visible. To begin with, a difference is exposed between the EU's approach to highly qualified labour migrants, or the ones "with qualifications as a manager, executive, professional, technician or similar" and the lower skilled, being the migrants with few formal qualifications and often in low-wage positions.

The EU Blue Card scheme, for example, sets out to improve the EU's ability to attract this particular category of higher skilled migrants "to increase the contribution of legal immigration to enhancing the competitiveness of the EU economy". For the lower skilled, however, there is no such tool that creates a flexible procedure for their admission and attractive residence conditions for them and their family.

However, to get out of global crises, it seems not enough to focus only on attracting "talented and highly skilled migrants". The Commission's latest publication from 2015 (!) on bottleneck vacancies showed that only 4 out of 8 profession groups within the EU require highly skilled qualifications. A 2021 report on bottleneck professions in Belgium, as an illustration, thereby still displays a mixture of high and low-skilled professions.

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Despite their general preferential treatment, high-skilled foreign workers disappeared from view with the advent of the COVID-19 crisis. While in ‘normal’ times they were coveted, in-demand and deemed essential for a strong economy, data shows they are now being overshadowed by the less-skilled migrants in essential sectors such as care work, food processing, agriculture, transport and storage work. To illustrate, extra-EU workers make up nearly 30% of cleaners and helpers, 17% of personal care workers and 9% of drivers and mobile plant operators. As shown in the graph below, their share in the higher skilled key professions is however much smaller.



Note: Occupations are defined following ISCO 2 digits classification. (F. FASSANI and J. MAZZA, ‘A Vulnerable Workforce: Migrants Workers in the COVID-19 Pandemic’.)

Even though the pandemic has underlined the importance of the lower skilled in our societies, this category of workers is most likely to be denied human rights and prevented from accessing essential services according to a 2020 report of Amnesty International. This notwithstanding that the Commission regularly mentions new efforts “to prevent and combat labour exploitation” and “to ensure the protection of the rights of the migrants who are working in the EU, in particular to prevent labour exploitation, irrespective of their legal status”. In reality, however, these good intentions never seem to be translated in concrete proposals on EU-level.

Temporary workers: a love-hate relationship

In the last years, the EU’s policy agenda was clearly driven by the member states’ immigration policy priorities, which followed a selective approach based on the perceived labour market needs. Still today, these policies are likely to promote temporariness of less skilled migration, mostly jeopardizing integration

perspectives of migrant workers. Having a 48% higher probability of being a temporary worker, they are often the ones whose access is denied to education and training, labour market guidance and recognition of skills and qualifications.

Furthermore, because of the quarantines and restrictions on mobility and travel due to COVID-19, this group of temporary work migrants proves more vulnerable than ever because of job insecurity. Not only is it more difficult for them to work from home, but they are also increasingly facing problems with renewing their work permits and visas. Due to these factors, their employment rate has fallen by 62.7% since the beginning of the crisis.

As a consequence of a deteriorating economic situation, they might therefore be forced to return to their country of origin or stay as undocumented immigrants. For those allowed to work, the situation is however not much better, as they are often the ones being highly exposed to contagion. Migrants in both situations are hence not able to always perform essential jobs, preventing them to contribute to the recovery from this pandemic.

Undocumented migrants: renewed hope?

Without doubt, the most vulnerable and prone to exploitation are the irregular and undocumented migrants. Being employed in the informal economy, they have limited or no access to social protection, unemployment benefits and sick pay. As a consequence, the ‘lucky’ ones, whose work is still possible during this pandemic, are forced to keep on working, thereby risking their health and that of those around them.

Besides long working hours in dangerous and unhygienic conditions, they are often living in informal settlements lacking basic health services and infrastructures, leading to even a greater risk of catching the virus. Although these migrants are entitled to urgent medical services, it is unlikely that they will go to the hospital when being affected. This is the case because they are afraid to be reported to the police or that data will be shared with immigration authorities. Access to social and health care services along with adequate income support and inclusive labour markets are nevertheless cornerstones of effective inclusion and integration policies. These are fundamental rights, regardless of status.

With the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) of 2021-2027, the EU however announced change in the area of socio-economic inclusion of third country nationals. The minimum share that each member state should allocate for this namely increased from 20% to 25%. While this sounds very promising, this 'change' could merely be symbolic as most countries already allocated between 20-30% to this specific objective before.

Thereby, it remains to be seen if the Fund will really enhance the inclusivity of all migrants, including the ones most affected from the economic consequences of the pandemic. The division between longer-term integration measures (ESF+) and the responsibility for early integration measures (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund) could have unintended consequences. Undocumented migrants, for whom it is already very difficult to benefit from the ESF, could for example fall through the gaps.

Policy recommendations

Despite the evolution to a single EU labour market, the EU's approach to legal labour migration has been very limited and fragmented. By just focusing on specific categories of legal migrants, the Union clearly proved not ready for the challenges brought forward by the COVID-19 crisis. To support potential economic recovery, Europe should reconsider immigration at all skill levels and all different durations of stay. Instead of solely focusing on high qualifications and long-term residents, the EU and its member states should pay more attention to essential roles and occupations in our society today. Only by shifting our focus, it will be possible to contribute to a sustainable recovery wherein everyone's health is protected and no one is left behind.

When one looks at the current EU labour migration law and policy, one sees however that there is still a lot of work to be done. As it seemingly is characterised by inequality of treatment, the Union should urgently step up its engagement to address and sanction discrimination. This can be done by strengthening existing equality and non-discrimination legislation and actions in employment. Drawing on the political guidelines of European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, it is thereby about time to adopt new legislation that ensures better protection of all migrants.

In a more inclusive way, EU-level labour migration policies should furthermore incorporate measures to facilitate the labour market integration of all flows of third country nationals. By treating these migrants as an integral part of labour supply and not as a 'disposable' migrant worker, it will be possible to contribute to more sustainable growth and development. Longer-term temporary visas and hence reduced mobility will moreover lead to more productive migrants and less unproductive churning.

Thereby, policy action supporting the migrant workers not only in the formal, but also informal economy will be critical in the recovery phase of this pandemic. Data on migrants working in the informal sector is however not always part of the national statistics. Policy reforms will therefore require new data collected through grassroot leaders and civil society organisations. Only with their help, the ESF+ will be able to reach out to all migrant groups. Yet, to not fall through the funding gaps, also clear guidelines are needed on which migrants are eligible to benefit from ESF-backed initiatives.

Conclusion: shifting our focus

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught Europe many lessons. It has highlighted the importance of 'essential' jobs these times, which were often performed by the lower skilled migrant workers. Considering the imbalance between the contribution of this group to the pandemic and the EU's unfavourable approach, adequate policy responses are definitely appropriate. A start could be shifting the focus from a distinction between low- and high-skilled migrant workers to more specific roles and occupations.

Furthermore, this pandemic is an opportunity to make much needed structural changes with regard to inclusivity of EU labour migration policies. Bearing in mind the Commission's empty promises in the past, it remains to be seen if the ESF+ will really contribute to more inclusive societies. Without including the entire migrant population, however, our experience today with the COVID-19 crisis shows that it will be difficult to recover from a crisis.

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