

POLICY BRIEF



SIRIUS

Skills and Integration of Migrants,
Refugees and Asylum Applicants
in European Labour Markets

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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PARTNERS IN LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN EUROPE: POLICY LESSONS FROM THE SIRIUS RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

Social partners play a key role in labour market dynamics as they contribute towards determining the policy and legal frameworks that shape labour markets, but also the social, political and economic trends in which labour markets are embedded. Therefore, an examination of social partners' understanding of the newcomers' capacities and their appreciation of opportunities and challenges to be addressed is unavoidable in any research willing to understand how to facilitate unlocking the employment potential of third country nationals, being these migrants, refugees or asylum applicants (MRAs—please note that SIRIUS only focuses on non-EU migrants).

Therefore, in this policy brief we present evidence and policy considerations about the role social partners and social dialogue play in labour market integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, with the aim to present the views of trade unions and employers representatives concerning barriers or enablers of post-2014 MRAs integration in European labour markets across the seven countries studied in SIRIUS (Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). We focus on post-2014 MRAs given the peak in migration and asylum figures Europe has experienced in 2015 and 2016 and the limited research-based evidence about them.

Our findings reveal that some of the key issues that had been discussed by extant studies, and in particular the dilemmas faced by unions vis-a-vis migrants (e.g. if they are to include them among their beneficiaries and members, how to mitigate the potential competitive spirals newcomers bring in the receiving society labour markets, how to avoid social/wage dumping, etc..) are still relevant.

Our data also show the social partners' awareness about the higher (than local workers) risks migrants incur for their health and safety due to the regulations of migration and asylum which often produce, as a negative externality, the fostering of newcomers to employment in the irregular economy, or to jobs requiring lower skills, leading to wasted talent, demotivation, and potential social isolation.

Furthermore, our survey reveals the appreciation that social partners have of newcomers' skills, of their potential for the wellbeing of our societies and economies, a potential which very often remains unrealised. This is due to reasons that are at a time pertinent to our society's regulation of migration (migration and asylum law, recognition of skills and educational attainment levels, services to improve newcomers' capacities to adapt to our labour markets, etc..) and a time connected with the characteristics of the migrants themselves (language proficiency, social capital, personal well-being and health). Such results are fully consistent with the analyses we have carried out in previous work packages, providing us with robust (triangulated) evidence about the further efforts policy makers, but social partners too, should engage in.

We have identified the following **perception and views about MRAs' integration into labour markets**:

- The understanding that social partners have of migrants depends among other factors from the characteristics of migrants themselves and from the experience that a given country has had with immigration. Two thirds of social partners that we have surveyed think that so-called economic migrants are either highly skilled or moderately skilled, but the percentage goes down to less than one every two for refugees. Conversely, only one in five respondents believe economic migrants do not possess meaningful skills, versus almost one in every two thinking the same for refugees. Social partners in countries like Italy, Greece and the Czech Republic, which have attracted primarily migrants to take up jobs requiring fewer qualifications, mainly in the agriculture, manufacture and the care sectors, or which are employed in the irregular economy, show a smaller share of social partners perceiving migrants as highly skilled individuals than the other countries. While in countries that either have a long tradition of immigration such as the UK, or in countries where migrants have been employed also in skilled occupations, like in Finland, there is a far more developed appreciation of migrants' skills among social partners;
- Unions appear to have a stronger appreciation of newcomers' skills than the other social partners. Although unions may express concerns regarding social dumping, they appear as the most open category among social partners towards migrants;
- Still, social partners across SIRIUS countries do not subscribe to the anti-migrant rhetoric: large majority of respondents consider migrants an asset or more an asset than a burden for their countries, and one in every two has the same appreciation for refugees; only in the Czech Republic there is a consistent share (one third) of social partners among those who responded to our survey who consider newcomers as only being a burden while in Denmark, Finland and Switzerland, a similar share of respondents considers refugees to be more of a burden than as asset (respectively 24%, 41%, and 25% of respondents);

- Social partners' experts seem to share to a certain extent the idea a tension exists between newcomers and native workers, and in fact almost one in every two of our respondents admit the newcomers' arrival has created tensions in the labour market; trade unions appear to be the actor most concerned by such tensions between newcomers and the local workforce. Such a concern is similarly distributed across our countries, with the most concerned respondents being located in the Czech Republic and those least concerned in Switzerland and in the UK;
- The most relevant reasons for such tensions to occur are related with the perceived competition for jobs brought by migrants, and, connected to this aspect, the risk of lowering wages. However, causes of tensions are considered also to be the perceived cultural differences, and related to this aspect, the perceived religious differences. The role of populist parties is also recognised as a cause of tensions by one every two respondents. There is difference between countries in which the perceived competition for jobs is clearly a salient reason to explain the perceived competition among migrants and local workers (Greece, Italy, Switzerland and the UK) and those countries in which job competition is a relevant concern but not as important as perceived cultural differences (the Czech Republic, Denmark and Finland);
- Only in the Czech Republic and Denmark EU policy makers are considered to be stoking tensions on labour migration. In Denmark, perhaps that is due to the country's usually protective stance towards any attempt brought in by the EU to Europeanize social policies, which are perceived as attempts to challenge its welfare state, its tripartite based labour market and industrial relations system, and its wage system. In the Czech Republic, perhaps due to the country's reluctance to adhere to the EU system of quota distribution for asylum seekers and relatedly the EU's more open approach towards internal mobility and infra-EU migration.

The analysis furthermore identified the following **barriers** of MRAs integration:

- Language proficiency, legal and administrative hurdles, lack of mechanisms for the recognition of qualifications, lack of services that support integration, skills mismatch, and also discrimination, cultural differences as well as poor knowledge about the labour market of the host country are identified as the most relevant causes preventing the full realisation of migrants or refugees' employment potential;
- A configuration of ineffective policies to address skills needs that newcomers might address, an environment which is often legally and socially obstructive, with poor opportunities to have qualifications and skills recognized, can lead to a situation in which newcomers end up working in the irregular economy, taking up jobs that locals are not willing to do, resulting in a large scale waste of talent. In some countries, as explained by the Italian, Greek and Czech cases, third country nationals may end up in precarious, and sometimes irregular, work;
- Slightly less than one in every two respondents say that their organisation has been involved in social dialogue processes in the past five years in the specific field of migration. On the one hand, such a result can be considered a positive sign given the difficult years trade unions have been experiencing in the past decades due to de-unionization and changes in the labour market. On the other hand, however, given the salient role immigration has played in public and political debates across Europe, the result tells us something about the real commitment that social and political actors have in solving immigration issues. Moreover, there are no major differences across countries in these results.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Building upon the aforementioned main findings, the most relevant policy implications are:

- Although evidence suggests that asylum seekers and refugees experience an extremely stressful situation which may hinder their well-being and capacity to work, the skills they have acquired in their earlier life and work do not disappear as they move forward. Hence, we

should all refrain from an aprioristic evaluation of people's skills on the simple basis of their reason to migrate;

- Although there are consistent examples of businesses and companies vocal in their support for labour market integration including for the most vulnerable groups of newcomers (cfr. the Italian report in the integrated report document), there is still room for improvement in the private sector for a full understanding of the potential which lies within refugees and asylum seekers that still remains unrealised;
- Social partners identified the need to have more language classes provisions, but also different migration policies, given that, legislation makes it very difficult for third country nationals, and in particular for asylum seekers, to enter the labour market and gain regular, stable and decent employment. Social partners consider also that better job search support services, along with skills matching and skills profiling, and job mentoring, could improve the employment situation of TCNs. Furthermore, antidiscrimination and anti-exploitation policies (or a more effective implementation of these) would help too;
- Employment inspections and minimum wages are viable options to improve integration into labour market. In particular, the need to improve the tools and resources to implement job place inspections appear as salient measures in Italy and in Greece. In the former, further inspections could perhaps contribute reducing the massive use of irregular workers in the agriculture industry of Southern regions and the terrible consequences this has had on the life of the immigrants involved;
- There is a need for both policy makers at various levels of government and social partners to commit to create further social dialogue opportunities. Too few cases of social dialogue have occurred across our seven countries in the field of labour migration, but social dialogue seems to us a (if not the) fundamental tool to solve problems occurring in such a polarized domain of migration, and in what is even a more contentious one, that of labour migration. A more coordinated multi-actor effort based on dialogue and mutual understanding, as represented by social dialogue should be encouraged.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The SIRIUS research project looks at the enablers and barriers of labour market integration of non-EU migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Our research is organised into several work packages, and this report details the findings of the fifth work package, building on our previous research in work packages one, two and three: Work package one analyses the labour market position of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the SIRIUS countries. Work package two details the legal frameworks of each SIRIUS partner country relevant to inhibiting or enabling integration. Work package three focused on migrant labour market integration (MLI) policies and services. Work package four focused on the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in MLI. Work package five, upon which this policy brief is based, focused on the views and role of Social Partners in MLI. More specifically, this work package addressed the following objectives: (a) to explore the views of social partners representatives concerning recent migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers and their employability and integration potential; (b) to analyse the barriers in the integration into labour market from the viewpoint of social partners; (c) to identify the enablers in the integration into labour market from the viewpoint of social partners. The research presents findings from a four-month long process of field work of interviews with social partners (gathering overall 123 interviews) complemented by an experts' survey which managed to collect responses from 293 additional social partners' representatives across our seven countries (Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Finland, Italy, Switzerland and the UK).

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FURTHER READING

WP1 Report – Labour Market Barriers and Enablers – Comparative report on the position of post-2014 migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the labour market (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)

WP2 Report – Legal Barriers and Enablers – Comparative report on the legal, institutional and socio-cultural analysis (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)

WP3 Report – Policy Barriers and Enablers (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)

WP4 Report – Civil Society Barriers and Enablers (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)

WP5 Report – Social Partners Barriers and Enablers (available on <https://www.sirius-project.eu/publications>)