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## Can the EU Talent Pool drive complementary pathways to the EU?

by Maria Tereza Matos, Martin Wagner & Caitlin Katsiaficas

*Within the EU, there are growing concerns about the ever-increasing numbers of displaced persons globally on the one hand, and the ever-increasing need for workers in all sectors on the other. While displacement and labour shortages are treated as separate policy areas, their potential solutions might be well connected. Complementary labour pathways are a promising solution for both challenges, and the EU Talent Pool could support their expansion in Europe if accompanying measures help it to meaningfully include displaced persons and support employers.*

Employers across different industries in Europe are struggling to find the talent they need to keep their businesses thriving. As a consequence, the competition for international skilled workers – the so-called ‘[global race for talent](#)’ – has long since begun. At the same time, many people in need of international protection cannot make use of their skills. They are often invisible to labour markets in their region of displacement, and even more so to distant labour markets like those in EU Member States.

Why not invest in tapping into this group of talent? Why not recognise the potential and skills that displaced persons possess and include them in the search for needed global talent?

### **The promise of complementary labour pathways**

A relatively new approach aims to address this gap by facilitating refugee labour mobility from countries of first asylum to countries where their skills are in demand. ‘Complementary labour pathways’ recognise the skills of displaced persons and turn them into a part of the solution to their displacement: They help refugees to move to another country in line with their skills and qualifications. This win-win situation has considerable promise to expand long-term options for displaced persons while also increasing the availability of qualified workers in destination countries. Momentum behind complementary labour pathways is growing globally, although the EU lags behind in comparison with [Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom](#).

Despite the potential, complementary labour pathways face some important roadblocks. One of them is how to make the skills and qualifications of refugees visible and accessible to employers in labour markets where there is a shortage of talent, such as EU Member States. In essence, what is needed is a platform where employers and refugees can connect – where employers can circulate job vacancies across borders and refugees can advertise their skills. This is key for kick-starting the recruitment process. In the EU, a possible tool is about to emerge: the EU Talent Pool, which is set to launch this year and is currently being piloted for refugees fleeing war in Ukraine. This platform has the potential to serve as a space where the supply of and demand for labour can meet, exchange, and be matched, creating opportunities for both displaced individuals and employers in need of skilled workers.

### **Increasing the visibility of skilled refugees outside the EU**

In the September 2020 [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#), the European Commission proposed to facilitate the attraction of skilled workers needed in the block through the creation of EU Talent Partnerships and an EU Talent Pool. The Talent Pool would function as an EU-wide platform for international recruitment, where skilled third-country workers could express their interest in taking up a job in the EU, and EU employers and migration authorities could identify potential workers who align with their needs.

In its [feasibility study](#), the OECD offers three options for how such a pool could be further developed. One option is to develop a pool of highly skilled migrants who are eligible for an EU Blue Card or a similar national migration scheme. Another addresses skilled migrants in high-demand sectors, while the third approach includes the potential to connect access to the pool with a skills development component. For refugees, the OECD proposes dedicated gateways along the lines of [Science4Refugees](#), which is an initiative by the European Commission to support refugee researchers in identifying job opportunities within the EU. At the Jacques Delors Centre, Lucas Rasche [proposes](#) to integrate a special refugee track into the Talent Pool that could, according to the skills of refugees, lead to 1) high-skilled employment based on the Blue Card; 2) low- and medium-skilled jobs in shortage occupations, based on annual quotas for refugees; and 3) direct matching with employers, based on regular (national) employment permits.

The regular operation of the Talent Pool was envisioned to start in 2023. In February 2023, the Commission started [consultations](#) on the various options for developing it. To this end, the Commission presented four options, which follow in essence those discussed in the OECD feasibility study; these options range from maintaining the status quo to developing a fully

self-standing and mandatory EU Talent Pool for all labour migration (which would necessitate corresponding legislation). Importantly, in the [call for evidence for an impact assessment](#), the Commission reiterates that one of the objectives of the EU Talent Pool is to facilitate access to complementary labour pathways for people recognised as in need of international protection who are interested in working in the EU.

In the meantime, to respond to the urgent need to support those fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Commission launched the [EU Talent Pool Pilot](#) in October 2022, a 'derivative' of the original idea proposed in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Temporary and exclusively for those displaced from Ukraine, this pilot is an online job-search tool aimed at helping to identify and map the skills and qualifications of temporary protection beneficiaries and facilitate matching with potential employers across the seven participating Member States (Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain). The pilot tool is accessible via the European Labour Authority's [EURES portal](#).

Some employers' associations, such as the [European Association of Hotels, Restaurants, Bars, and Cafes \(HOTREC\)](#) and the [European Association of Small and Medium Enterprises](#), have welcomed the initiative as an important tool for facilitating the labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees and an efficient way to test the Talent Pool before launching its larger version, which will be open to third-country nationals broadly. An evaluation of this pilot is, however, still pending. It will be interesting to see how many Ukrainians and employers have made use of the tool and what their experiences using it have been. The lessons learned from the pilot can inform the further development of the Commission's [recommendation to expand complementary labour pathways](#) for persons in need of international protection. A legislative proposal, should this be the chosen option after the consultations and pilot evaluation, may be proposed by November 2023.

While much thinking has been dedicated to how the Talent Pool could work, what purpose it could serve, and whether or not a regulatory framework is necessary, the question of how to make the pool attractive for users has received comparably little attention – neither in the Commission's call for evidence nor in the feedback from submitting organisations. However, establishing a Talent Pool alone is not enough to attract an international workforce, let alone if people in need of international protection should be meaningfully included.

## **How can an expanded Talent Pool successfully reach and recruit refugees?**

Initiatives already in place such as Talent Beyond Boundaries' [Talent Catalog](#), as well as [ICMPD's research and practical work](#), provide valuable lessons that underscore what is needed to make full use of job matching. Above all, the creation of a Talent Pool itself is only a first step. Also needed are accompanying measures that promote it, explain its benefits, and take both EU employers and refugee job seekers by the hand, accompanying them in the use of the platform. Below are some suggestions for accompanying measures for the Talent Pool that could help it to effectively reach displaced persons outside of the EU and tap into their skills:

**Information sharing.** Guaranteeing that information about the EU Talent Pool is delivered to refugee communities – and that the Talent Pool is perceived as safe and legitimate – is paramount. In conversations with ICMPD, some employers have mentioned difficulties in reaching out to potential candidates abroad due to distrust and concern that the company contacting them for a work opportunity abroad could be a scammer or even a human trafficking network in disguise. During its [Global Refugee Labour Mobility Summit](#), Talent Beyond Boundaries explained that the first 10,000 people who signed up for its Talent Catalog did so after attending an in-person information session in Jordan or Lebanon. For refugees in first countries of asylum, it will be necessary to build trust, prevent potential labour exploitation, and manage expectations with respect to the chances of landing a job offer and how long the whole process could take. Information sharing is equally necessary for employers: They must be encouraged to post job vacancies in the Talent Pool or to use it to seek registered job seekers outside the EU – including refugees. In many cases, employers are interested in hiring refugees but are not always well connected to this group. Information is key to building trust, explaining the tool, encouraging people to use it, and setting expectations for potential workers and employers.

**Awareness raising.** Sharing information about the Talent Pool itself alone is not sufficient. For a Talent Pool to effectively facilitate the hiring of displaced persons, it is fundamental to raise awareness about the initiative and engage with refugee communities (inside and outside of the EU) and with organisations responsible for refugee reception and integration, employers' associations, trade unions, and other bodies responsible for employment relationships. Awareness raising in this context means explaining to employers who refugees are and what makes them different from other internationally recruited talent. Employers must be aware of the legal specificities that apply to refugees, particularly concerning the need for sustainability, as they cannot return to their countries of origin.

As an example, during conversations with ICMPD, some private sector stakeholders mentioned that even Ukrainians under temporary protection, a seemingly more straightforward and publicised legislation, were facing some obstacles to integrating into the labour market due to the scepticism and abundance of caution among employers who were not entirely sure of the rights granted by the Temporary Protection Directive. Awareness raising is also important to shift mind-sets so that refugees are also looked to as a source of talent.

**Building in focal points.** In the [REF-VET project](#), we saw that intermediary organisations or focal points are fundamental on both ends of the recruitment process (i.e., for job seekers and employers). Having a trusted contact point that interacts directly with employers is necessary to raise awareness of the skills and talents of refugees, to provide information on legal issues related to the employability of refugees, and to give a sense of security and support, especially for companies that have little or no experience hiring third-country nationals. In the case of refugee communities, a reliable focal point is necessary for maintaining a relationship of trust so that displaced persons feel safe enough to share their personal data. A focal point can also help refugees to assess their skills, draft CVs, and prepare for job interviews according to EU employer standards and norms so that they present themselves as strong candidates.

**Upskilling and training.** The Talent Pool should not focus only on the needs of employers, such as facilitating access to a new pool of candidates and matching, but also on the needs of refugee job seekers. Providing the displaced persons registered in the platform with opportunities to develop their skills, such as through language learning, interview preparation, or cultural orientation via free online courses, would be a positive way to increase interest and trust among displaced job seekers – and to support more successful matches.

## Conclusion

The upcoming launch of an expanded EU Talent Pool for third-country nationals outside the EU offers a promising new opportunity for EU employers to attract international talent – including displaced talent currently outside of the EU, a large pool of talent that remains far from tapped. Although much remains pending, the inclusion of displaced persons would open up new possibilities to promote complementary labour pathways in the EU.

Compared to tailor-made tools like the abovementioned Talent Catalog, the Talent Pool has both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it could become an EU-wide tool that could be used for foreign workers generally as well as a platform to make the talent of displaced persons visible to EU employers. It could also include measures that promote refugees' skills and connect them to employers committed to engaging in corporate social responsibility, helping to reduce the number of displaced persons without a sustainable solution. However, the EU Talent Pool is an EU initiative that administratively addresses issues related to migration, employment, and also IT infrastructure, and thus cuts across various policy areas. In turn, its implementation will also need to take different interests into account and meet many different requirements, meaning that changes or optimisations of processes that could help refugees would likely take some time. Targeted talent platforms, such as the Talent Catalog, are tailored specifically for refugees, can quickly be adapted to emerging needs, and are, therefore, probably the more flexible instrument.

Still, the Talent Pool has significant potential. It could become the gateway to EU labour markets and a new channel to reach international talent, including displaced persons, who could finally have an instrument at their disposal for widely advertising their skills. Consequently, the EU Talent Pool could ultimately also become a driver for further developing complementary pathways within the EU.

Sources and further reading:

- European Commission (2023): [Call for evidence for an impact assessment – Ares \(2023\)1128776](#).
- ICMPD (2023): [Tapping displaced talent: Policy options for EU complementary pathways](#)
- OECD (2022): [Feasibility Study on the Development of an EU Talent Pool](#).
- Rasche, L. (2021): [The EU Talent Pool An Opportunity for Skills-based Pathways to Protection](#), Hertie School, Jacques Delors Centre.
- Interviews referred to in the commentary were conducted in the framework of the project [Making refugee talent visible and accessible to EU labour markets - tapping into the potential of skills-based complementary pathways](#).

*This commentary is based on work conducted under the EU-funded and ICMPD-implemented Migration Partnership Facility project [Making refugee talent visible and accessible to EU labour markets - tapping into the potential of skills-based complementary pathways](#).*

*Tereza Matos has been working as a Consultant for ICMPD on projects focused on complementary labour pathways.*

*Martin Wagner is a Senior Policy Advisor Asylum in ICMPD's Policy Unit. His work focusses on the Common European Asylum System, international protection, complementary pathways, and displacement from Ukraine.*

*Caitlin Katsiaficas is a Policy Analyst in ICMPD's Policy Unit, where her recent research focusses on complementary pathways, temporary protection, and integration.*

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### Contact Information

For more information please contact:

#### Policy Unit

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)  
Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor  
1010 Vienna, Austria

Email: [Policy\\_Unit@icmpd.org](mailto:Policy_Unit@icmpd.org)

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