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Research Report

Expanding legal pathways for labour immigration: A stocktake of the European Commission's efforts

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Report

Expanding legal pathways for labour immigration



ODI Europe

A stocktake of the European Commission's efforts

Claire Kumar

November 2024



Expanding legal pathways for labour immigration: a stocktake of the European Commission's efforts

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Acronyms

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
BCD	Blue Card Directive
DT4E	Displaced Talent for Europe
EBC	European Builders Confederation
EFBWW	European Federation of Builders and Woodworkers
ELA	European Labour Authority
EMN	European Migration Network
EU	European Union
EURES	European Employment Services
FIEC	European Construction Industry Federation
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
ICT	Information and communications technology
ICTD	Intra-Corporate Transfer Directive
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IRU	International Road Transport Union
MPF	Migration Partnership Facility
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
SMP	Skills mobility partnership
SPD	Single Permit Directive
SRD	Students and Researchers Directive
STEP	Skills, Talent and Empowerment through Pathways
SWD	Seasonal Workers Directive
TBB	Talent Beyond Boundaries
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees

1 Introduction

Europe is facing a future of growing labour shortages in the context of a declining working age population. This is a shared challenge with other regions: high-income and middle-income countries alike are ageing rapidly, while only low-income countries are experiencing growth in their populations (World Bank, 2023). This trend will spark intense global competition for workers in future. Progress attracting the workers that Europe needs now and for the future is slow. It is well recognised that the European Union (EU) is not a preferred destination for foreign workers, and that it is failing to compete successfully for global talent (European Commission, 2023b).

European migration debates have become increasingly polarised and divisive. The policy agenda has narrowed to focus on irregular migration, deterrence and return, with labour migration a low priority. Early signs are that this will continue: the new European Commission is set to prioritise defence and security, sidelining labour mobility (von der Leyen, 2024). This is despite growing calls for more serious attention to ‘the contribution that migration makes to competitiveness’ (González Laya, 2024: n.p.).

This report seeks to reinvigorate discussions around labour immigration. It looks at recent policy trends and how the legal pathways available to non-EU nationals match up to the EU’s labour and skills shortages. This is critical for policy-makers interested in effective migration management, given labour market demand is the biggest driver of international migration (de Haas, 2023); evidence shows that efforts to restrict migration will fail if they act against labour market forces (World Bank, 2018).

Although set in the context of Member States’ immigration policies and reform efforts, this briefing mainly focuses on the European Commission’s scope for action. This implies some limitations, given Member States have primary competence in relation to labour immigration. However, this briefing looks broadly across the Commission’s commitments, labour migration directives and specific operational tools and investments to promote labour migration, providing analysis of several funding streams and offering a top-level assessment of progress.

The Commission has been trying to expand labour migration pathways for several decades, in line with the rationale that doing so will help improve overall migration management and reduce irregular migration (European Commission, 2022). The New Pact on Migration and Asylum is just the latest iteration of the EU’s commitments in this area, including through the new Talent Partnerships model. While the specific impact of opening legal pathways on irregular migration has been the subject of some debate, overall the evidence available supports the Commission’s position (see Box 1).

This briefing is based on a literature review and 10 key informant interviews conducted between June and August 2024, as well as analysis of the projects funded under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Key informants included expert academics and representatives from think tanks, international organisations and the private sector, with DG HOME also providing some assistance. Section 2 provides background context on the EU’s labour shortages. Section 3 then looks at immigration policy in EU Member States, recent policy reforms and existing shortcomings.

Section 4 focuses on the European Commission's investments, particularly via AMIF's Action Grants and the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF), and the Talent Partnerships process, as well as

covering recent reforms to the EU's migration directives. Section 5 provides conclusions and recommendations.

Box 1 Legal pathways and irregular migration

Research has established clearly that, if labour demand exists and legal pathways are not available, undocumented workers will find a way to fill the gaps (de Haas, 2024). It has also been documented that closing down an existing legal pathway can result in almost immediate replacement by irregular migration, as illustrated by the US–Mexico Bracero programme and the closure of visa routes for North Africans used to travelling to Southern Europe for work.¹

While the lack or closure of pathways clearly has an impact, it has been less clear whether the reverse holds true (i.e. whether expanding legal migration pathways reduces irregular migration flows). Studies in 2018 and 2019 found that increasing work visas (in the US) or residence permits for work or education (in the EU) were associated with a decline in irregular migration (see Beirens et al., 2019 for a discussion). Analysis by Clemens (2024b) looks at 12 years of irregular entries to the US involving 11 million migrants, and specifically the responses of migrants at the US–Mexico border to the raising or lowering of immigration restrictions. This finds that offering more legal pathways 'significantly decreases the rate of unlawful crossings, with this deterrent effect growing stronger over time' (Clemens, 2024a: n.p.).

While this evidence should bolster the Commission's commitment to offering more legal migration pathways, it is also important to consider how this remedy works in practice. It will be undermined if the legal pathways offered are restricted to highly skilled professionals and few of those seeking to migrate fit this profile. The match between legal channels and people on the move matters, as well as the scale of access offered (Beirens et al., 2019; Crisp, 2022).

¹ When the Bracero programme closed, undocumented workers replaced almost one-to-one the previous 450,000 workers entering the US on guest worker visas (World Bank, 2018; World Bank, 2023). In Europe visa restrictions for North African workers enacted by Spain and Italy in the 1990s led to the phenomenon of Mediterranean 'boat migration' (de Haas, 2023).

2 EU labour market context

2.1 Introduction

Unemployment rates remain very low across the EU and vacancy rates have reached historically high levels (ELA and EURES, 2024). Although there has been a surge of vacancies since the Covid-19 pandemic, this tight labour market context is not temporary; the EU has experienced a 10-year trend of declining unemployment and rising vacancy rates (ibid; Petruskaite and Tiongson, 2024).

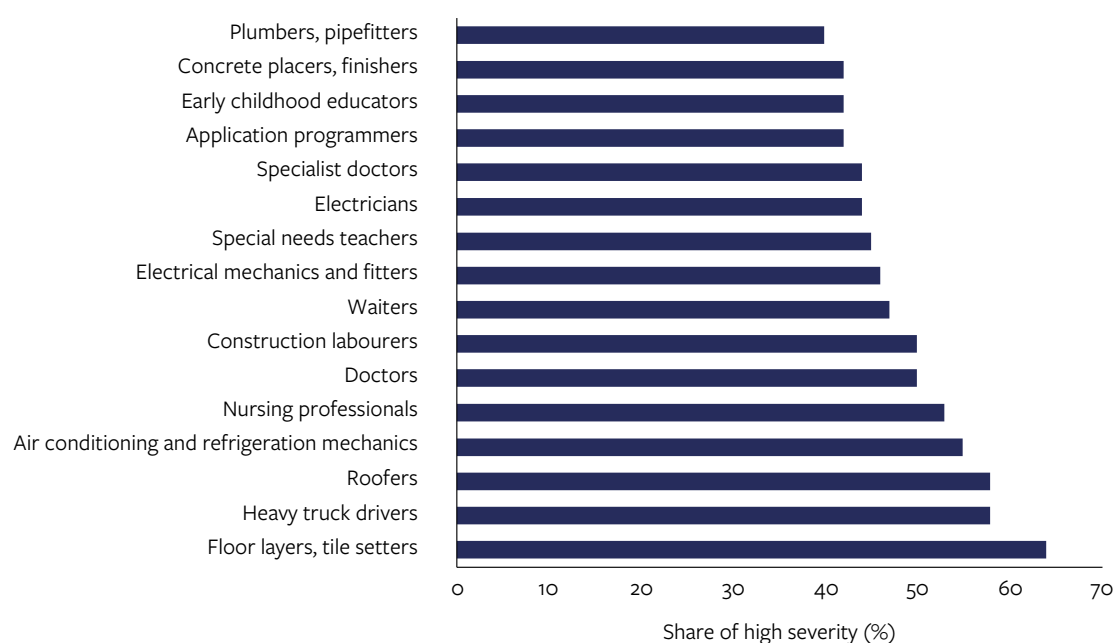
The European Commission has identified three key drivers for labour and skills shortages: demographic change, which both reduces the size of the working age population and increases the demand for certain services (e.g. healthcare and long-term care); the substantial impact of the green and digital transitions, which imply significant growth in jobs as well as changing skills; and poor working conditions and low wages in certain occupations, which make it difficult to recruit and retain workers (European Commission, 2024b). Societal factors, such as workers' preferences for shorter working hours and more flexibility, particularly notable since the Covid-19 pandemic, have had an additional impact (Petruskaite and Tiongson, 2024).

The high level of labour and skills shortages Europe is experiencing has significant implications, creating challenges for businesses and constraining growth. The European Commission (2023a: n.p.) is concerned that, without concerted action, labour and skills shortages will 'undermine the green and digital transitions, dampen the EU's competitiveness, and weaken public services in areas already facing a shortfall of workers'.

2.2 Sectors in shortage

The level of labour and skills shortages varies across sectors and countries, with implications for occupations at all skills levels. Sectors of particular concern include construction, information and communications technology (ICT) and health and long-term care, for which labour shortages have become a persistent feature of employment (ELA and EURES, 2024). Figure 1 provides a snapshot of the specific occupations experiencing the most severe shortages. It clearly illustrates the preponderance of technical trades (construction, metal and machinery trades and electrical workers) amongst the occupations with the most widespread and severe shortages. A more extensive list of 38 occupations features welders, motor mechanics, carpenters and bricklayers (ibid).

Figure 1 Occupations experiencing the most severe shortages across EU countries, 2023



Note: The 16 occupations shown have the most severe shortages (largest share of high severity) out of the 38 identified as in widespread shortage. The severity level is assigned by the EURES National Coordination Office.
Source: ELA and EURES (2024)

Notably, many of these occupations are not in the highly skilled, highly paid professional category. Indeed, many require technical vocational qualifications and others are in lower-paid categories (waiters, construction labourers). In particular, the widespread and severe shortages in construction (see Box 2) should be a significant concern to policy-makers given the sector's major role in Europe's green transition (as ODI has previously noted).² Pressure on the sector will increase in light of the new Commission's commitment to a European Affordable Housing Plan, which will entail an expansion of housing construction (von der Leyen, 2024).

The scale of labour shortages forecast for other sectors is also daunting. In ICT, the EU is currently 11 million workers short of its target of 20 million professionals employed by 2030 (European Commission, 2023b). In long-term care, the European Commission anticipates 7 million job openings by 2030, vacancies that cannot all be filled by available EU workers (European Commission, 2022). Workforce shortages in long-term care are directly linked to low pay, poor working conditions and the undervalued nature of care work, as well as the impact of austerity, privatisation and marketisation trends (Kumar et al., 2022). The sector is known for its lack of legal pathways and a prevalence of undocumented migrant care workers (Cangiano, 2014; Van Hooren, 2020; Kumar et al., 2022).

² See Kumar et al. (2023), Kumar and Donoghue (2024) and Kumar (2024) for a discussion of workforce issues related to renovating buildings with energy efficiency and low-carbon heating improvements.

Box 2 Construction sector workforce challenges

Labour shortages in the EU construction sector have nearly tripled since 2013, with the significant decline in craft workers³ from 2012–2022 particularly worrying; over 7 million construction workers will need to be replaced by 2035 (EBC, 2024). While demographic change is contributing to shortages, the sector is also known for its low appeal and precarious nature (for example due to the widespread use of subcontractors, high levels of self-employment and use of temporary labour) (ELA and EURES, 2024). Even though wages are higher than for other sectors, and with improvements in working conditions and health and safety on construction sites, the sector's image problem persists (FIEC, 2023).

While the industry is trying to make itself more attractive to young people, the supply of craft apprentices across Europe is still contracting (ELA and EURES, 2024). As Ireland's experience shows, even with robust, well-coordinated attempts across industry and government to counter negative perceptions, attract under-represented groups (particularly women) and promote the industry, it is very difficult to expand craft apprenticeships and increase the number of new entrants (Kumar and Donoghue, 2024).

Intra-EU mobility has been critical for the sector, with workers from countries such as Poland, Romania and Lithuania filling construction vacancies in multiple European countries. However, these countries are themselves increasingly recruiting construction workers from non-EU countries (Danaj et al., 2023; ELA and EURES, 2024).⁴

Even with these acute shortages, the number of non-EU nationals engaged in construction work has not substantially changed.⁵ The sector is affected by the lack of legal pathways for technical trades workers; the predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across the industry also means that firms struggle with international recruitment (EBC, 2024; Kumar and Donoghue, 2024). There is a lack of tailored immigration policy options for the sector.

³ Craft workers include bricklayers, joiners/carpenters, plumbers, electricians, roofers and glaziers.

⁴ Workers from Central and Eastern Europe are no longer moving to take jobs in other EU Member States at the same rate as previously, not least because of the convergence in living standards (Springford, 2024).

⁵ Between 2010 and 2020 the number of third-country nationals working in construction decreased from 796,000 to 750,000, with their share of the construction workforce remaining stable (Danaj et al., 2023).

The EU's Action Plan to tackle labour and skills shortages, launched in March 2024, includes a strong focus on countries' domestic workforces which are the subject of three of the five pillars of the action plan.⁶ This is important given the many shortcomings that need to be addressed domestically, not least the persistent under-representation of female workers in shortage occupations. The fourth pillar focuses on the contribution of migrant workers from EU countries, and the fifth on workers from outside the EU. Given that, for occupations experiencing the most widespread shortages, there is only limited potential for intra-EU mobility (ELA and EURES, 2024), employers will need to turn to third countries for migrant workers; as such, this last pillar requires more concerted attention.

6 These relate to: supporting the activation of underrepresented groups in the labour market, supporting skills development, training and education, and improving working conditions in certain sectors (European Commission, 2024b).

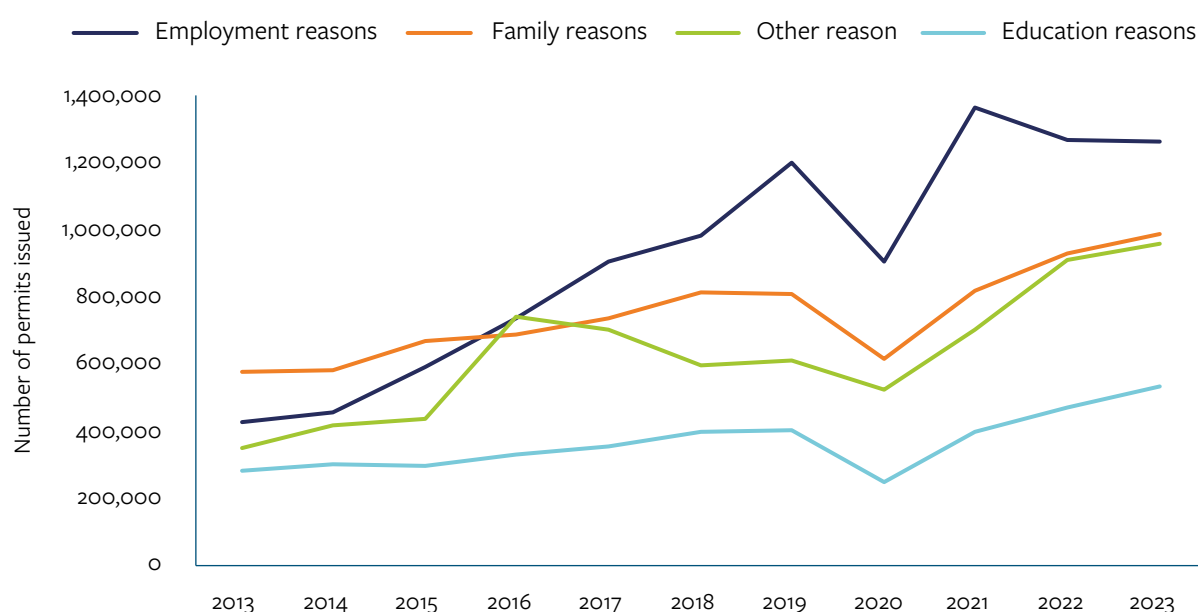
3 Labour immigration policy context

3.1 Labour immigration trends

Labour immigration is on the increase in industrialised countries. In most OECD European countries, labour immigration reached a 15-year

high in 2022 (OECD, 2023b). Labour immigration now substantially exceeds other types of immigration into the EU (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 First residence permits issued, by reason, 2013–2023

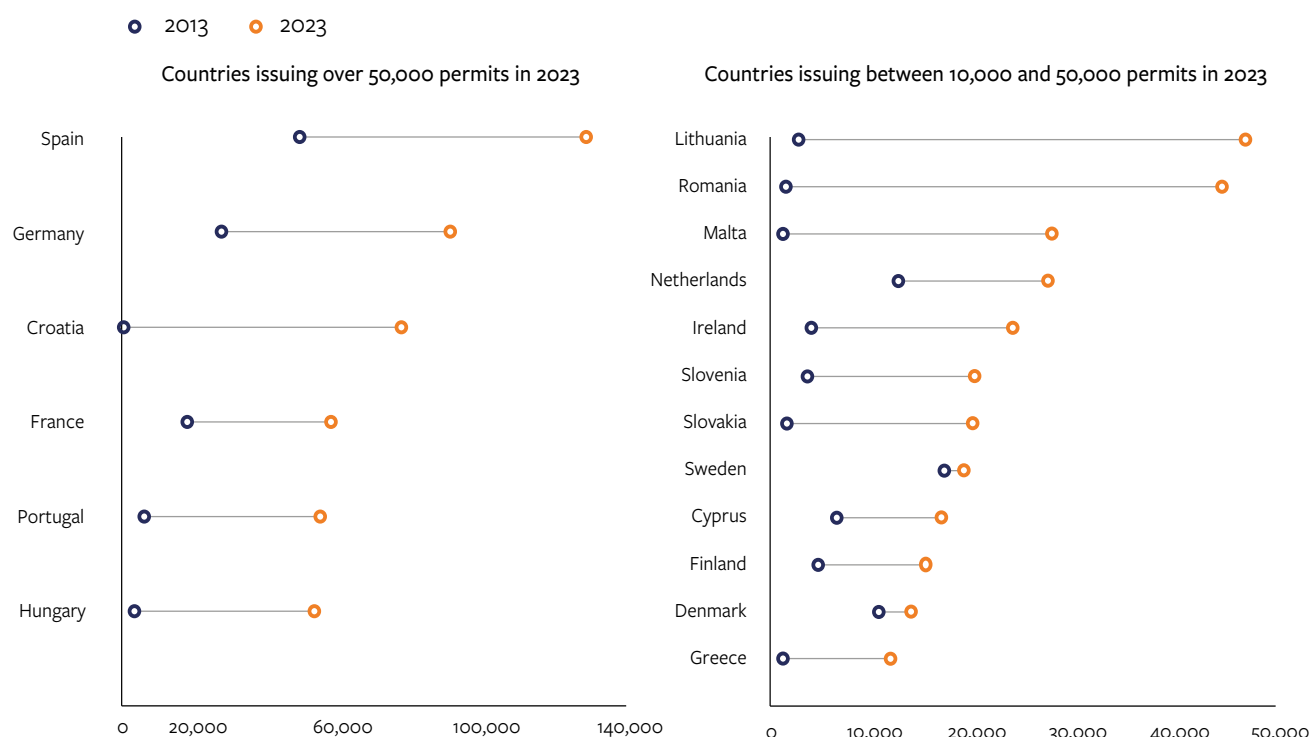


Note: This includes all first resident permits issued for any duration.

Source: Eurostat (n.d.)

Poland issues the most employment permits by far in absolute terms: it has regularly issued more than 400,000 each year since 2016 (sometimes offering far higher numbers) (Eurostat, n.d.). While a key lever is Poland's 'employer declaration system', which enables employers to hire workers from countries such as Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova (MPF, 2022), the high figures are also related to a 'cash-for-visas' scandal, which is thought to have impacted the number of visas issued between 2018 and 2023 (Scislowska, 2024). Excluding Poland, Figure 3 shows trends in countries issuing more

than 50,000 employment permits in 2023 (left panel), while the right panel gives the countries issuing between 10,000 and 50,000 permits. Spain, Germany, Croatia and France top the list, and there is a very high rate of growth in permits issued in Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania and Romania, traditionally countries with very low levels of recruitment of foreign workers. All EU Member States show increases over this time period, with the exception of Italy and Czechia.

Figure 3 Employment permits issued in 2013 and 2023

Note: Poland is not included here. This data refers to all employment permits issued for any duration. Ireland's data is classified by Eurostat as of low reliability. Data submitted by France in 2023 is reported as provisional. Italy and Czechia are excluded from this graphic due to a reduction in the number of employment permits issued in this period. Source: Eurostat (n.d.)

3.2 Policy reforms

Many OECD countries are undertaking policy reforms aiming to increase labour immigration, with some increasingly focusing on specific occupations or sectors (OECD, 2023b). In Germany, the Skilled Immigration Act is a bold, large-scale reform designed to attract non-EU migrants with vocational skills across all occupations, with a revised fast-track procedure enabling more rapid access (Cörvers et al., 2021). While such comprehensive reform remains unusual in the EU, other Member States are also seeking to enable increased labour immigration (see Box 3 for some recent examples). These

reforms sit alongside others that focus on 'talent retention', for instance through relaxed naturalisation or long-term residence pathways or family reunification pathways, as in Germany, Norway, Cyprus and Denmark (see Fragomen (2024b) for further discussion on countries' 'retention' strategies).

Box 3 Recent reforms by Member States to increase labour immigration

Increasing quotas

Quota expansion for the recruitment of foreign workers has been an almost permanent feature of the migration policies of EU Member States over the last decade. Quotas can be increased by sector (as Austria has done for seasonal workers since 2016) (OECD, 2022; 2023b), or for workers from certain countries (as done by Czechia for workers from Georgia, Armenia and North Macedonia) (Eurostat and EMN, 2023a). Quotas can also be increased overall (as in Romania in 2019), or even abolished entirely (as in Croatia in 2021) (OECD, 2020; Eurostat and EMN, 2022). Germany has significantly increased its quota under the Western Balkans Regulation⁷ – from 25,000 to 50,000 workers a year from 1 June 2024 (Fragomen, 2024c). Italy has moved from a traditionally low annual quota of around 30,000 workers before 2019 (OECD, 2021) to offering 136,000 spaces in 2024; however, this is still far below the 608,000 pre-applications filed by companies in 2024 (Kazmin, 2024). Italy is perhaps the emblematic example of a country with a longstanding mismatch between labour demand and migrant worker quotas, resulting in exceptionally high numbers of undocumented workers (Näre et al., 2024). The country's 'train to hire' law – which will allow firms to recruit internationally outside of the quota system if they commit to training workers before departure – is a new policy innovation that seeks to circumvent the problems with what has become an unworkable quota system.⁸

The proliferation of bilateral labour agreements

It is estimated that 17 Member States have more than 120 bilateral labour migration arrangements with partner countries (Brady, 2024). There are multiple historic examples, such as France's agreements with Morocco and Tunisia (signed in 1963), to provide access to seasonal workers (EMN, 2021). Germany's agreement with Georgia provided initially for the recruitment of 500 seasonal agricultural workers but this was rapidly increased to 5,000 (Schneider, 2021). Germany also has a significant new agreement with Kenya, including investment in pre-departure language and training (common with German programmes) (Muia, 2024). Spain has new bilateral agreements with multiple Latin American countries, focusing mainly, but not exclusively, on seasonal workers (Mora et al., 2024), alongside new circular migration agreements with Gambia and Mauritania (Mellersch, 2024b). Greece's migration and mobility agreement with Bangladesh, signed in 2022, envisages 15,000 temporary residence permits for Bangladeshis already in Greece, as well as 4,000 new five-year residence permits for Bangladeshis with job offers in agriculture and other sectors. Greece's new agreement with Egypt seeks to bring in 5,000 agricultural workers in 2024 (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2024b). This may be expanded to cover construction and tourism (Mellersch, 2024a).

7 This regulation, covering Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia, was primarily designed to move people from the international protection channel to a labour channel (Schneider, 2021). Nationals of these countries are granted a renewable work visa, on the basis of a job offer alone, with no language, formal skills or qualifications criteria applied.

8 The government has also proposed a new decree to manage quota procedures by region, instead of a centralised system.

The Greek government is also pursuing a new bilateral agreement with the Philippines, with shipping, home care services and tourism under consideration (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2024a). Some bilateral agreements are potentially far larger in scale and scope. Slovenia's agreements with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia enable workers to get a work permit for three years, with unfettered access to the Slovenian labour market after the first year (EMN, 2021).

Easing administrative criteria

Even when legal pathways exist, complex and cumbersome immigration systems create real barriers. In Italy it can take months, even years, for companies to have a worker approved (Beirens et al., 2019). The capacity of embassies and consulates in third countries creates additional issues. Understaffing in German consular offices caused serious bottlenecks in implementing the Western Balkans Regulation when it was first enacted (Camilli et al., 2020). Portugal, which increasingly receives immigrants from Nepal, Bangladesh, India, the Philippines and Vietnam, faces major challenges given the country's low embassy presence in these countries; visa applications require multiple appointments, and may take from three months to a year to process (MPF, 2022). Member States are seeking to streamline and simplify immigration procedures. Administrative procedures for recruitment are being eased, fast track procedures established, exemptions from labour market testing expanded and administrative procedures for changing employers simplified (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2023). Spain, France, Sweden and Hungary have all taken steps to digitise visa applications (OECD, 2021), though progress is described as 'incremental' (Fragomen, 2024c).

New refugee labour mobility pathways

Refugee labour mobility is gaining attention, with refugees increasingly seen as an 'untapped' source of relevant skills for businesses (World Bank, 2024). The organisation Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB) works closely with governments to design refugee labour pathways, with a demand-led model that has created job offers for several hundred refugee candidates in Australia, Canada and the UK (Dorst et al., 2024). In Australia the majority of recruitment has been for the construction sector, and in Canada and the UK for healthcare; the UK's National Health Service (NHS) has provided an opportunity for cohort hiring that has been particularly efficient. In Canada, the programme has supplied workers for long-term care, a sector experiencing chronic shortages (ibid.). Similar pilot programmes are being implemented in some European countries. European Commission financing has supported pilots in the UK, Belgium, Ireland and Portugal,⁹ where IOM, in collaboration with TBB and other partners, is supporting businesses to recruit refugees. This model is being extended to other EU countries.¹⁰

9 Via the Displaced Talent for Europe (DT4E) programme, and its extension into DT4E 2.0, financed through the Action Grants provided under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). These, and another expanded pilot known as the Skills and Talent Empowerment Pathways (STEP) programme, are discussed in more detail in the next section.

10 In a separate effort, the Spanish government in collaboration with UNHCR is bringing around 200 Nicaraguan refugees in Costa Rica to Spain to work in the renewable energy industry (Mora et al., 2024). This is part of a commitment to refugee resettlement.

While in the minority, some countries are enacting stricter labour immigration policies. Hungary recently ended its 'single permit' and introduced a new, more restrictive 'guest worker permit', designed to make it harder for employers to recruit low-skilled workers (Fragomen, 2024c). In Finland the new government that took office after elections in 2023 is planning to tighten labour migration policies to reduce net migration (OECD, 2021; OECD, 2023b), reversing proposals announced in 2021 to double the number of labour migrants by 2030. Sweden – where since 2008 employers have been able to recruit workers from any country without restrictions for different skill levels and without quotas or preferences (Beirens et al., 2019) – is set to change its approach, with moves to favour high-skilled immigration and stricter conditions for low-skilled labour migration (including a doubling of the minimum salary requirement) (OECD, 2023b). This follows a pattern of more restrictive reforms in Sweden, including tighter conditions on family reunification and stricter requirements for citizenship (Eurostat and EMN, 2023d). In Portugal, the new government has announced the closure of the main legal pathway used by migrant workers to enter the country, though this change was enacted amidst a large backlog of residence permit applications. Typically, migrant workers would enter as a tourist, secure a work contract and later apply for a residence permit.¹¹ Migrants will now require an employment contract before moving to Portugal (DW, 2024). The new Dutch government has announced its intention to reduce the number of high- and low-skilled migrants coming in, alongside limits on the numbers of international students (DutchNews,

2024). These examples aside, however, 'wholesale restrictive immigration policy' is still assessed as likely to 'remain the outlier, even as politics in Europe swings to the right' (Fragomen, 2024c: 49).

3.3 A high-skill bias

It is well documented that EU Member States' immigration systems are biased, favouring high-skilled migrants and making immigration more difficult for low-skilled migrants (Beirens et al., 2019; Cepla, 2021; Lens et al., 2021; MPF, 2022). Attracting highly skilled workers remains a central focus for policy-makers, and EU countries have undertaken multiple policy reforms in this area (see Box 4). This prioritisation is reflected in the EU's migration directives, primarily through the Blue Card Directive (discussed in the next section). However, the Commission is working to shift this emphasis, including through the EU Talent Pool proposal, which prioritises shortage occupations.¹²

11 This was considered a useful pathway for sectors such as agriculture, construction and restaurant and hotel businesses, though the imbalance of power between employers and workers using this pathway has been noted as leading to abuses (MPF, 2022).

12 The Annex to the proposed Talent Pool regulation specifies the shortage occupations that will be its focus, many of which are low- to medium-skilled (see European Commission, 2023c).

Box 4 Reforms to attract highly qualified migrants

In 2022 Sweden introduced a new residence permit for highly qualified jobseekers and start-up founders to come to the country to seek employment or start a business, while Finland launched a new fast-track service offering processing within two weeks for visas for specialists, start-up entrepreneurs and EU Blue Card applicants and their family members (OECD, 2022). Other recent examples include Poland's Business Harbour scheme (ICT); Estonia's Digital Nomad visas, start-up visas and e-residency service; Portugal's Tech Visa, StartUp visa and Digital Nomad visa; and the Dutch scheme for entrepreneurs covering staff for start-ups and the self-employed (MPF, 2022). In 2022, Lithuania brought in reforms to attract highly qualified third-country nationals, including simplifying qualification criteria for ICT professionals and making it easier for highly qualified immigrants to change employers (Eurostat and EMN, 2023b). Hungary has created a new 'Hungarian Card' permit to attract highly skilled workers, particularly in engineering and ICT (Fragomen, 2024c).

The high-skill bias means that legal pathways for low- and mid-skilled migrants typically (and problematically) receive far less attention from policy-makers (Kohlenberger, 2024). In the Netherlands, pathways for middle- and lower-skilled workers are exceptionally limited, with major implications for occupations such as nursing and sectors such as construction and agriculture where labour gaps are significant (Cörvers et al., 2021; MPF, 2022).

In low-wage sectors that have high labour demand – such as agri-food, logistics and delivery, domestic and care work and cleaning services – the lack of legal pathways has resulted in a proliferation of irregular work or a reliance on specific groups, such as asylum-seekers, those with temporary residence permits or EU citizens from countries such as Romania and Bulgaria, working in highly precarious conditions and vulnerable to exploitation (Näre et al., 2024). The skewed nature of immigration systems has a distinctly classist result: higher-class immigrants, with higher education, skills and income, receive preferential

treatment, while lower-class immigrants often end up with insecure or undocumented migration status (de Haas, 2024).

3.4 The lack of pathways for technical trades

Technical trades, and occupations that would be defined as more mid-skilled, are in general neglected in immigration policy. Eurobarometer survey data shows that small and medium-sized firms seeking to recruit staff experience most difficulties when hiring for technical occupations, and particularly for jobs requiring vocational qualifications such as apprenticeships (Eurobarometer, 2023). An OECD-led consultation with businesses found similar: three-quarters of firms confirmed that legal pathways are only satisfactory for high-skilled workers, and they were unable to meet their recruitment needs for technical trades workers (OECD, 2024).

While often no legal pathways are available, even if a permit option exists eligibility criteria can make things difficult for technical trades workers

(e.g. due to the salary threshold). Other barriers, such as a labour market test, may mean it is more cumbersome for firms to recruit technical trades workers (though this test will often be waived for highly qualified roles). The smaller firms that dominate the construction sector are disadvantaged compared to larger firms as they cannot afford the services of specialist immigration lawyers and by administrative and compliance-related requirements (such as obtaining sponsor licences). This is, of course, a wider issue of concern given SMEs make up 99% of all businesses in the EU, with the lack of skilled workers affecting SMEs more broadly across all sectors of the economy (DG for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2023).

Barriers to hiring for more technical trades affect multiple sectors and occupations. At EU level sectors like construction and road freight transport, which figure prominently on the shortage occupation list, are particularly disadvantaged. At country level the picture will have nuances; in Portugal for example, it is the need for mid-skilled workers, particularly for the textile, shoes, furniture and automobile industries, that is noted as overlooked (MPF, 2022). Key industry stakeholders in road freight transport are actively pushing for immigration policy reforms to address the shortage of truck drivers, and are making progress in raising this issue at EU level (see Box 5).

Box 5 Addressing the shortage of truck drivers

As illustrated in Figure 1, heavy truck drivers are in particularly short supply across the EU. This is in the context of a substantial global shortage of drivers and increased transport demand, with the EU's current workforce ageing and the industry unable to attract younger drivers into the profession. The International Road Transport Union (IRU) forecasts that, without action, some countries will face vacancy rates of 50% by 2026 (IRU, 2023).

In addition to the lack of suitable visa pathways in many countries, another challenge is the lack of recognition of third-country driving licences. The IRU has called for amendments and the expansion of agreements with third countries for recognition of professional driving licences, as well as reforms to labour immigration rules to allow the legal immigration of non-EU workers for the mobility and logistics services industry (IRU, 2023).

The new 'Skilled Driver Mobility for Europe' project under the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) will focus on research, planning and framework development to address the shortage of professional drivers in the EU. Multiple EU Member States are participating, with partner countries including Egypt, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan and Tunisia (MPF, 2024c).

While there is a general lack of pathways available for technical trades workers, some countries are more open to offering visas to these workers than others. Poland, for example, issues work permits

without a labour market test for hundreds of occupations, including construction workers, bus and lorry drivers and machine operators (OECD, 2020). In Estonia, registration for short-term work

is an important route for employers to recruit foreign workers in the construction and industrial sectors (MPF, 2022). In Slovakia, an expansion of visa eligibility in 2022 included a visa for bus and truck drivers (Eurostat and EMN, 2023c). In Italy, the increase in the number of work permits for third-country nationals includes road transport, construction, mechanics and shipbuilding, albeit with the caveat that overall quotas are far lower than labour demand, as discussed in Box 3 (ELA and EURES, 2024). The Walloon region in Belgium has opened up access to work permits for low-to mid-skilled occupations not on the shortage occupation list, provided applicants pass a labour market test (Fragomen, 2024a). Ireland has extended the eligibility for its general employment permits to numerous technical trades;¹³ since 2021, virtually all construction sector occupations have been eligible for work permits (DETE, 2021). This move is in line with the Irish government's retrofitting and new house building targets, though evidence so far is that the construction sector remains a minor user of the immigration system and the craft workers in greatest shortage receive a relatively small share of the permits issued to the sector (TUS et al., 2023; Kumar and Donoghue, 2024).

Most notable, however, is Germany's new Skilled Immigration Act, which opens the door to non-EU migrants with vocational training, even if jobs are not on the shortage occupation list. Since June 2024, this includes a job search option allowing third-country nationals with language skills, qualifications or work experience (including two years' vocational experience) to apply for an

Opportunity Card to come to Germany without a job, to look for employment (InfoMigrants, 2024). Jobseekers can work up to 20 hours a week while looking for employment. A job search visa of this kind allows employers to meet prospective hires before committing, making it easier to match employers and employees in the international recruitment process (OECD, 2023a). Portugal has also opened a new job search visa pathway, which has no education or skills requirements (ibid.). Job search visas could prove particularly useful for technical trades given qualification recognition is typically more difficult, and the demonstration of skills is important. Germany's new Act also allows foreign nationals to do their vocational training in Germany (with the option of working during this training period) (Cörvers et al., 2021). This a useful approach for the green transition given green skills – e.g. related to heat pumps, solar PV and circular waste – are evolving and new upskilling courses are being designed and implemented in many European countries.

3.5 Posting of workers

Posting occurs when an employer sends their employee to work in another country for a limited period in the context of a service provision.¹⁴ This plays an increasingly important role in enabling European firms to access technical trades workers. It is most commonly used in the construction and road freight transport sectors (De Wispelaere et al., 2022). While it has been generally associated with EU citizens, posting of third-country nationals has been increasing rapidly (Lens et al., 2021; De Wispelaere, 2022). While

¹³ These include electricians, masons, roofers, plumbers/heating and ventilation engineers, carpenters/joiners, floorers/wall tilers, painters/decorators and construction and building trades supervisors (DETE, 2021).

¹⁴ This is allowed under the framework of the free movement of services.

posting within the EU does not need to follow any migration-related procedure,¹⁵ it leads to a complex legal arrangement whereby the person is working in one country, with their residence and social security benefits tied to another. Posting has been identified as a route by which labour mobility within the EU is increasing, and one which is largely outside Member State control (Lens et al., 2021).

Some see posting as a way for labour migration to respond flexibly to the EU's labour shortages, in particular in technical trades where migration pathways are restricted. However, there are concerns about the potential for worker exploitation, in particular due to the uncertainty introduced into workers' immigration status and employment conditions, heightened dependence on the sponsoring employer and the role of fraudulent labour supply agencies that have sprung up in recent years (Lens et al., 2021; EBFWW and FIEC, 2023). Posting is, in some instances, associated with low wages, poor conditions (including poor health and safety standards and a lack of decent accommodation) and abuses of working time, and workers often lack information on their rights and enforcement options (Lens et al., 2021; EBFWW and FIEC, 2023). There are also major shortcomings with posting data; the lack of transparency around third-country nationals employed in construction, for example, has been raised as a concern by industry actors (EBFWW and FIEC, 2023). It has proved difficult to monitor the working conditions of posted workers given the temporary nature of these arrangements; there are also concerns about the frequency and effectiveness of labour enforcement (Cremers et al., 2007; Lens et al., 2022). This is receiving increasing attention

from the European Labour Authority (ELA), and there are plans to increase inspections and enforcement, in cooperation with national authorities (ELA, 2024).

3.6 Conclusion

Labour immigration is increasing across the EU, supported by policy reforms that seek to attract and retain foreign workers and increase mobility within the EU. This is occurring even in countries known for the 'ostentatious hostility' of their discourse around immigration, but which are still 'quietly admitting large numbers of foreign workers' (Beattie, 2024: n.p.). Reforms are however generally piecemeal, rather than large-scale efforts. Highly qualified migrants remain the major focus, and the bias against more mid- and low-skilled immigration remains strong in many EU countries. The lack of legal pathways for technical trades is concerning. In general, the existing policy bias is detrimental in light of both the profile of occupations on Europe's shortage occupation list and the pressing needs of Europe's green transition.

15 The worker needs to have a Portable Document (PD) A1 showing they pay social security contributions in another EU Member State and the company needs to file a posted worker declaration in the receiving country (Cörvers et al., 2021).

4 The EU's efforts to expand labour immigration

4.1 Introduction

Member States have the prerogative to determine the volume of admission, and there are limits to the EU's competence and activities in relation to labour immigration. However, the Commission has both legislative and operational initiatives of relevance via its labour migration directives, investments to support labour mobility schemes and the Talent Partnerships and Talent Pool initiatives. This section concentrates particularly on the operational elements managed by the Commission – specifically the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) investments via the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) and AMIF's other areas of grant funding managed by DG HOME.

4.2 The AMIF work programme

The AMIF programme aims to boost Member State capacity to manage migration. Under its four objectives it seeks to: 1) strengthen the common European asylum system; 2) support legal migration to Member States, including by supporting the integration of third-country nationals; 3) counter irregular migration and ensure effective return and readmission in third countries; and 4) enhance solidarity and responsibility-sharing between Member States,

in particular towards those most affected by migration and asylum challenges (European Commission, 2024a).

By far, the largest share of AMIF funding is allocated to Member States participating in AMIF for 'shared management'.¹⁶ Actions in shared management can support any of the policy domains under the scope of AMIF, from integration to resettlement, reception capacity or return and reintegration for example, according to Member States' priorities. How this funding is allocated and used at Member State level has been extensively analysed (UNHCR and ECRE, 2018; 2019). Notable findings include slow progress by Member States in spending funds, and challenges in ensuring balanced funding across AMIF priorities. For example, Member States' spending of AMIF funds emphasised migrant returns (48%) with much less (26%) spent on integration (UNHCR and ECRE, 2019).¹⁷

After these budget allocations for Member States, funding is invested via grant allocations and 'indirect management' arrangements. Grants are managed directly by DG HOME and allocated via open calls for proposals, or given in direct awards to support a wide range of themes. Funding under 'indirect management' supports international organisations such as the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), in

¹⁶ Under the Fifth Revised 2023–2025 Work Programme, for example, €1 billion is allocated via 'shared management' to Member States, out of the total €1.57 billion AMIF work programme budget (European Commission, 2024a).

¹⁷ This analysis looked at the previous AMIF work programme (2014–2020), with spending analysis picking up on the 2014–2017 period.

this case specifically for its Migration Partnership Facility (MPF) and Return and Reintegration Facility. Only AMIF grant awards and AMIF financing channelled through the MPF are analysed here.

4.3 AMIF investment in the Migration Partnership Facility (MPF)

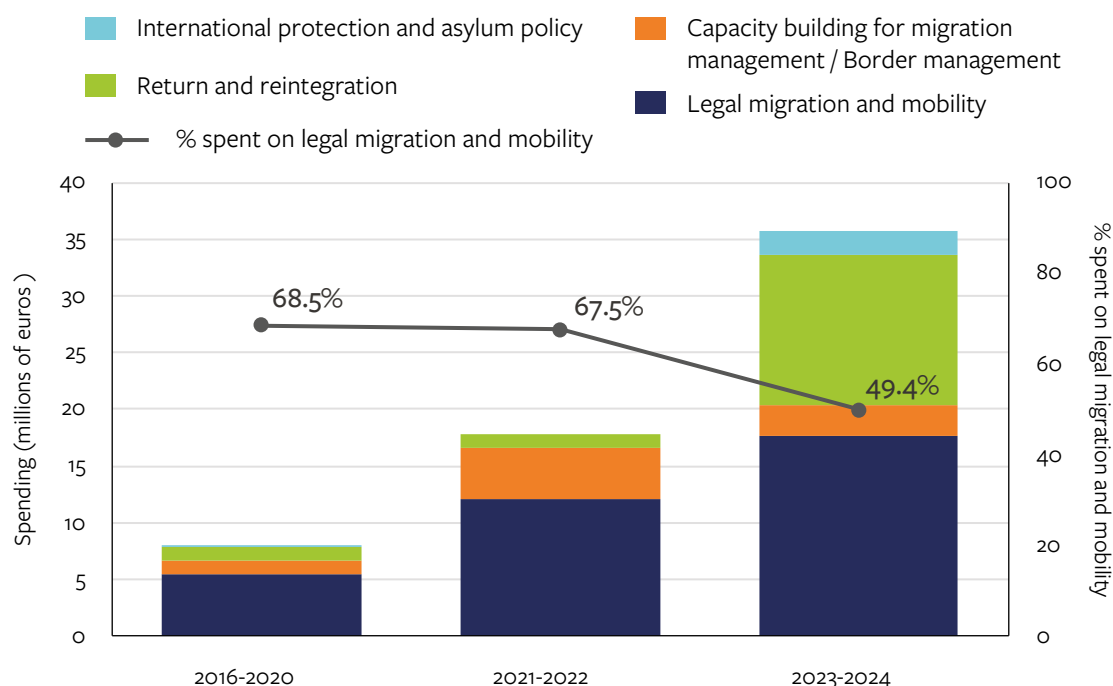
The EU has been investing in promoting skills mobility partnerships (SMPs) and facilitating legal migration for some time, mainly via the MPF. Talent Partnerships, introduced as part of the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, build on these programmes.

The MPF is financed under a contribution agreement between the European Commission and ICMPD. Funding comes from AMIF, as well as the Internal Security Fund for Police Cooperation (ISF-Police) and the Internal Security Fund for Borders and Visa (ISF-Borders), with a budget of €62.55 million allocated for 2020–2024 (ICMPD, n.d.). The MPF can support a wide range of initiatives including in relation to international protection and asylum policy, trafficking, return and reintegration, border management, anti-smuggling and capacity-building for migration management. However, its flagship element is its work to support legal migration and mobility (European Commission, n.d.b.). This includes the implementation of labour mobility projects and, increasingly, new interventions aligned with the EU's Talent Partnerships commitments. Geographically, the MPF covers the Western Balkans and Türkiye, Eastern Partnership and Southern Neighbourhood countries, Silk Route countries and sub-Saharan Africa (ibid.).

For labour mobility work, seven countries were selected as priorities for MPF activity: Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal and Tunisia.

Since its launch in 2016, the MPF has supported numerous SMPs between EU Member States and southern partner countries. An analysis of MPF projects – and specifically looking at the AMIF co-financing element – shows that the bulk of AMIF-MPF spending is on MPF's 'legal migration and mobility' priority (see Figure 4). The facility's project spending has expanded rapidly in recent years, meaning significantly increased financing for legal migration and mobility-related projects (from around €5.5 million in 2016–2020 to around €17.6 million in 2023–2024).¹⁸ In total, between 2016 and August 2024 AMIF-MPF spending classified as supporting 'legal migration and mobility' reached around €35 million; however, this 'pales in comparison' to the very substantial EU funding – over €10 billion – allocated to border security and migration management for the period 2021–2027 (Dempster et al., 2024: 5).

¹⁸ The periods cited refer to project start dates given many of these projects are multi-year initiatives. Spending for the 2016–2020 period is collated given spending in the early years was comparatively very low. For 2024 only spending on projects reported up until 31 August 2024 is recorded here.

Figure 4 AMIF spending on MPF projects, 2016–2024

Note: The categories reflected here are those used by MPF to tag its projects. Capacity-building for migration management and border management are combined as a small number of projects fall under both categories. Only AMIF-financed projects are reported here, and only the specific percentage of AMIF financing is captured. Projects reported up to 31 August 2024 only are recorded here. See Appendix 2 for the list of projects analysed.

Source: MPF, n.d.c.

Projects classified under the ‘legal migration and mobility’ category have become comparatively less of a priority within the AMIF-financed MPF portfolio, falling from 69% in 2016–2020 to 49% in 2023–2024. At the same time, the resources devoted to return and reintegration projects are increasing significantly (from a 16% share to 37%). This shift is largely driven by the unprecedented allocation of €11 million to a project for the return and reintegration of irregular migrants from Türkiye, by far the highest amount ever allocated under any AMIF-MPF project.¹⁹

4.4 Assessing AMIF-financed MPF investments

AMIF spending via the MPF supports a wide range of activities, with a key aim being to test new pathways and match workers to sectors experiencing labour shortages. This is not an easy area in which to achieve results. In its review of the implementation of SMPs generally, the Migration Policy Institute finds many disappointing aspects, including high operational costs, questions about developmental benefits in countries of origin

¹⁹ This is under the project ‘Enforcement of Migration Governance and Partnership through a Holistic Methodology (EMPATHY)’, which began in April 2024 (MPF, 2024a). After this, the second-highest AMIF investment (€3.8 million) is in the skills partnership project between Senegal/Ghana and Germany to enhance construction skills and facilitate the mobility of construction workers (begun in October 2023).

and a lack of employer buy-in translating into low demand for workers, as well as problems in basic design (Hooper, 2019). The fact that these are often temporary pilots, while employers generally want to retain the workers they invest in, can cause problems (*ibid.*). Employers have also reported frustration that these partnerships do not include priority visa processing or a family dimension, which they view as useful for attracting and retaining talent (OECD, 2024). Multiple reviews have also pointed out that these projects are often accessible to very few, often moving fewer than 100 people (Beirens et al., 2019; Hooper, 2021). This critique remains valid though two recent projects do aim to enable labour migration of somewhat larger numbers, including to take up long-term employment.²⁰

Challenges aside, some MPF projects have achieved interesting results. The Digital Explorers project (2019–2021) between Nigeria and Lithuania involved the recruitment of Nigerian ICT professionals to work for one year with Lithuanian companies. After the first track 11 Nigerian ICT professionals remained in Lithuania, with seven workers staying after the second phase; others gained opportunities locally (MPF, n.d.a). While this is a very small-scale example, a key aim of the project was to establish a new corridor between the two countries, particularly given Lithuanian firms had very little experience of international recruitment. The difficulties accessing work permits led to the Lithuanian government introducing more flexible standards for assessing the work experience and education of tech workers and to the opening of new consulates in Nigeria. Even with

the high unit costs of this type of project, the value for money assessment was positive given increased salaries of participants, national tax contributions and value added for the ICT sector (MPF, n.d.a). The Digi Talents project, which gave internships to ICT professionals from Moldova and Ukraine with Slovakian companies, similarly had a direct influence on Slovak immigration legislation, facilitating an amendment to the visa requirements for highly skilled third-country nationals (MPF, n.d.b). These projects tested demand and the potential to match workers to employers, with this learning translating into immigration policy and systems change.

It is also important to note, when considering impact, that the aims of the labour mobility projects supported under the MPF vary greatly. Of the 21 projects that focus on legal migration and mobility (see Appendix 2), five do not envisage any mobility at all – e.g. the project focus is on research, labour market assessments, networking or partnership-building. Seven projects provide short-term (often three- month) internships or traineeships, while two focus on entrepreneurship networking, exchange and study tours, and one a Masters programme after which students return home. While sometimes a project offering a three-month internship programme has the long-term aim of building a scalable pathway (e.g. the Pakistan–Finland vocational talent project for hospitality and care), this is not clear for many. Indeed, a number of projects explicitly envisage short-term, temporary mobility, with the main focus being skills transfer, reintegration support or entrepreneurship support so that people can learn

20 The construction project between Senegal/Ghana and Germany aims to move 180 workers (with 360 workers trained on a home track) (MPF, 2023). A partnership between France and Tunisia focused on the plastics industry aims to move 320–480 technicians with a view to them gaining permanent contracts in France (MPF, 2024b).

skills (in Europe if need be), but ultimately remain in their countries of origin, in part due to a desire to guard against 'brain drain'.

The fact that only a minority of the legal migration and mobility projects undertaken to date actually anticipate people moving to take up permanent (or long-term temporary) jobs in Europe impacts the spending picture. Looking at projects started since 2021 (when MPF spending became more substantial), only 28.5% of all AMIF-MPF spending supports projects with clear labour migration pathways. This rises to 53.5% once internships, traineeships and study tours are included. While the MPF facility is presented as a flagship vehicle in the EU's efforts to promote and expand labour pathways, it is clear that labour immigration is not necessarily either a central aim of many of the projects supported, or always the primary focus of investment.

4.5 Analysis of AMIF's Action Grants

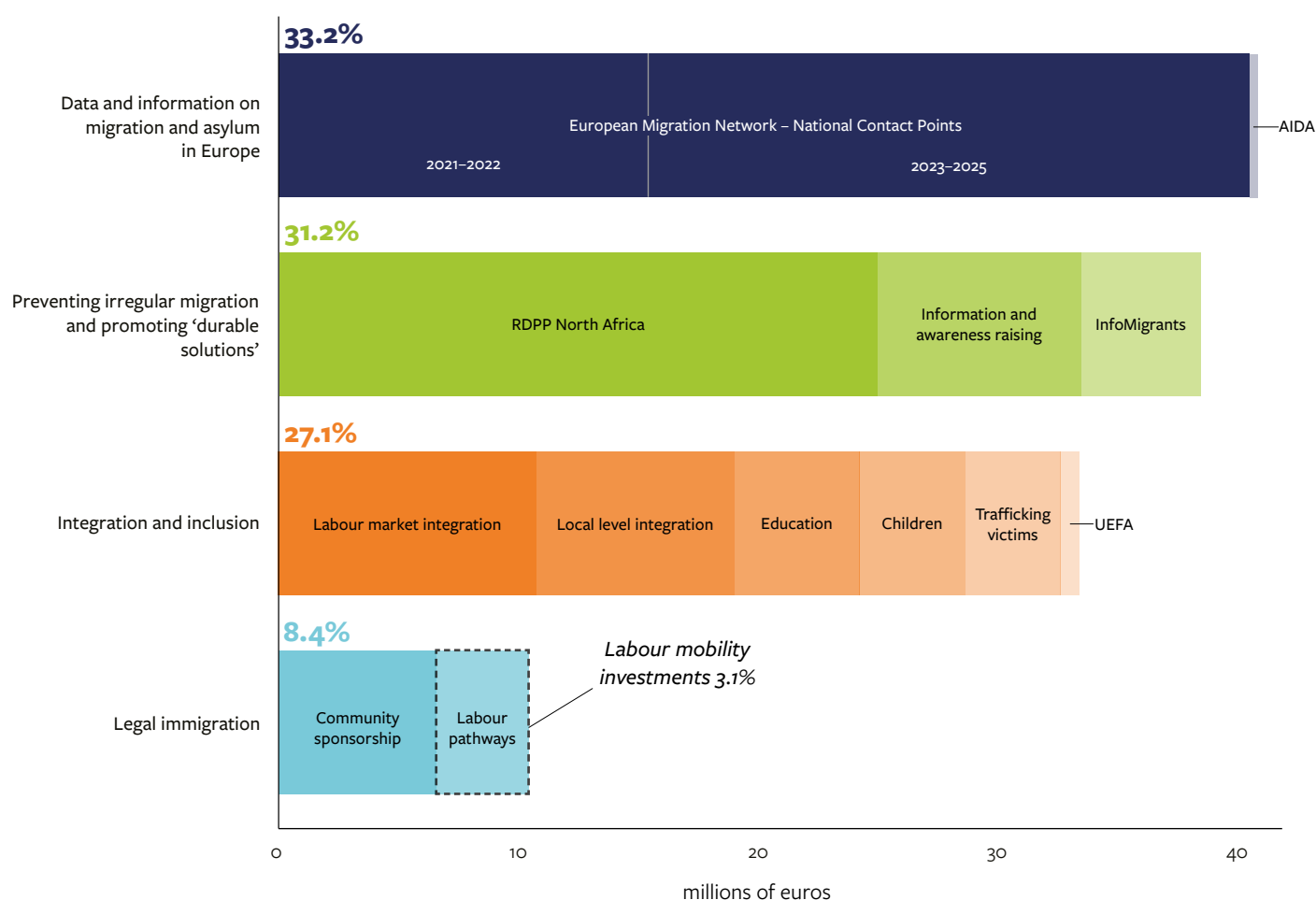
Analysis of AMIF's grants, as reported through the EU Funding and Tenders Portal for the AMIF work programme (2021–2027), provides further insight into how much of the funding the Commission is managing is currently invested in supporting legal migration and particularly labour pathways. Figure 5 provides an overview of the topic areas of the grants awarded since 2021; it shows clearly that labour mobility is a very minor priority in investment terms.

As Figure 5 illustrates, the largest investment is in the EU's critical data and information infrastructure – the European Migration Network and the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) – which have received 33% of allocated grants since

2021. Also notable is the investment in inclusion and integration (27%) – whether directed at the local level, into educational efforts with young people, supporting vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied children or trafficking victims, or focusing on labour market integration. By contrast, investment that involves mobility – whether refugee resettlement via community sponsorship or relocation via a labour pathway – is low (8%). Ultimately, only 3% of AMIF Action Grant funding is directly supporting labour migration initiatives.²¹

Also notable is that more than 10 times more funding is directed at preventing irregular migration and 'building durable solutions' for refugees and other migrants in third countries than goes to supporting labour pathways to Europe under AMIF's Action Grants. Significant funding (€25 million) goes to the Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) for North Africa. This programme, now in its sixth phase, is coordinated by the Ministry of Interior in Italy and implemented with partners including IOM and UNHCR. It aims to promote protection, assistance and durable solutions in North Africa, to consolidate countries' migration and asylum systems and build their capacity to provide adequate reception and protection for vulnerable migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, with the ultimate aim of providing alternatives in the region so that people do not travel on to Europe. Activities financed under this grant include significant direct assistance and service provision for refugees, other migrants and host communities, awareness-raising, assisted voluntary return and capacity-building for refugee status determination procedures in the region (Samuel Hall, 2021; European Commission, 2023d).

²¹ This analysis does not include the amounts allocated to the original DT4E project or EU Passworld as both projects were funded under a 2020 call and fall under the previous AMIF work programme.

Figure 5 AMIF Action Grant financing, from 2021

Note: This analysis includes all of the Action Grants listed in the EU Funding and Tenders Portal, under the AMIF programme for 2021–2027 (as at 31 August 2024). The EU's contributions are aggregated under the classification of each call and then according to the author's classification given the aim and nature of the work. InfoMigrants is included in the 'preventing irregular migration' classification as the stated aim of this funding is to give information to potential migrants and asylum-seekers to counter misconceptions about the risks of the journey and quality of life abroad. UEFA refers to the 'Football in Unity' programme which receives a direct award.

Source: European Commission (n.d.a.)

Investment in information and awareness-raising focusing on the risks of irregular migration (€8.5 million) also far exceeds funding for labour mobility initiatives (€3.8 million).²² This is particularly notable given significant evidence that

these types of campaigns are ineffective (Pécoud and Beaujeu, 2024). Analysis of extensive MIGNEX survey data finds that 'warnings rarely have an

²² To date, seven large projects, focused on awareness-raising campaigns around the risks of irregular migration, have been supported with grants under the 2021–2027 AMIF programme. These target Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Gambia, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt.

impact on migration aspirations and that when they do, they are most often associated with a higher desire to leave' (Caso and Carling, 2024).

Also notable is that the small number of AMIF grants related to pathways for labour immigration all relate to refugee labour mobility. As such, AMIF investment is supporting growing efforts to provide employment pathways for refugees, increasingly seen as a feasible and attractive complementary solution (Dorst et al., 2024; Fragomen, 2024c). As noted earlier, this financing is supporting pilots in the UK, Belgium, Ireland and Portugal – via the DT4E programmes – with new pilots expanding this work to Italy, Spain, France and Slovakia under the STEP programme. Building on the successful UK experience, relocations have taken place to Ireland and Belgium, with a strong initial pipeline to Italy thanks to the country's new 'train to hire' law (see Box 3).²³ There is significant potential to expand these efforts further across EU Member States.

It is instructive to compare the MPF and refugee labour mobility models. Unlike most MPF projects, refugee labour mobility schemes are driven by a central aim of securing a work permit, with a view to as many people as possible moving and obtaining long-term residency as soon as possible.²⁴ Refugee labour mobility programmes are also demand-led, entirely determined by private companies' requirements for a specific candidate profile according to their job vacancies. Private sector engagement is something MPF's projects (and SMPs more generally) have

traditionally struggled with. Companies also cover many of the costs of the international recruitment of refugee candidates (including visa fees). As well as the goodwill demonstrated by governments' engagement in these pilots, satisfaction levels reported by employers are high²⁵ and there is a very high retention rate (94%) of refugee employees by the end of the first year of recruitment (TBB, 2024). Early survey results have found that 48% of those engaging with TBB said they were less likely to consider an irregular migration journey as a result (TBB, 2020).

While refugee labour mobility pilots are becoming more established across Europe, there are still major constraints with this model. It is resource-intensive, given a highly tailored service is provided to employers, complicating efforts to reach scale (Dorst et al., 2024). There are also challenges matching employer demand to the skill set of participating refugees, difficulties upskilling candidates (particularly when it comes to language) before departure without the support of development programmes, and the need for advocacy around the necessary adaptations to immigration pathways to ensure the model can work effectively. The AMIF Action Grant financing model does not necessarily help respond to these challenges. A budget of around €2 million per programme is typically provided, but this is a multi-year budget, shared across multiple partners and countries, which translates into very light infrastructure and very low capacity, particularly for employer outreach at country level. The AMIF financing model

23 This includes 25 refugees in Uganda who will relocate to work in IT companies, 10–14 candidates (goldsmiths) from Egypt and Jordan who will relocate to work with Turin-based jewellery companies, and 50–80 refugee candidates who will be included in a programme recruiting Egyptian workers for a shipbuilding company.

24 An important point to note is that these schemes, also seek to secure appropriate protection measures if someone falls out of employment.

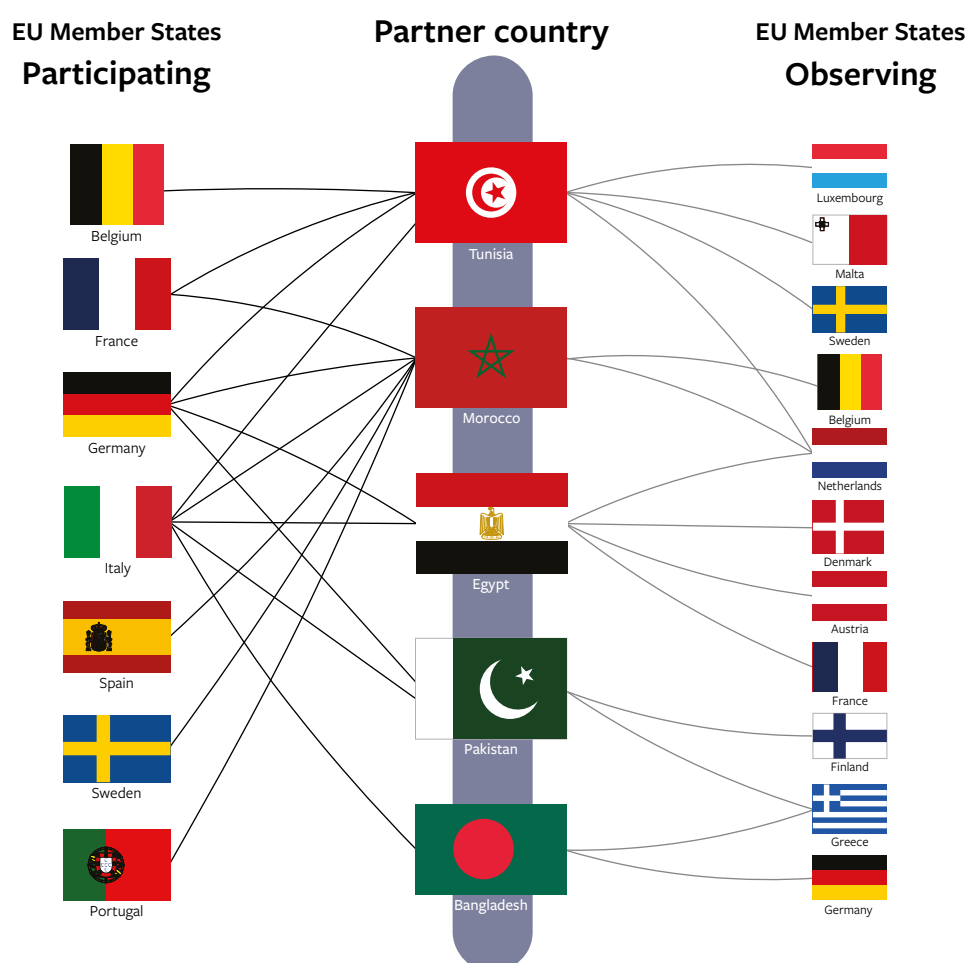
25 In a survey 95% of employers said they would hire again through this channel. In addition, 97% of employers rated the technical and soft skills of displaced talent employees as satisfactory or higher (TBB, 2024).

also requires a large investment of resources in coordination. This requirement, along with the fragmentation of budgets, means projects simply are not designed to scale effectively.

4.6 Talent Partnerships

When Talent Partnerships were launched, they were seen as ‘the furthest-reaching and most concrete attempt to create and expand opportunities for legal migration from non-EU citizens to date’ (Stefanescu, 2020: 3). They build upon the successful pilot projects developed under the MPF, with expanded scope and ambition and designed under a broader, long-term framework of cooperation on migration management (European Commission, 2022). DG HOME and ICMPD play a key role advancing these partnerships, but progress depends on co-ownership by partner countries and Member States. The first Talent Partnerships were launched with Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh. Essentially, these are an attempt to move from the project-based approach of the MPF to a larger-scale, more strategic and systems-based approach.

The Talent Partnership process involves a series of roundtables, steered by DG HOME, with partner countries in dialogue with EU Member States. Member States are cautious about joining these negotiations and participation remains limited. This is important given that the level of participation by Member States will significantly impact scalability (de Lange et al., 2022). However, participation is growing: Figure 6 shows which EU Member States are engaging in the Talent Partnership process with each partner country. Member States can opt for observer status to begin with, but can upgrade their participation level (as Belgium did recently in relation to the Talent Partnership process with Tunisia). Italy is a notable frontrunner in the Talent Partnership process and is seen as a highly constructive participating Member State, including due to its decision to open a quota for Tunisian workers as part of the process.

Figure 6 Participation in Talent Partnerships

Source: Information provided by DG HOME (correct as of July 2024)

Within each process, the first two roundtables explore contexts, sectors and professions of mutual interest and clarify the main shared objectives and priorities between the parties. Objectives can focus on a wide range of aspects, including the recognition of qualifications, comparing competency standards for priority occupations, skills development programmes and recruitment systems for third-country candidates (European Commission, 2023b). The next step is to develop a roadmap – a detailed, granular plan of action – that will guide the work. These are currently under development. While reports of the roundtables are not public, once endorsed by participating states the roadmaps will be publicly

available. For now it remains unclear to what extent legal pathways will actually be expanded or created under these processes, and crucially whether mobility opportunities will be limited to the highly skilled and short-term seasonal work, another factor which would significantly affect the scope of these initiatives (de Lange et al., 2022).

In parallel, the Commission is creating an EU Talent Pool which will be linked up with the Talent Partnerships, an important step given it has long been recognised the EU could play a constructive role in enabling more active matching of workers to vacancies (OECD and EU, 2016) (see Box 6).

Box 6 The EU Talent Pool

The Commission intends to set up an EU-wide digital platform that will help employers identify and recruit foreign workers more effectively. This is viewed as particularly useful given only a few Member States have digital platforms and talent attraction tools that target foreign workers, with their scope often limited to highly skilled workers. According to the terms of the European Commission proposal – which is currently being negotiated by the European Parliament and Council – the EU's Talent Pool will focus only on occupations that are identified as in shortage across the EU, whether low-mid or high skilled occupations,²⁶ and on recruiting workers from third countries. People seeking international protection, who reside outside of the EU, can also apply for a job through the Talent Pool. There will also be a direct link between Talent Partnerships and the Talent Pool, with those who have participated in a partnership programme able to create a profile on the platform linked to a 'Talent Partnership pass'. This will provide prospective employers with information on their skills developed within the programme, providing additional visibility to these jobseekers. Any Member State can voluntarily join the Talent Pool and employers from participating Member States will be able to list their job vacancies on the platform. While a useful tool to aid international recruitment, this initiative will have no direct impact on the visa procedures for workers, which remain a Member State competence, though the Commission proposal does encourage facilitations to be adopted within countries' visa processes for those recruited through the Talent Pool. This is likely to be a critical success factor for the initiative.

Sources: European Commission (2023b; 2023c)

While these are much larger scale, systemic efforts, it is important to bear in mind that the framework under which Talent Partnerships are conducted includes border management and readmission, which has already complicated progress.²⁷ As such, although Talent Partnerships have been framed as being about labour mobility, it is clear that this component 'still risks being dominated by migration control priorities' (Milazzo, 2024: 32). The impact of linking

conditionalities around border management and readmission with labour mobility components has also been highlighted as particularly unhelpful if the Commission wants the private sector to collaborate and invest in these processes (de Lange et al., 2022).

²⁶ However, Member States will be able to amend this list to fit with their own labour market realities.

²⁷ The EU intended to develop Talent Partnerships with Senegal and Nigeria, but discussions have not gone forward due to the lack of progress on readmission agreements (Migration Control, 2024). Conditionalities in these areas are known to be a major disincentive for sending countries (Ike et al., 2024).

4.7 The EU's migration directives

Five directives have been adopted as part of the EU's efforts to develop a harmonised set of rules for labour immigration: the Blue Card Directive (BCD), the Student and Researchers Directive (SRD), the Intra-Corporate Transfer Directive (ICTD), the Seasonal Workers Directive (SWD) and the Single Permit Directive (SPD) (de Lange and Vankova, 2022). The first three focus on more highly qualified categories. Many experts have expressed concern regarding the lack of progress in coordinating legal channels for low- and mid-skilled workers, a gap with particular implications for the green transition given the nature of the EU's labour shortages (Beirens et al., 2019; Lens et al., 2021; Cörvers et al., 2021; Rasche, 2023).

Efforts to attract highly skilled workers have had disappointing results (OECD and EU, 2016; OECD, 2019). The Blue Card scheme in particular – the EU's most attractive permit option, which seeks to attract highly qualified workers including by offering intra-EU mobility – is widely viewed as ineffective (Beattie, 2024). Operating in parallel to more attractive national visa schemes, and with limited information campaigns targeting both migrants and employers, the number of Blue Cards issued has been small, with the scheme only used in any significant way by Germany, Poland and France (de Lange and Vankova, 2022). The Commission has sought to address its shortcomings by renegotiating the Blue Card Directive, but the process has been difficult and achieved less than the Commission had hoped (see Box 7).

Box 7 The recast of the EU's Blue Card

The recast Blue Card has more accessible entry conditions, with a reduction in the minimum job offer durations and simplified rules on admission and work for spouses. It relaxes restrictions on changing employers and makes it easier to accumulate the five years required for long-term residency status. Intra-EU mobility rules for Blue Card holders – the major comparative advantage offered by this visa option over national schemes – have also been simplified. More discretion has been introduced on salary thresholds, which now range from 1.0 to 1.6 times the average gross annual salary in the Member State, not quite the 1.0 to 1.4 range the Commission wanted in order to achieve a more inclusive visa channel. The recast Blue Card also redefines the skills threshold, so that professional experience (rather than academic qualifications) enables someone to qualify as eligible, which does enlarge the pool of candidates. However, this exception mainly applies to specialists in the ICT sector and the EU's ambition to enable the access of mid-skilled workers by adapting rules of recognition of prior experience was not achieved.

Some Member States met the implementation deadline (November 2023), while there have been delays in other countries in transposing the new Blue Card into national legislation. Concerns remain around the risk of variation between countries given the considerable discretion given to Member States in how they apply the directive; the substantive differences between how Germany and Italy are implementing the Blue Card is one illustration. While the Commission expects more take-up of the scheme in future, given its high-skilled focus it is not seen as opening up new migration options to the EU.

Sources: de Lange, 2021; de Lange and Vankova, 2022; Antoons et al., 2024; Fragomen, 2024c

The Commission has also reviewed other directives to make them more effective in attracting and retaining talent. The EU Single Permits Directive, which streamlines procedures for work and residence permits, has been recently revised (April 2024) with an expedited application process and with foreign workers granted more rights to change employers and more protection in case of unemployment, among other improvements (Fragomen, 2024c). The Students and Researchers Directive, which aims to retain highly qualified foreign talent in the EU's workforce after studies, was recast in 2016. It confers several benefits on students, researchers and trainees including: a (limited) right to work, the right to move within the EU, and the possibility of staying on after studies/research to seek employment or start a business. However, experts have concluded that Member States have adopted a rather conservative approach, with a number of barriers and limitations still evident in how this complex set of rules is applied (Correia Horta and Antoons, 2020; de Lange, 2020).

In general, the EU's labour migration directives are seen as overly complex and as contributing to a fragmented and inconsistent regulatory landscape. Member States do not always use them; those that do are subject to minimum standards only and have high levels of discretion in interpreting and implementing the directives (OECD and EU, 2016; de Lange and Vankova, 2022). The inconsistencies that result offer little clarity and predictability to employers, a major

shortcoming that ultimately undermines the original vision of offering unified, EU-wide labour immigration options (Antoons et al., 2024).

There are also notable gaps, of which the lack of a directive for mid-skilled occupations and technical trades is perhaps the most glaring. Migration law experts have also pointed to the lack of consideration of the legal interaction between Talent Partnerships and existing labour migration directives. This has been highlighted as an area for action (de Lange et al., 2022).²⁸ In particular, any future amendment of the Student and Researchers Directive could enable trainees, who often move via mobility schemes, to be offered the right to look for a job or start a business after finishing their traineeship or study under the Talent Partnership framework. This type of reform would improve coherence across the legal migration package (de Lange et al., 2022). A clear area of opportunity for a fresh legislative agenda for the Commission is consideration of a new Displaced Talent Mobility Directive, in line with the Commission's robust commitment to enhancing complementary pathways.²⁹

4.8 Conclusion

The EU's operational investments to promote labour migration are important given its limited competence in this area and the very substantial funding allocated to border security and migration management via other channels. Moreover, although the MPF remains the flagship vehicle to promote labour immigration, it is clear that its investments in support of

²⁸ An opportunity was missed with the revision of the Single Permit Directive, which could have included the creation of a simplified, fast-track procedure for third-country nationals participating via Talent Partnerships (de Lange et al., 2022).

²⁹ This was proposed at the Displaced Talent for Europe (DT4E) conference in Brussels (11–12 September 2024) by experts working within the DT4E consortium.

actual mobility are modest and increasingly risk being squeezed out by other priorities. AMIF investment via Action Grants shows negligible financing for labour mobility since 2021, far exceeded by efforts to prevent irregular migration and other priorities. Overall, this level of investment appears a long way from meeting the Commission's stated objective regarding legal migration under the AMIF work programme.

There is also an evident lack of clarity around whether these operational investments should actually respond to labour shortages as experienced by the European private sector, and particularly whether they should support people moving to take up permanent contracts in shortage occupations. Historically this has not been a visible aim of the MPF, though there are welcome signs that some recent investments are designed around such a vision. More consistent effort is needed, including to ensure that Talent Partnerships are responsive to labour shortages and translate into mobility at scale for workers of all skill levels.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

For industries and occupations across the EU, labour and skills shortages are acute. As the demographic transition advances, European countries will be competing for a shrinking pool of qualified workers, without which countries face difficult choices between mass automation (inappropriate for many sectors), shrinking economic activity and stagnation. The future is undoubtedly one of increasing labour immigration. While European political leaders should be significantly amending policies to attract workers, and increasing investment in integration in parallel, they should also be substantially revising their rhetoric. A more honest narrative – that we face a future with more immigration (not less), and that this is a necessary ingredient for Europe's prosperity and competitiveness – is long overdue.

The European Commission (2022) wants a more strategic approach to legal migration, including channelling it towards locations and occupations experiencing skills shortages. The rationale for such an approach is clear; countries that can incentivise migration that most strongly matches labour market needs gain higher benefits (World Bank, 2023). However, progress has been lacklustre. Policy reforms to attract more migrant workers are often piecemeal and biased towards highly qualified migrants. Legal pathways for mid- to lower-skilled workers remain neglected, resulting in a mismatch with labour market needs that is especially concerning in light of the urgent requirements of the green transition.

The findings here also show that, even in its areas of competence, the Commission's operational and investment choices are not adequately

prioritising labour pathways. Initiatives enabling labour immigration are a minuscule share of the AMIF work programme's investment. Gaps in respect of labour migration directives could be further explored, though renegotiation of existing directives is a difficult area. Overall, there is a significant risk that the migration agenda will remain almost entirely driven by security and border concerns, rather than business imperatives including labour and skills shortages.

What is to be avoided are policies (or a lack of policies) that create incentives for irregular migration. There is a clear risk that irregular migration will grow in a Europe of high labour demand and where legal pathways do not match business needs. This is not just bad for migrants themselves, who will experience potentially severe exploitation; it will also have a knock-on effect on domestic workers in the same sectors, who will be equally affected by a race to the bottom on wages and conditions. And while the lack of legal pathways may significantly undermine the EU's commitment to fair labour standards, the provision of regular pathways will also be beneficial for public finances, given that labour migrants with regular status contribute more to the fiscal balance than irregular workers (Hennessey and Hagen-Zanker, 2020). Accessible legal pathways for low-mid skilled workers, and ensuring regular status and formal employment for migrant workers, should be very high on the political agenda if the Commission wants to avoid increasing irregularity and all its economic, social and political costs.

5.1 Recommendations

There are many ways that Member States can take action, from amending quotas and reviewing shortage occupation lists (including with private sector input) to reducing visa fees or fast-track processing of work permits. Special migration partnerships and schemes can also provide hands-on support to firms, while sector-based approaches can be particularly strategic. The recommendations discussed here do not focus on these options at Member State level, concentrating instead on the Commission's scope for action. These recommendations include a particular focus on investigating policy options for enabling the access of technical trades and long-term care workers, which clearly merit special attention.

With regard to strategy:

1. Prioritise labour immigration in the European Migration and Asylum Strategy

Legal pathways for labour migration have been deprioritised in the face of an intense focus on countering irregular migration, more securitised borders and more effective returns. This requires significant reconsideration in the creation of the new European Migration and Asylum Strategy that will frame a forward-looking vision for the EU. Increasing labour immigration is essential for the EU to adapt to future challenges, maintain its economic security and competitiveness, and tackle irregular migration more effectively.

With regard to immediate investment decisions:

2. Rebalance AMIF funding to support labour immigration

Given current negligible levels of funding, increasing investments in labour immigration

under AMIF's Action Grants should be a priority, in keeping with the legal migration vision within AMIF's four key objectives. In addition, AMIF financing of MPF projects should be rebalanced to protect labour mobility as its flagship element. MPF projects that strive to fill vacancies, with workers achieving long-term temporary or permanent contracts in shortage occupations, should be prioritised.

3. Invest more (and more effectively) in refugee labour mobility

There is space for the EU to increase support for this popular policy model to enable it to reach scale. Given the model is now well validated by pilots, it should become a permanent piece of the EU's migration infrastructure. This would entail substantially higher and longer-term funding, delivered through direct award (whether via grants or contribution agreements) rather than tender. This would help address current problems with fragmentation and would help to build a much more robust infrastructure in Europe for this model to scale effectively. Another opportunity would be to change the entitlements for the AMIF lump sum paid to Member States for each person admitted through resettlement programmes, to include those who move through refugee labour mobility programmes. This would create greater incentives for Member States to participate, and contribute to more efficient scale-up of this model. This aspect should be part of discussions around the new EU resettlement and humanitarian admission plan.

With regard to current institutional infrastructure and initiatives:

4. Consider the options for EU delegations to further support international recruitment

EU delegations in third countries could play a more proactive role in the Talent Partnerships process and more generally to promote opportunities to work in Europe. This could include efforts by all EU delegations to communicate more about the sectors that the EU is prioritising for international recruitment due to chronic shortages, the specific visa options available in different Member States for particular categories/occupations of workers and the conditions for bringing family and for long-term settlement. EU delegations should also be enabled to communicate and promote the Talent Pool mechanism to third-country nationals once it is operational. As previously recommended, the creation of the position of EU Labour Information Officer in EU delegations, and activities such as job fairs in countries of origin, would make an important contribution (ICMPD, 2024).

5. Prioritise the mobility of low- and mid-skilled workers in Talent Partnerships and labour mobility schemes

The Commission should continue to encourage Member States to participate (fully) in the Talent Partnerships negotiations. Equally, the Talent Partnership process and labour mobility schemes generally should address the need for low- and mid-skilled workers, as a priority, as this will be critical to delivering new labour migration opportunities at scale. Sectors such as long-term care, road freight transport and construction merit special consideration. Talent Partnership efforts should be complemented with accessible

immigration pathways to enable foreign workers to move to Europe without major delays, costs and other administrative obstacles.

With regard to labour migration directives:

6. Improve the implementation of existing directives and maintain sight of critical gaps

The inadequate and inconsistent implementation of labour migration directives across Member States offers little predictability and is a source of frustration for business. The Commission should ensure more timely and effective implementation of both of the recently recast Directives (Blue Card and Single Permit) across Member States. While this may not be the moment to reopen negotiations on any existing directive, the Commission cannot lose sight of the lack of a directive to attract professionals into mid-skilled occupations.

7. Consider a Displaced Talent Mobility directive as part of a new legislative agenda

A Displaced Talent Mobility directive could be an important new legislative initiative for the Commission, with the recognition that this would take 5–10 years to come to fruition. Such an instrument could formally incorporate the flexibility needed to enable refugees to access employment permits in its conditions for entry, as well as establishing minimum standards and ensuring rapid access to permanent migration status. AMIF projects supporting work in this field are already providing operational lessons on what is needed in this area, and could provide the evidence to inform this new directive. Hence, the Commission could propose this for preliminary assessment now. It is likely to be palatable to Member States given it is a talent-based and demand-led proposal, with refugees only gaining access to the EU with job offers. The Commission

could also link this directive to shortage occupations specifically to increase its appeal, with the added benefit of offering legal pathways to a group at risk of opting for irregular migration. At the same time, it remains important to ensure that all measures are taken to support the inclusion of refugees and forcibly displaced third-country nationals in Talent Partnerships, the Talent Pool and MPF's labour mobility schemes.

With regard to new research and testing new models:

8. Investigate the effectiveness of job search visas for technical trades

While job search visas are not generally sector-specific, they could offer significant benefits for firms recruiting technical trades workers given employers can feasibly test skills. As such, it is a category that merits renewed consideration as a policy option for Member States and for action at EU level. The Commission should monitor the impact of the new job search visas being implemented in Germany and Portugal, given both are deliberately not focusing on high-skilled workers. It would be important to assess whether these visa options are enabling employers to effectively recruit mid-skilled professionals and investigate the impact of the different eligibility thresholds and other criteria applied. Resurrecting the idea of a Schengen job visa,³⁰ possibly modelled on Germany's Opportunity Card, has also been raised as an option to attract (particularly young) labour migrants (Brady, 2024).

9. Investigate and test models for providing tailored immigration facilitation services for SMEs

Lack of familiarity with migration-related administrative procedures, and their cumbersome nature, largely explain European firms' reluctance to hire foreign workers (OECD, 2019). Obstacles are especially difficult for SMEs. The Commission should explore operational models, including with public employment services, to support European SMEs to engage in international recruitment. This goes further than Talent Pool matching, with the aim of providing tailored, hands-on assistance with recruitment for SMEs. This model should be researched and piloted, as a priority, for SMEs in construction, road freight transport and long-term care (especially home care). It offers additional benefits given it can increase equity between small and large firms, and migrant worker candidates are supported to access non-exploitative employment.

10. Research and pilot skills assessment tools for priority sectors

The Commission should increase its efforts to enhance the recognition of qualifications and skills of foreign workers via mutual recognition frameworks and the harmonisation of procedures across Member States. It has already been noted that a sector approach to these efforts and a focus on shortage occupations would be valuable (ICMPD, 2024). EU funding could also support the development and piloting of skills assessment tools, particularly in technical trades. There are already some interesting innovations to build on

30 See OECD and EU (2016) for a discussion of an EU job search visa, including the indirect option of allowing any legally present third-country national to file an application for a work permit from within the EU, rather than requiring them to return home.

for the construction sector.³¹ This type of initiative should include investment in the design and piloting of skills assessment tools with displaced populations involved in refugee labour mobility programmes.

With regard to data availability:

11. Improve data availability on worker admissions across all categories and for posted workers

The Commission should work to improve the data held for Member States' admissions of workers outside of the seasonal worker and highly skilled categories. This is critical given the profile of occupations experiencing chronic labour shortages. Heightened scrutiny of intra-EU posting of third-country nationals is also required. The Commission should support efforts to improve the comparability and accessibility of EU-level data on posted workers, including their sector of work and nationality.

³¹ In Estonia a multilingual, AI-based tool (Werk39) has been developed to verify the competences of construction workers before arrival. It assesses knowledge of materials, the use of specific tools and roles via a 20-minute test. The tool is free for workers, though companies pay a fee; it has been successfully used in Estonia, Finland and Sweden (ELA and EURES, 2024).

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Appendix 1 Employment permits issued by EU Member States

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Austria	3,555	3,442	3,598	3,337	2,938	3,737	4,077	2,739	3,935	5,437	7,166
Belgium	4,347	4,768	4,948	5,179	5,947	6,073	6,114	4,110	6,247	8,144	8,631
Bulgaria	334	304	2,261	276	1,822	1,621	2,414	2,388	2,515	4,621	6,466
Croatia	599	609	790	2,634	6,987	23,754	46,587	31,816	30,056	53,471	77,541
Cyprus	6,613	7,989	7,337	7,385	8,204	9,771	10,686	7,897	9,800	19,221	16,874
Czechia	18,263	11,083	19,931	23,095	23,327	35,529	66,440	29,217	41,592	24,592	13,688
Denmark	10,684	10,954	9,706	10,208	10,347	11,220	11,465	8,350	11,367	14,801	13,935
Estonia	579	882	1,279	1,339	1,531	1,791	2,102	2,035	2,290	2,341	2,065
Finland	4,719	4,786	5,026	5,381	6,221	5,705	15,137	13,753	12,286	17,616	15,410
France	18,244	19,428	21,003	23,275	27,835	33,993	39,652	27,354	38,060	55,247	58,221
Germany	27,788	29,275	13,451	39,552	52,915	68,342	65,717	14,322	60,365	96,974	91,095
Greece	1,226	2,190	1,111	2,133	2,022	2,861	3,133	1,632	2,193	5,649	11,838
Hungary	3,561	3,733	4,209	5,851	13,210	31,553	38,875	31,840	38,960	47,372	53,542
Ireland	4,018	5,139	6,073	7,842	9,398	9,480	12,049	7,131	8,009	19,502	23,918
Italy	80,726	53,327	17,370	9,389	8,409	13,877	11,069	10,243	50,597	66,791	38,103
Latvia	793	971	1,639	1,736	2,158	3,575	4,447	2,545	3,685	3,549	3,838
Lithuania	2,822	4,800	2,789	4,082	7,572	9,506	18,395	19,534	15,939	22,346	46,920
Luxembourg	1,272	965	1,257	1,340	1,783	2,142	2,614	1,554	1,918	3,204	3,151
Malta	1,230	2,044	2,782	3,036	5,997	10,178	12,644	6,592	8,060	27,549	27,808
Netherlands	12,673	11,780	13,308	14,621	17,744	20,885	22,030	13,345	20,769	32,123	27,439
Poland	141,668	206,279	375,342	493,960	596,916	533,646	625,120	502,342	790,070	447,225	427,162
Portugal	6,394	6,409	6,805	5,791	8,164	20,256	34,999	32,666	38,659	53,194	55,161
Romania	1,542	1,803	1,680	1,766	2,952	6,347	16,394	10,788	18,011	31,079	44,662
Slovakia	1,624	1,741	3,142	3,590	7,421	13,989	20,885	12,077	21,852	19,339	20,042
Slovenia	3,674	4,168	5,423	6,894	12,194	21,030	20,356	9,929	17,927	22,517	20,174
Spain	49,525	42,873	41,566	38,154	42,672	58,433	63,267	81,158	88,119	140,034	128,844
Sweden	17,189	14,857	15,726	15,632	18,138	23,926	25,556	17,313	21,115	24,082	19,124

Note: This data refers to all employment permits of all durations. Ireland's data is classified by Eurostat as of low reliability. Data submitted by France in 2023 is reported as provisional. Polish data (in 2018) and German data (in 2020) is reported as having a break in the time series. This data is revised annually with Eurostat releases.

Source: Eurostat, n.d.

Appendix 2 AMIF financed MPF projects, by category

Name	Timeframe	Description
Legal Migration and Mobility		
Pakistan-Finland International Cooperation – Vocational Talent and Mobility Boost (PAFIIC)	Jul 2024– May 2027	Support for Pakistan's vocational education system to boost skills of students in hospitality and of care assistants. Includes research, curriculum development, training and mobility elements. 500 students to be trained; 150 to travel to Finland for a 3-month internship.
Skilled Driver Mobility for Europe	Jun 2024– Dec 2024	Research and stakeholder consultation to assess shortage of professional drivers in Europe and develop framework and partnerships for mobility of skilled drivers.
Professional Mobility in the Plastics Industry by Reskilling and Upskilling Trainings for Tunisian talents	Apr 2024– May 2027	France-Tunisia partnership for skills enhancement and labour mobility in the plastics sector. Includes training course development; 800 technicians to be trained; 40-60% to move with a permanent contract.
NET-Work You: Creation of a Skills Network to Increase Employment Opportunities for Young Egyptians in the Green Job Sector	Apr 2024– Apr 2027	Offers traineeship opportunities to 100 young Egyptians in Apulia, southern Italy. A training programme will enhance skills in green economy, digitalisation, agriculture. 40 graduates and 60 agricultural workers/technicians will move for 3 month traineeships. Graduates could obtain a work visa during their stay if the company wants to retain talent. Return activities also supported.
Strengthening Circular Legal and Skilled Migration through Cooperation between Italy and Pakistan	Feb 2024– Apr 2025	Analysis of labour market in Piedmont looking at needs of Italian companies and exploration of the qualifications framework. The project also includes the development of a conceptual framework on legal migration and mobility between Italy and Pakistan and webinars to share knowledge.
Skills partnerships between Senegal/Ghana and Germany	Oct 2023– Mar 2027	Professional training in construction, including the establishment of certification and recognition procedures, to enhance the TVET infrastructure in Senegal and Ghana. The project will use a demand driven approach, with cost-sharing, and develop legal pathways for apprenticeships; 360 participants for the home track and 180 to join the 'abroad' track.
Strengthening the partnership between Belgium and Georgia through Temporary Mobility of Entrepreneurs (EMLINK)	Sep 2023– Feb 2025	Pilot temporary mobility scheme for outstanding entrepreneurs. The project includes networking events, exchange missions, study tours with a particular focus on start-ups and entrepreneurs, to improve Georgia's entrepreneurial eco-system.

Digital Explorers – Iraq Edition	Sep 2023– Feb 2025	Training for 15-25 aspiring Iraqi ICT professionals. The project also includes a job fair, the revision of ICT curricula in Iraq, bilateral policy dialogue with stakeholders and a labour market needs assessment in Iraq.
MOBILISE: Circular Talent Development for Climate-Smart Agriculture	Jun 2023– May 2027	Circular talent development programme between the Netherlands and Tunisia, Egypt and Ethiopia. It includes a skills programme focusing on high tech plant production systems for horticulture. 120 participants will be trained via a 3 month internship/training programme in the Netherlands, with certification awarded and with return assistance.
Enabling European Private Sector-Driven Labour Mobility Schemes for Nigerian Technical Professionals (Nigerian TechPro4Europe)	Apr 2023– Dec 2024	A technical assistance project focusing on the construction and manufacturing sectors. The project will assess mobility schemes' challenges and lessons learned, analyse legal and practical hurdles and develop an action plan, as well as a service desk, for labour mobility in Nigeria.
Digital Explorers II	Mar 2023– Feb 2026	Building on the first Digital Explorers, this project includes Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia working with Nigeria, Kenya and Armenia. It includes upskilling of ICT specialists and will support 150 participants; 75 will be part of a mobility scheme in one of three Baltic states and 65 will be offered internship opportunities. A 'Professional' track matches people to companies for open-ended contracts whereas trainees are allowed 4-6 month internship opportunities.
WAFIRA – Women as Financially Independent Rural Actors	Oct 2021– Feb 2025	Supporting female Moroccan seasonal workers that are participating in circular migration schemes, with skills to launch their own income generating activities on return from Spain. 250 women will participate, via two cohorts. Business and finance skills training will take place in Spain, with support on return including business plan development and business funding.
Pilot Project for Business Mobility between Belgium and Senegal (PEM-WECCO)	Oct 2021– Sep 2024	Circular mobility to support entrepreneurship in Senegal. This project will support 60 Senegalese entrepreneurs, with training pre-departure and temporary stays in Belgium for learning and exchange (with companies, incubators and universities in Belgium), with follow up business support on return to Senegal.
(E)Co-development for Innovation and Employment in Green and Circular Economy between Andalusia and Morocco (MOVE_GREEN)	Sep 2021– Aug 2024	A circular mobility scheme: 36 Moroccan graduates take part in a 4 month training programme in Spain related to renewable energy and green economy sectors. Includes exchanges and visits to Andalusian companies and entrepreneurs. Support is provided to reintegrate in Morocco and develop a business activity.
Mediterranean Network for Training Orientation to Regular Migration (MENTOR) II	Jul 2021– Dec 2024	A circular mobility scheme for Tunisians and Moroccans, with the municipalities of Milan and Turin. The project includes language, civic and technical training pre-departure and traineeships and reintegration support when back.
DIGI TALENTS: Labour Mobility Programme of ICT Graduates between Slovakia, Ukraine and Moldova	Jul 2021– Jun 2024	ICT professionals from Moldova and Ukraine were given internship and employment opportunities in Slovakia. Capacity building in Moldova and Ukraine was undertaken. The temporary labour mobility of 18 young people was facilitated with 16 companies participating. Reintegration support was provided on return.

Young Generation as Change Agents	May 2019– Jun 2021	Moroccan graduates are offered the opportunity to do their Master's degree in Spain in various fields, with language and cultural training provided, as well as support once back in Morocco. 98 graduates participated.
High Opportunity for Mediterranean Executive Recruitment (HOMERe)	May 2019– Dec 2020	Internships provided for Moroccan and Tunisian students via connections with French companies and placements in ICT, engineering, energy, entrepreneurship and business administration, to improve future employability. 50 students selected and matched for short term internships.
Pilot Project Addressing Labour Shortages through Innovative Labour Migration Models (PALIM)	Mar 2019– Apr 2021	A 7 month ICT training programme for 120 Moroccans, including language and soft skills. International mobility interrupted due to Covid but work by ENABEL continued under the THAMM project.
Digital Explorers	Jan 2019– Dec 2021	Labour mobility programme for ICT specialists from Nigeria to work in Lithuania. The project included awareness raising with Lithuanian companies, recruitment and training of 30 ICT specialists, with some gaining jobs and staying in Lithuania. It also led to the opening of Lithuanian visa centres in Abuja and Lagos and a Lithuanian company opened a branch in Lagos.
MENTOR – Mediterranean Network for Training Orientation to Regular Migration	Jun 2017– Oct 2018	A circular migration project involving Turin and Milan municipalities and Moroccans and Tunisians. 19 participants from Morocco and Tunisia were matched with businesses in Italy. The project included pre-departure training, 3 month professional traineeships and mentoring to re-integrate locally.
Capacity Building for Migration Management / Border Management		
Strengthening the regional cooperation on migration management between Western Balkans and neighbouring EU Member States in accordance with EU Acquis and international standards (MIRCO)	May 2024– May 2026	Expanding Serbia's Migration Training Centre to a regional training centre to provide services and protection to migrants in line with EU best practices. This project is implemented with the Swedish Migration Agency.
Strengthening of the Migration and Asylum system in the Republic of North Macedonia (MANOMA)	Jan 2024– May 2025	Bolstering North Macedonia border management authorities' capacity for detecting, protecting and ensuring the orderly return of irregular migrants. Includes training and study visits to Poland and Czech Republic.
Migration Management Diploma Programme (MMDP) and Moving the Migration Policy Agenda Forward (MMPAF) programme	Sep 2023– Feb 2025	Capacity building programme for civil servants regarding migration policy. Training is provided by Maastricht University via a three month programme, for civil servants from multiple partner countries.
Training Institute on Migration Capacity Partnership for the Mediterranean (MCP-Med)	Dec 2021– Nov 2024	A permanent regional training institute on migration – the MCP Med – will be set up in Malta. Once operational it will target Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia for training and capacity building of their migration operators.

Strengthening Migrant Integration through Cooperation between Portugal and Cabo Verde – Coop4Int	Dec 2021– Dec 2024	This project will enhance the inclusion and integration of migrants in Cabo Verde, facilitating the development of tools and services provided locally to migrants and strengthening cooperation on migration issues between Portugal and Cabo Verde.
Strengthening of the Migration Management System in the Republic of Moldova	Sep 2021– Feb 2023	Capacity building trainings and study visits for Moldovan General Inspectorate of Border Police and Bureau of Migration and Asylum. Sharing of border management experiences with Poland, Latvia and Lithuania.
Children Left Behind by Labour Migration: Supporting Moldovan and Ukrainian Transnational Families in the EU	Jun 2021– Dec 2023	Supporting Moldova and Ukraine to improve their child protection frameworks and migration and mobility policies, given vulnerabilities of children left behind when parents move via circular and temporary migration schemes. Includes research and awareness raising around transnational families (and risks to/needs of children) and training of child protection specialists.
Migration Management Diploma Programme for Representatives of MP and CAMM Countries (MMDP)	Nov 2020– Jul 2023	Training for 60 civil servants and policy practitioners from partner countries on migration issues and policies. The training programme is delivered in Maastricht university.
Support to the Mobility Partnership between the EU and Jordan (JEMPAS II)	Feb 2020– Oct 2021	Strengthening the EU-Jordan Cooperation Framework on migration, this project includes dialogue and peer exchanges between Jordan and participating EU Member States as well as a focus on trafficking in human beings.
Support to the Development of the Concept of the National Migration Policy in Belarus	Feb 2019– Feb 2020	Support to Belarus to develop national migration policy, the project included research, fact-finding missions, study visits and knowledge exchange regarding migration policies and legislation.
Support for the Moldovan Call Centre for Migrants	Apr 2018– Jan 2019	This project involved Portugal working with Moldova to enhance their call centre for migrants, with staff training, provision of a bespoke software system and improvements to the IT system and website.
Return and Reintegration		
Enforcement of Migration Governance and Partnership through a Holistic Methodology (EMPATHY)	Apr 2024– Mar 2027	A technical assistance project to enhance safe and dignified return and reintegration of irregular migrants from Türkiye. The project will strengthen operational capacities for return, including establishing an online case management system and an International Migration Cooperation Centre.
Community of Practice on Voluntary Return and Sustainable Reintegration (COPRR)	Mar 2024– Jul 2026	Technical assistance and support initiative to foster exchange of information on policies and programmes, lessons learned and challenges, as well as to explore opportunities for collaboration with regard to voluntary return and reintegration. Implemented by MPI-Europe, it builds on their previous initiative to foster understanding between return and reintegration actors.
Empowering Reintegration: Strengthening Capacities for Return and Reintegration Counselling through CSOs	Mar 2024– Jun 2025	This project will enhance the capacity of EU and non-EU CSOs to provide return and reintegration counselling services for migrants residing in EU countries. The project will be implemented through the CARITAS network.

Reinforcement of the Migration Management System in the Republic of Armenia – ReMMAr	Sep 2023– Mar 2025	Address irregular migration in EU Member States by facilitating the integration of returnees and foreign nationals in Armenia. The project supports government agencies and CSOs to offer support to migrant populations.
D.O.M.D.E. 2 – Development of Moldovan Diaspora Entrepreneurship 2	Jun 2022– May 2025	Strengthening the relationship between the public and private ecosystem of social entrepreneurship in Moldova and the Moldovan diaspora in Italy. The project focuses on circular migration and the productive return of Moldovan migrants, their reintegration into the labour market and especially in the social entrepreneurship sector.
Development of Moldovan Diaspora Entrepreneurship (D.O.M.D.E)	Nov 2017– Dec 2018	Training and support for Moldovan institutions regarding migration management, this project included a cooperation scheme with Italy regarding diaspora entrepreneurship, with training and peer to peer learning.
Strengthening current and future (self) employment programmes through value chain management systems under the Migration Resource Centres and Local Centres of the State Employment Agency	Jul 2017– Nov 2018	Support for Armenia to implement circular migration policies and to improve its return and reintegration policies. Included research, training and study visits.
Reintegration Policy for Returning Armenian Migrants	Dec 2016– Jun 2018	Supporting the Armenian government on its return and reintegration programmes. This project included support from France to assist returnees with business plans, in-kind assistance for start-ups, as well as support with accommodation and medical care.
International Protection and Asylum Policy		
Understanding profiles and experiences of refugees and migrants in North Africa for sustainable responses – MASARAT	Jun 2023– May 2025	Focusing on Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, the project will provide reliable data and analysis of mixed migration dynamics, including profiles, drivers, journeys, protection needs, aspirations and intentions. Implemented by the Mixed Migration Centre and the Danish Refugee Council, it aims to provide policymakers and practitioners with data to make well informed decisions.
High Fidelity – Exercising for Asylum Procedures	Mar 2017– Nov 2017	The project aimed to strengthen Georgia's capacity on asylum. Implemented with Estonia and Latvia, it included training, study visits, good practice exchange and testing of complex scenarios in asylum.

Note: The project P-ACT 4P: Actions against trafficking in human beings is not included in this analysis as the AMIF share of the budget is unclear. The Sustain Europe project is also not included as it started in September 2024.
Source: MPF, n.d.c.



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