

Migrant labour in Slovenia

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Abstract:

Migrant workers are a population still significantly affected by informal economy and remain the least protected category of workers in Slovenia. Employment policies that once welcomed migrants to supplement the workforce deficit also due to Slovenia's aging population have changed and now contain regulations that work against migrant employment. New restrictions have been applied, intended to avert migrants from entering the labour market in the situation of crisis. It seems inevitable that migrants will continue to be needed to satisfy Slovenia's labour shortages, particularly in certain occupations. The actual demand for migrant workforce, however, remains poorly reflected in policies which define and regulate the migrants' positions primarily in terms of limitations.

Slovenia experienced increasing immigration from the late 1990s onwards, though intra-state migration from other republics of Yugoslavia began already in the 1950s. A pronounced labour migration to Slovenia began especially in the 1970s when the Western European states that had been the primary countries of destination for Yugoslav migrants started limiting immigration. These trends have significantly affected the current composition of migrant population, since the majority of foreign-born population in Slovenia comes from the former Yugoslavia's successor states, almost half from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Migration from other EU member states, as well as more distant countries, remains modest: only about 6% of the entire foreign population are EU nationals and only 3% come from non-European countries (e.g. Asia, Africa, the Americas).¹ The geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity thus remain deciding factors for former co-nationals to continue migrating to Slovenia, even though the construction of EU external borders classifies these people as "third country nationals", a category inherent in migration and integration policies to the detriment of their full inclusion.

¹ See Statistical Yearbook 2011 published by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, available at <http://www.stat.si> (30.7.2012).

In 2011, foreign citizens represented 4.1% of Slovenia's total population.² Immigration remains predominantly masculine, since only about 30% of the foreign population are women. Male migrants mostly arrive with the purpose of work, while women's migration is more often connected to family reunification. Labour migration is therefore by far the most frequent "reason" for migration to Slovenia. Considering recent concessions in terms of entry visas for most countries of the Western Balkans, labour market policies represent the most potent means of control exerted over the newcomer migrant workers.

As in other EU states, migration policies exhibit a trend in designing entry requirements for migrants according to the specific national labour market needs. Migrants classified as entering with intent to work have been geared toward professions that are considered as "deficit" or as too dirty, difficult, and dangerous to be performed by the domestic workforce (Pajnik et al. 2010; Medica and Lukić 2011; Pajnik and Bajt 2011). In recent years, restrictive regulations pertaining to non-EU nationals, such as requirements for residence permits, family reunification provisions and some procedures in employment have been relaxed to a certain degree. Yet employment policies that once welcomed migrants to supplement the workforce deficit also due to Slovenia's aging population have changed and now contain regulations that work against migrant employment. This is despite the fact that the EU Blue Card has recently been introduced, which eases the position of highly-skilled migrants. However, only seven EU Blue Cards have been issued up to June 2012. It is here important to note that migrants still face obstacles in terms of recognition of their education and skills; they find the official procedures to be too long and costly, also on account of bureaucratic complications in countries which issued their certificates.

Slovenia exhibited increasing trends in activity rates between 2003 and 2007 and migrant work has played a crucial part in the rise of the construction sector, with employers acutely aware of reliance on hard-working "former Yugoslavs". Yet unemployment rates rose from 4 to 13% between the end of 2008 and 2012, significantly deteriorating the share of persons employed in construction and other sectors of migrant employment (e.g. manufacturing). Trade depression and economic crisis severely affected construction, agriculture, forestry, fishing, and manufacturing. New restrictions have been applied, intended to avert migrants from entering the labour market in the situation of crisis. Starting already in February 2009, a stipulation was introduced that allowed employment of "third country" migrants only if there were no suitable unemployed Slovenian (or EU/EEA) citizens available for the job.³ This factually negated the previous existence of so-called deficit professions, which eased employment of foreigners in sectors where suitable domestic workforce was lacking. Shortly afterwards, the government also accepted a *Decree on Restrictions and Prohibition of Employment and Work of Aliens* that substantially limited the employment of migrants.⁴ This

² See Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia brief at http://www.stat.si/eng/novica_prikazi.aspx?id=4481 (21.2.2013).

³ Rules on Work Permits, on Registration and De-registration of Work and on the Supervision of the Employment and Work of Aliens (sl. *Pravilnik o delovnih dovoljenjih, prijavi in odjavi dela ter nadzoru nad zaposlovanjem in delom tujcev*), see http://zakonodaja.gov.si/rpsi/r09/predpis_PRAV8639.html (24.2.2013).

⁴ Sl. *Uredba o omejitvah in prepovedih zaposlovanja in dela tujcev*, see http://zakonodaja.gov.si/rpsi/r02/predpis_URED5422.html (24.2.2013).

shows how the crisis has resonated in actual anti-migration policies, such as limiting the employment of migrants to allegedly protect the “national” labour force. Slovenia’s migration, citizenship and integration policy reflect the overall state’s nationalising tendencies of preferential treatment of ethnic Slovenians, who are granted several concessions irrespective of their citizenship (cf. Pajnik 2007; Bajt 2011).

As a consequence, many non-EU migrants have lost their jobs and few can now gain employment. Observations from the field show that many migrants who had lost their temporary jobs returned to their countries of birth (cf. Pajnik et al. 2010; Pajnik and Bajt 2011; Medica and Lukić 2011). The crisis in construction, especially, has made several migrants seek for work in agriculture, specifically seasonal work, while many also search for employment opportunities elsewhere (e.g. in Germany or Austria). Nevertheless, it seems inevitable that migrants will continue to be needed to satisfy Slovenia’s labour shortages, particularly in certain occupations. The actual demand for migrant workforce, however, remains poorly reflected in policies which define and regulate the migrants’ positions primarily in terms of limitations.

Moreover, even though the relevant legal provisions are to discourage employers from engaging people in illicit work, migrant workers are a population still significantly affected by informal economy and remain the least protected category of workers, since even the trade unions favour the “national” worker. Employers have been known to disregard legal requirements and circumvent policy regulations, thus putting their “foreign” employees in disadvantaged positions of dependence, low pay, harsh working conditions, and extended working hours (cf. Medica and Lukić 2011)– a situation that, in the present situation of crisis – nowadays marks a significant share of all workers in Slovenia.

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The article has been written as part of the project Migration to the Centre supported by the European Commission - The "Europe for citizens" programme, and the International Visegrad Fund.

This article reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Funded by the Europe for
Citizens Programme
of the European Union



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