

Slovakia closes eyes to labour migration

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Abstract:

In its Migration Policy, Slovakia declares clear desire to receive economic migrants and enhance employment of highly qualified foreign workers. The presented article describes developments in labour migration in recent years and argues that Slovakia lacks a clear policy in managing labour migration.

Since the EU accession in 2004, Slovakia has experienced a systematic increase in the number of immigrants, irrespective of the economic situation in the country. Despite economic recession and tightening of immigration policies, no major changes in the incoming or outgoing migration have been observed from 2008 to 2012.

From 2005 to 2008, the Slovak economy experienced a boom, which was accompanied by serious labour shortages in several sectors. In a time when there was a clear demand from the labour market and open attitudes of the private sector to employ foreign workers, Slovak government did not react or take any steps to promote labour migration.

Situation changed slightly in 2011, when two important immigration strategies - *Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to year 2020* and *Minerva 2.0 - Slovakia to the first league*, as well as a new Act on Residence of Foreigners were adopted by the previous government.¹ In its Migration Policy, Slovakia formally states a desire to receive economic migrants in accordance with labour market needs, and to enhance employment of highly qualified foreign employees. However, it still did not adopt any appropriate tools to implement this policy.

Since July 2011, when a Blue Card - the new institute for attracting the highly skilled migrants, was introduced, only 30 foreigners applied to obtain it. To date, Blue Cards have only been granted to 9 highly skilled foreign nationals. Additionally, we are not aware of any analysis on the actual needs of the labour market, upon which Slovakia could set out its further priorities. Generally, it is very difficult to access information about labour migration and its management.

¹ The Government adopted the *Migration policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2020* by a Resolution dated 31 August 2011. Source: www.emn.sk/phocadownload/documents/migration_policy_sr_2020_en.pdf

As the information is cryptic and available only in Slovak, it is almost impossible for migrants to find guidelines for employment of foreigners on the official websites the relevant institutions. Recent rise in unemployment resulted in negative attitudes of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the SR (“Ministry”) towards migrant employment and their integration into the local labour market. In January 2013, the unemployment rate hit its peak since the EU accession at 14.9%² and is one of the highest in the EU (with over 25 % unemployment in certain regions of the country).³

Although the Ministry did not take any official action to limit the employment of migrants, there has been a change in the process of issuing work permits. According to the new policy, labour offices undertake the labour market test (i.e. a review whether the vacant position can be given to the registered job seeker) of the entire labour market in Slovakia or neighbouring districts, rather than solely a review of the database in the given town.

The data show, however, that the economic crisis did not visibly reduce the number of foreigners on the labour market.⁴ On the contrary, the number of foreign workers was still slowly growing in 2011. If we compare the latest available data for January 2011 and January 2012, there was only a slight increase (or stagnation) in the number of workers from foreign countries. For example, in January 2011 there were 18,339 foreigners employed in Slovakia out of this number work permits were granted to 3,007 third country nationals, while in December 2011, 22,185 foreigners were employed and a work permit was granted to 3,253 third country nationals. The latest published figures indicate that in January 2012 there were 21,265 employed migrants on the Slovak labour market (including 3,308 migrants with work permits)⁵. As we can see above, only a small portion of migrants depend on the prior approval of their employment by authorities and successful application for a work permit. This is because majority of foreign workers are either EU-EEA nationals or settled third country nationals whose employment is not limited to obtaining a work permit.

Views on the foreign migration to Slovakia vary among experts, with the prevailing attitude that immigration is a marginal issue. The attitude of government officials towards labour migration can range from ambivalent to protective, despite the clear support of migration management and desire for highly skilled foreign labour, as was declared in two main strategic documents mentioned above. However, there is a lack of initiatives to attract foreign workers and adoption of the few measures in the field of labour migration – mostly related to the transposition of the EU legislation, is uncoordinated and sometimes illogical, mostly to the burden of migrants.

² www.oecd.org/std/labour-stats/HUR_03e13.pdf

³ www.upsvar.sk/statistiky/nezamestnanost-mesacne-statistiky/2013.html?page_id=268686

⁴ Employment of foreigners in the Slovak Republic (Assessment for the year 2011), UPSVaR 17 July 2012.

⁵ Around 3900 third country nationals with work permit in December 2012 according to unofficial data.

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