MIGRATION POLICY DIRECTIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION FOR FOREIGN SKILLED WORKERS: SUPRANATIONAL LEVEL

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The innovative development of the economies of the European Union continuously increases the demand for skilled professionals, which cannot be met solely through internal labor resources (intra-European mobility). In this regard, labor migration, particularly the stimulation of the influx of foreign skilled workers, plays a vital role in addressing the imbalance of supply and demand in the European labor market. This article examines the migration policy instruments of the European Union, applied at the supranational level and aimed at mitigating the imbalance between the growing demand for skilled professionals and the limited supply in the regional labor market. It argues that the overall vector of the EU’s migration policy, as an integration union, is oriented towards attracting and accumulating potential (foreign students, interns, doctoral candidates) and actual skilled professionals within its territory, in line with the current and future needs of the European labor market, thereby contributing to the achievement of the strategic goals of the social, economic, and innovative development of the EU.

Keywords: European Union; labor migrants; foreign skilled professionals; migration policy; supranational regulation; foreign students; labor market

Introduction

The problem of labor market imbalance is characteristic of most developed countries, including the European Union.

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However, solving these issues solely through internal labor resources is not feasible. As an integration union, the EU is the largest center of attraction for international migrants, among whom migrant workers are of particular interest in terms of influencing the dynamics of the regional labor market.

In 2021, there were 27 million working-age migrants in the European Union. The distribution of migrants in the EU is extremely uneven: 57% of all working-age migrants go to Germany, Spain, and Italy, out of the twenty-seven EU countries. Overall, foreign-born workers in Western European countries make up 18.4% of the total labor force (Annual Report on intra-EU Labor Mobility 2023).

The significant enlargement of the EU has led to a manifold increase in the size of the integration union and, as a result, the creation of additional opportunities for labor mobility. These opportunities were facilitated by the free movement of labor within the integration union (Directive 2003/109/EC).

As seen from Tab. 1, the number of migrants (intra-European) in the EU has been increasing annually, largely due to deliberate policies to promote mobility within the integration union.

Table 1 - Number of intra-European migrants of working age (EU-27 and EFTA+ citizens) in the European Union, million people
(compiled by the author based on the Annual Report on intra-EU Labour Mobility 2023)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2021</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number, million people</td>
<td>9,684</td>
<td>9,564</td>
<td>9,856</td>
<td>10,089</td>
<td>10,185</td>
<td>10,876</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The largest sources of labor within the EU are Romania (27%), Poland (12%), and Italy (10%). Despite Germany being the leader in attracting international migrants (30% of all working-age migrants), their proportion of the overall population in the country is relatively small, at 5.5%, while in several Western European countries, the percentage of foreign-born population is significantly higher. For instance, in Luxembourg, foreigners make up 47% of the total population, in Switzerland, 29%, and in Cyprus, 14%.

Thus, within the framework of the European Union, a regional labor market has been formed, creating additional opportunities for the expansion of skilled professionals' migration between EU member states.

However, at the regional level, a layer of contradictions arises between the interests of the integration union as a whole and the national interests of individual countries. The further development of the economies of EU countries, along with the increasing efficiency of utilizing the achievements of the scientific, technological, and informational revolutions, constantly heightens the demand for skilled professionals.

Concurrently, there is a growing gap between the demand for qualified labor and its supply in the labor market.

The competition among EU countries for skilled professionals is the objective basis for the reinforcement of the regulation of migration processes. On the other hand, at the supranational level, the EU is developing and implementing unified directions for migration policy regarding skilled professionals.
Theoretical aspects and research methodology

The regional economic integration that began in the second half of the 20th century has led to significant changes in the system of international economic relations. The impact of the formation of integration unions is manifested in the general tendencies of the development of foreign economic relations among member countries and changes in the scale and structure of external labor migration flows. In fact, migration is a natural consequence of broader processes of social, political, and economic integration (Rubinskaya, 2022).

The degree of freedom of movement for migrants in integration unions is determined by the level of integration of the countries (free trade area, customs union, common market, economic union). At the stage of a "common market," "transparent boundaries" within the integration union generate "external" migration, which refers to a portion of international migration within a single integration space. Regional economic organizations address the management of international migration flows, developing a range of measures related to the admission and stay of workers who are not citizens of the receiving country. Despite varying degrees of freedom of movement in different integration unions, the main principle of the approach to migrants is similar: a more liberal migration regime is applied to migrants from member countries of the integration union compared to those from third countries.

Research by Eppleyard et al. (2002), Iredale (2001), Holzmann & Munz (2004) and other scholars has focused on the impact of integration unions on the migration of highly skilled professionals. David Massey's recognition that "immigration is a natural consequence of broader processes of social, political, and economic integration that transcend international boundaries" is noteworthy (Massey, 2002).

The goal of this article is to analyze supranational migration policy instruments aimed at attracting foreign skilled professionals, both actual and potential, to the European Union. The article applies analytical and statistical research methods based on data from Eurostat, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, and a formalized method for analyzing EU regulatory and methodological documents.

The results of the research allow for the hypothesis that an integration union, like a state, can act as an attractor for skilled professionals, thereby contributing to the realization of strategic goals for social, economic, and innovative development.

Tools for attracting skilled foreign professionals considering labor market needs

The demand for skilled professionals and the inability to satisfy it solely through internal sources, such as intra-European labor migrants, have led to the liberalization of the admission regime for skilled professionals from non-EU countries.

At the EU level, the Blue Card Directive (2009/50/EC) has been in effect since 2011, regulating the immigration of qualified professionals from third countries who have higher education, qualifications, work experience, and high salaries (countries determine the required salary level independently). At the same time, each EU member state implements its own policy to attract this category of migrants.

As evident from Fig. 1, the number of Blue Cards issued annually from 2012 to 2019 increased by approximately 12% each year, growing tenfold.
However, there was a dramatic decrease in the number of issued Blue Cards in 2020, almost threefold, directly related to the limitations imposed by countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, there was an increase in the issuance of Blue Cards, and although the level of 2019 has not yet been reached, there are ample grounds to anticipate a restoration of the positive trend.

![Figure 1 - Dynamics of the issuance of Blue Cards in the EU over a number of years (compiled by the author based on data from Eurostat)](image)

Blue Card holders—highly skilled professionals from non-EU countries with labor market demand—are entitled to a range of preferences. For example, they have the right to family reunification, to extend their stay in European Union countries, to expedited permanent residency, and more. Additionally, in many labor and social rights, Blue Card holders are placed on equal footing with EU citizens.

### Table 2 - Countries with the largest number of highly skilled foreign Blue Card holders (persons)
(compiled by the author based on data from Eurostat)

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2 584</td>
<td>11 580</td>
<td>12 108</td>
<td>14 620</td>
<td>17 630</td>
<td>20 41</td>
<td>26 996</td>
<td>28 858</td>
<td>5 586</td>
<td>19502</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>1 037</td>
<td>1 519</td>
<td>2 036</td>
<td>2 032</td>
<td>1295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>673</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>1 576</td>
<td>2 104</td>
<td>2 251</td>
<td>2980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>677</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3664</td>
<td>12964</td>
<td>13869</td>
<td>17104</td>
<td>20979</td>
<td>24310</td>
<td>32648</td>
<td>36806</td>
<td>12596</td>
<td>28992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Tab. 2, it is evident that Germany is a leader in terms of the number of qualified professionals from non-EU countries, consistently accounting for nearly 80% of Blue Card holders. In 2021, more than half (52%) of all issued Blue Cards were granted to qualified professionals arriving from India (6,403 individuals), Russia (2,630 individuals), Ukraine (1,739 individuals), China (1,645 individuals), Turkey (1,695 individuals), and the United States (910 individuals).

In 2021, amendments were made to Directive 2009/50/EC aimed at enhancing the attractiveness of the Blue Card for qualified professionals by simplifying its acquisition (Directive (EU) 2021/1883). For example, the lower threshold for salary has been reduced, and the minimum duration of the employment contract has been shortened to 6 months. The new rules facilitate the recognition of professional skills for jobs in the information and communication technology sector. Additionally, family members of the qualified professional are granted the right to work in the EU. An important innovation of this directive is the possibility for refugees meeting the criteria of qualified professionals to apply for the EU Blue Card.

It is worth noting that the attractiveness of the Blue Card for qualified professionals is due to its advantage over the preferences of national legislation in European countries, as the latter does not grant citizens of third countries the right to reside and work in other EU member states. The right to labor mobility within the EU is one of the main advantages provided by EU legislation, which national legislation cannot ensure.

The issue of a shortage of skilled workers for the needs of the new digital economy has led to the European Commission's initiative to declare 2023 the Year of Skills and Competencies. Currently, over three-quarters of companies in the EU claim to have difficulty finding workers with the required knowledge and skills.

The European Union needs to address the problem of a shortage of professionals in certain occupations. For example, in 2020, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Romania, and Sweden reported a shortage of healthcare professionals, which was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The integration policy of the European Union (EU) is focused on a comprehensive approach to accumulating skilled professionals within its territory. This was initially associated with the implementation of the "Europe 2020" strategy, then with the "Horizon Europe 2021-2027" program, and also with the "New European Innovation Agenda" presented by the European Commission in 2022, which prioritizes achieving sustainable innovative development by 2030.

The platform "Skills and Talents," established by the European Commission, is aimed at attracting skilled professionals from third countries. It provides a clear algorithm for the legal entry of professionals from various occupations into the EU, with the further prospect of employment. As of 2022, the EU has launched a pilot project called the "Talent Fund" for foreign skilled professionals, operated through the EURES job search portal.

A regulation (EU) No. 2016/589 of the European Parliament and the Council established the "European network of employment services (EURES)" on April 13, 2016, aiming to facilitate access for workers to current vacancies and promote further labor market integration. Managed by the European Labor Agency, EURES brings together national employment services, private employment agencies, and employers throughout the EU, promoting cross-border exchange of labor mobility information. The "Talent Fund" is open to individuals benefiting from temporary protection in the EU who are interested in finding...
qualified work within the European Union. Information on the portal is provided in English, Ukrainian, and Russian languages. This indicates that the EU's migration policy possesses flexibility and adaptability to external and internal challenges, seeking to attain maximum socioeconomic benefits from new migration waves.

A crucial channel for developing skilled workers in the European Union is the policy of attracting students as future professionals (Rubinskaya, 2021). Furthermore, to enhance the EU's attractiveness for students and researchers, as well as other categories, the Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and the Council from May 11, 2016, about the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of scientific research, studies, training, voluntary service, student exchange, or educational projects, and work in the "au pair" program, has been introduced. This directive emphasizes the significant value of student and researcher immigration to the EU in the formation of human capital and in ensuring reasonable, sustainable, and comprehensive growth. To improve the appeal of the EU for students and researchers, the Directive suggests a range of preferential treatments such as family reunification, labor market access, and free mobility within the EU.

It is also worth noting that the EU experiences intense student migration within the European region, with 42% of foreign students from Europe choosing to study in other EU countries. This can be explained in part by the decision on the comparability of diplomas based on certain criteria. Moreover, the EU operates sectoral directives for the recognition of diplomas, which include a detailed list of professions and fields where diplomas are recognized as equivalent across the EU and where a mandatory minimum of additional education is required.

The ERASMUS program, established in 1987, is aimed at stimulating academic mobility and fostering cooperation between countries. In 2004, the EU also created the Erasmus Mundus program, designed to enhance the influence of European higher education in non-EU countries, particularly focusing on master's programs. It is important to note that the share of international students enrolled in master's and Ph.D. programs averages 22% across EU countries. In France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, the portion of foreigners among Ph.D. students constitutes 40% and above.

Thanks to the popularity of the ERASMUS program, 8 out of 10 foreign students in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovakia, and Slovenia come from other European countries. Since its inception, over 2 million students have participated in the ERASMUS program, signifying the ongoing relevance of enhancing academic mobility, as reflected in its record budget for 2023: 387.2 million euros (opening of 2023 Erasmus+).

Another avenue for attracting skilled professionals to the EU is the preferential regime for workers from third countries moving within the framework of intra-corporate transfers from one unit of a multinational corporation to another (Directive 2014/66/EU, dated May 15, 2014). These specialists do not require a visa for work, have no salary requirements, are not bound by the labor market's needs, and also have the right to reunite with their families.

Conclusion

New opportunities for successful competition in the global market for qualified specialists arise in regional integration unions, firstly through the use of uniform mechanisms for attracting qualified specialists from "third countries" and, secondly, through the migration
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policy of “transfer” of qualified personnel within integration groups under conditions of preferential regime.

The general vector of the EU migration policy, as a single formation, is focused on attracting and accumulating on its territory potential (foreign students, interns, doctoral students) and actual qualified specialists in accordance with the present and future needs of the labor market.

Thus, the EU is strengthening its position in the global race for talent. We can talk about a synergistic effect from the implementation of such a migration policy since, on the one hand, the opportunities provided to this category of migrants make the European Union more competitively attractive compared to other major centers of attraction for qualified specialists (USA, Canada, Australia). On the other hand, the free movement of labor within the EU helps to quickly satisfy demand in the labor market.

References:


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**Paper submitted**  27 November 2023  
**Paper accepted for publishing**  08 January 2024  
**Paper revised**  16 January 2024  
**Paper published online**  30 January 2024