POLICY BRIEF

Labour migration from East to West: The example of foreign workers in Austria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like other high-income countries, Austria is an attractive destination for many labour migrants who compensate for the existing labour shortages in a wide range of economic sectors and occupations. Immigrants from the East predominantly fill vacancies in Accommodation and Food, Cleaning and Support Services, and Agriculture economic sectors. While the Austrian economy benefits from immigration, emigration affects the origin countries whose working age populations have been shrinking and giving rise to economic and social tensions.

In this policy brief, the immigration of workers from the Eastern countries[1] to Austria is used as an example to discuss the labour flows and analyse their impact on sending and receiving countries. When imposing stricter immigration regimes that allow for skilled immigration only, receiving states should consider that such policies may increase the brain drain in sending countries. Policies that reduce the brain drain and contribute to positive feedback effects in the way of remittances or the transfer of knowledge are recommended for sending countries. Considering that migration is a common challenge that calls for cooperation at all policy levels across regions, which are highly interwoven economically, policy makers should be able to closely monitor the demographic trends and the phenomena associated with international migration in both sending and receiving countries.

1. This policy brief will focus on the following origin countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovak Republic, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan

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CONTEXT

International migration is largely driven by the motivation to work in another country. According to the recent global estimates of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the world's labour force consists of 164 million migrant workers, which amounts to 59% of the overall 258 million international migrants, and to 4.7% of all workers worldwide (2017 reference year, see Popova et al. 2018).

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It is not surprising that the majority of migrant workers move to high-income countries like Austria, where economic opportunities are available due to shortages of skilled labour and thus rewards to skills are high (Grogger and Hanson 2011). As a result, the labour force in destination countries is increasingly composed of migrant workers. Every year, the Austrian Federal Minister of Labour issues a list of shortage occupations that are open to third-country nationals. In 2019, 45 occupations were in shortage Austria-wide, and more than 20 additional occupations in certain Federal States (see Sozialministerium 2019). The majority of these occupations require skilled workers in the crafts or trades, in Austria traditionally trained by the apprenticeship system. Eight special shortage occupations for highly qualified workers were listed in 2019 as well, open to higher education graduates in certain MINT subjects (math, IT, natural science and tech) as well as business administration (Sozialministerium 2019). Third-country nationals shall apply for the "Red-White-Red-Card", which is issued conditional on a points-based system considering education, work experience, language skills, and age.

On the side of some sending countries, the growing outmigration is not compensated by high birth rates, thereby resulting in shrinking populations and changing demographic structures as predominantly young people leave. This poses a threat to the source countries' potential for social, economic and cultural development. The fact that not only the young and economically active tend to leave, but also those who are more educated, with higher motivation and aspiration exacerbates the situation and creates brain drain.

Table 1: Demographic dynamics: Working-age populations and net migration in selected countries

	Population In 1990 (in 1000s)	Population In 2020 (in 1000s)	Pop. change 1990 – 2020 (in 1000s)	Pop. change 1990 – 2020 (in %)	Net migration (in 1000s)
Georgia	4,554	3,344	-1,210	-26.6%	-1,659
Bulgaria	7,409	5,826	-1,582	-21.4%	-708
Romania	19,624	16,222	-3,402	-17.3%	-3,014
Armenia	2,926	2,499	-426	-14.6%	-1,120
Ukraine	44,071	37,660	-6,411	-14.5%	-102
Hungary	8,757	8,207	-551	-6.3%	325
Belarus	8,638	8,134	-504	-5.8%	166
Republic of Moldova	3,613	3,518	-95	-2.6%	-371
Russian Federation	126,359	124,695	-1,664	-1.3%	11,682
Poland	31,679	32,080	400	1.3%	-1,075
Czechia	8,704	8,929	225	2.6%	544
Slovakia	4,387	4,663	276	6.3%	-7
Kazakhstan	13,476	15,433	1,958	14.5%	-2,622
Azerbaijan	5,901	8,582	2,681	45.4%	-122
Kyrgyzstan	3,471	5,318	1,847	53.2%	-666
Turkey	43,115	70,818	27,702	64.3%	2,873
Turkmenistan	2,879	4,972	2,093	72.7%	-285
Uzbekistan	15,888	27,819	11,931	75.1%	-1,059
Tajikistan	4,033	7,571	3,538	87.7%	-997

Source: UN World population prospects 2019 (UN Population Division 2019). The first columns refer to the working age population (15-64 year olds) and the last column refers to total net migration.

Most working age populations in the 19 selected countries[2] have shrunk over the last three decades (see Table 1). Losses are particularly severe in Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, Armenia and Ukraine, where the potential workforce in 2020 will be 14.5%-26.6% lower than in 1990. Emigration substantially contributed to this trend, as exemplified by the negative net migration. The populations of most Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) as well as Turkey and Azerbaijan, on the other hand, grew by 45.4% to 87.7%. Russia, in contrast, gained almost 12 million people from migration since 1990, but due to relatively low fertility rates and relatively high mortality, its population has nevertheless decreased.

The case of Austria is illustrative because it is one of the high-income Western European countries whose population is growing entirely due to immigration (Statistik Austria 2018). Besides the long-standing labour immigration from the Western Balkan countries, Turkey and Germany, labour immigration has increasingly originated from the Eastern European EU member states. Between 2000 and 2018, 2.5 million foreign nationals, aged 15 64, have registered in the Austrian social security system. Almost 50 % (1.12 million) of these foreign nationals were citizens of the 19 selected countries. The main origin countries are Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Poland, of which between 263 and 146 thousand working-age adults moved to Austria between 2000 and 2018, followed by Turkey (139 thousand), the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine. Nationals of the remaining ten selected countries represent only a minor part of all immigrants in Austria.

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Table 2: Working age immigrants to Austria 2000-2018

	Immigrants 2000-2018	Still in Austria in 2018	% female	% naturalized
Hungary	263,297	132,840	43.6%	1.4%
Romania	225,569	124,485	59.4%	5.1%
Slovakia	159,962	78,645	63.7%	1.2%
Poland	146,354	60,811	41.8%	5.0%
Turkey	139,294	115,747	49.7%	36.4%
Czech Republic	55,775	24,380	49.0%	4.2%
Bulgaria	41,460	23,832	53.4%	3.6%
Russian Federation	37,929	24,376	58.9%	8.1%
Ukraine	19,930	10,456	69.0%	8.0%
Georgia	8,567	2,870	57.5%	6.9%
Armenia	5,251	3,031	51.8%	8.9%
Republic of Moldova	2,975	1,229	74.2%	11.1%
Belarus	2,794	1,638	75.4%	10.0%
Azerbaijan	1,731	985	50.6%	9.4%
Kazakhstan	1,667	958	68.7%	4.5%
Kyrgyzstan	1,268	669	69.2%	14.2%
Uzbekistan	772	462	56.2%	6.3%
Tajikistan	504	309	48.4%	10.7%
Turkmenistan	276	141	74.8%	6.4%
Selected countries	**1,115,375**	**607,864**	**52.4%**	**9.9%**
All immigrants to AT	***2,500,848***	***1,334,753***	***49.5%***	***10.8%***

Adults aged 15-64, naturalized: immigrants receiving the Austrian citizenship. Source: Austrian Labour Market Database (AMS - Sozialministerium 2017), statistics: Stefan Vogtenhuber/IHS.

2. See the footnote above.

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In 2018, roughly more than half of immigrants from the listed origin countries were still registered in Austria. This share is the highest among Turkish immigrants, of whom more than 80% were still in Austria in 2018, and the lowest among nationals of Georgia, Poland and Moldova. As to the gender distribution, over 50 % of migrants from Romania, Slovakia, Russia, Ukraine and Georgia were female. Even higher numbers of female migrants, amounting to up to three thirds, originated from Moldova, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, whereas migrants from Poland and Hungary are predominately male.

The statistics on immigration in Austria show that 36.4 % of Turkish immigrants, which is by far the largest group, naturalised in the meantime, thus confirming the permanent character of their migration. Naturalization rates are the lowest among migrants from the neighbouring countries, meaning that these are primarily labour immigrants in the narrow sense who temporarily come to Austria to work, including cross-border commuters who do not have a private residence in Austria at all.

The economic situation, unemployment and education system characteristics of origin countries differ substantially.

The economic situation, unemployment and education system characteristics of origin countries differ substantially (see Table 3). Apart from Romania and Bulgaria, the World Bank classified Eastern EU member states as high-income countries – just like Austria. The other selected countries span from the upper-middle category (Romania, Turkey, Russia, Kazakhstan) to low-income countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Youth unemployment, being one of the main push factors for labour emigration (Yüksel et al. 2018), ranges from a very low level in Kazakhstan to up the 37.8% in Armenia. Education attainment levels tend to be relatively high in most of the selected countries. Only in five countries the share of the adult population with low attainment levels (no more than compulsory schooling) is higher than in Austria. The outlier is Turkey, where the majority has attained a low level of education. In Georgia, on the other hand, more than 40% have attained a high level of education (post-secondary or tertiary degree). However, the quality of education in Georgia seems to be lower than in Austria and other countries, including Russia, Kazakhstan, Poland, Hungary and Czechia.

Table 3: Economic situation, unemployment and education characteristics across countries

	Per-capita GDP (int. $)	Youth unemployment	low education attainment (%)	high education attainment (%)	Educational quality
Austria	55 455	9.4	22.2	27.8	520
Hungary	31 103	10.1	20.8	28.1	523
Romania	28 206	16.3	30.0	23.5	469
Slovakia	33 736	15.0	13.4	22.7	495
Poland	31 337	11.7	15.0	28.5	529
Turkey	28 069	19.7	57.7	17.3	470
Czech Republic	39 744	6.7	13.5	21.5	516
Bulgaria	21 960	12.7	23.7	26.7	491
Russian Federation	27 588	17.1	9.8	28.4	552
Ukraine	9 249	18.0	11.0	19.0	478
Georgia	12 005	29.0	10.4	42.1	460
Armenia	10 343	37.8	10.6	24.4	469
Republic of Moldova	7 272	7.4	28.6	14.0	nd
Belarus	19 995	10.7	7.1	23.6	nd
Azerbaijan	18 044	13.2	14.8	13.9	453
Kazakhstan	27 880	3.7	12.1	23.0	536
Kyrgyzstan	3 885	14.3	20.2	13.2	362
Uzbekistan	8 556	11.2	15.9	18.2	nd
Tajikistan	3 450	20.9	15.5	18.4	nd
Turkmenistan	19 304	8.0	11.7	12.3	nd

Source: World Bank data (GDP and unemployment of 15-24 year olds in 2018), Wittgenstein Centre (education attainment among 15-65 year olds in 2015, see Stonawski et al. 2018), World Bank Group (educational quality in 2015, see Altinok, Angrist, and Patrinos 2018), nd: no data.

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When it comes to labour force participation (Figure 1), female migrants of most origin countries have a lower labour participation rate than Austrian women, except for Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, whose female labour activity is higher. On average in 2018, 69% of native Austrian women have been working, 4% were unemployed and 27% were out of labour force. Bulgarian and Moldovan women reach a similar labour market integration rate as Austrian women, but with higher unemployment. Polish, Czech and Belarussian women are slightly less integrated in the Austrian labour market than Austrian women. Migrant women from other origin countries are clearly less integrated with relatively high shares of unemployment.

Substantial differences in activity rates exist among male workers as well, although men from the main origin countries (EU member states and Turkey) have relatively similar patterns. Turkish men have the highest labour force participation rate with only 14% of 25-64-year olds inactive. However, their unemployment rate is three times higher than of Austrian men. Most men from the Eastern European EU member states work (between 79% of Hungarian and 70% of Bulgarian men), while their unemployment rates slightly differ (between 3% among men from Hungary and the Czech Republic and 11% of Bulgarian men). Activity rates among men from Moldova, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are similar to, or slightly below, those of Bulgarian men.

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Figure 1: Labour force participation of immigrants from selected origin countries and native Austrians broken down by sex

Annual averages of the three labour market states (working, unemployed, out of labour force) in Austria in 2018 (adults aged 25-64). Source: Austrian Labour Market Database (AMS - Sozialministerium 2017), statistics and graph: Stefan Vogtenhuber/IHS.

Labour immigrants, in particular first-generation immigrants, predominantly occupy jobs, which the native Austrian labour force increasingly refuses to accept, thus creating distinct migrant labour market segments[3]. This is clearly visible in Figure 2. Most Austrians work in *Wholesale and Retail* trade (17%) - an equally popular economic sector among foreign workers - followed by Manufacturing (15%) and *Public Administration* (12%). The latter does not feature among most popular economic sectors of any other origin country. Meanwhile, work in *Manufacturing* is also widespread among migrants from Turkey (17%) and the Czech Republic (12%). Foreign workers mainly occupy positions in *Accommodation and Food and Cleaning and Support Services*, as well as *Agriculture*, where more than a quarter of all Ukrainians and 18% of Poles work. Even more Poles are working in the *Construction sector*.

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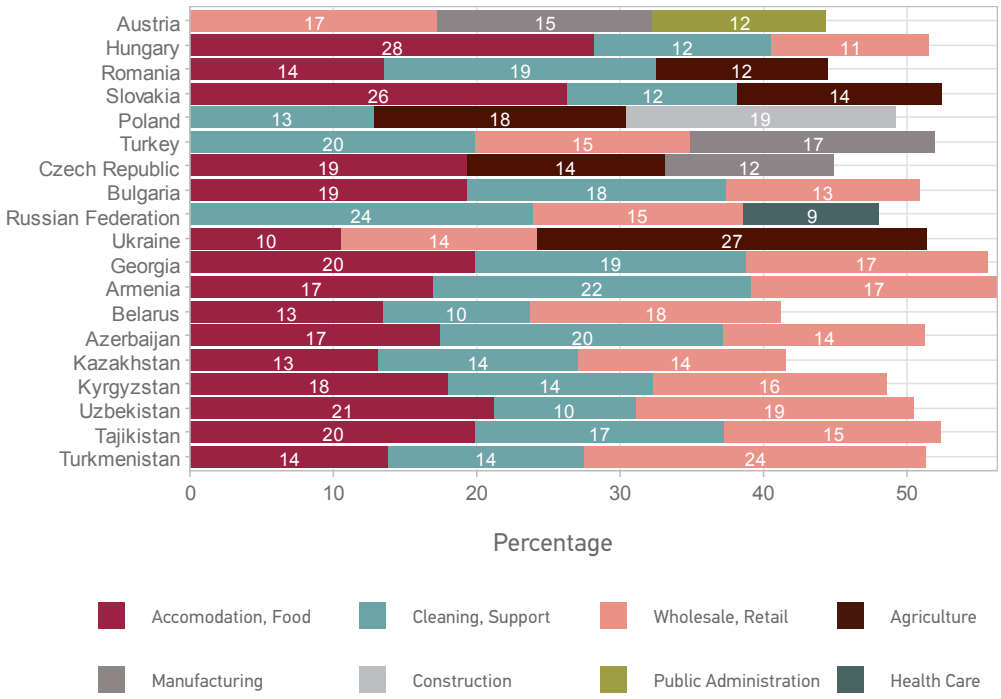
Figure 2: Top 3 economic sectors of workers according to origin country in 2018



Annual averages of adult workers aged 25-64. Source: Austrian Labour Market Database (AMS - Sozialministerium 2017), statistics and graph: Stefan Vogtenhuber/IHS.

3. The need for high skilled labour in Austria is predominantly filled by German workers.

MIGRATION EFFECTS AND POLICY OPTIONS

Over the past decades, receiving countries have increasingly shifted towards selective immigration regimes that target skilled labour. The fact that the more educated are more likely to emigrate may pose a threat to the socio-economic development of middle- and low-income countries, which are increasingly affected by brain drain (Boeri et al. 2012). However, more recent studies have challenged the traditional notion of a predominantly negative brain drain effect and suggested that continuing labour migration prospects abroad enhance education and skill formation at home. Moreover, these effects are large enough for origin countries to compensate for their initial losses (Docquier and Rapoport 2012). This literature shows that even high-skilled emigration can generate positive externalities through trade and foreign direct investment.

The positive feedback effect is amplified when the migration is temporary and when people return to their origin countries whilst in working age. In addition to the remittances they may have paid, they may bring with them financial and human capital attained during their stay abroad, which may contribute to economic activity.

Countries negatively affected by emigration have considered different policy options as a response to the brain drain. Their public education may focus on skills that are either country specific or in low demand in destination countries, or pay less attention to education that provides internationally transferable skills. Countries following this policy path possibly end up with too many trained lawyers (country-specific) and too few natural scientists, engineers or health care professionals. Poutvaara (2008) has shown that the introduction of income-contingent student loans repayable upon emigration or graduate taxes can compensate for the loss in taxes associated with the brain drain and thus contribute to the retention of diversified education. Nevertheless, adjusting the public provision of higher education could be part of a policy response to the departure of highly skilled labour. When predominantly the better educated leave, the feasibility of educational subsidies diminishes and/or public finance needs to increase tax rates.

Encouraging students to study abroad and obtain foreign qualifications is another policy option for sending countries. In this case countries can "free ride on destination countries' foreign education programs [which] certainly represents a source of fiscal gain, especially for small countries suffering from very high emigration rates" (Docquier and Rapoport 2012, 720). Outsourcing higher education this way may, however, increase inequality in access to education, and, because it likely increases job prospects in the training country, it may further stimulate the brain drain. Alternatively, governments could aim at retaining skilled labour by increasing educational spending in order to improve the quality of domestic education (Lien 2008). This may alleviate the brain drain problem because improving educational quality will reduce the number of individuals who leave the country to study abroad.

Policy options in high-income countries that attract migrants focus on shrinking domestic populations and the financial viability of the welfare state. Concerning the labour market, labour shortages in several economic sectors and the need for skilled immigrants to fill the vacancies have to be addressed by education and labour market training policies, but also in terms of attracting foreign labour.

Recent developments in Eastern European countries have had a great impact on Western European countries, and particularly on Austria. For example, the sizable labour migration flows from the Visegrád states[4] to Austria will unlikely continue because of their shrinking working-age populations and their catching-up in terms of socioeconomic conditions and standard of living (Astrov 2019). Moreover, a large share of migrant workers from neighbouring EU Member States are seasonally employed in agriculture and tourism (accommodation and food service sector) in Austria, predominantly in border regions closest to their home countries, including cross-border commuters (Schmieder and Weber 2018). Because of these demographic and economic changes in the neighbouring EU states, in the future Austrian employers may need to increase wages and/or attract workers from farther away regions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. However, this will also affect the housing needs since workers will no longer be daily or weekly commuters, but rather require longer stay arrangements.

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IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Since labour migration concerns regions, which are highly interwoven with each other, it requires intensified cooperation at all policy levels. First, policy makers should keep track of demographic transitions across countries in relation to phenomena associated with international migration such as remittances, return migration, and possible incentives of migration opportunities on skills and human capital formation. This implies the need for better data on migration patterns and flows that will help to better understand the reasons and impact for individuals, intermediate organisations and countries.

Western European countries still have less selective immigration regimes as compared to other traditional countries of immigration like the United States, Canada or Australia. There is therefore ample room for more selectivity at a time when calls for changes in European immigration policies have increased in light of shortages of skilled labour. However, the right policies to achieve the goal of raising education and human capital endowments of immigrants are far from being straightforward. Immigration flows result from a multi-layered mechanism in which political regulations in sending countries as well as self-selection processes of potential labour migrants in these countries play an important role that needs to be considered. Host countries may thus be unable to change the composition of its immigrant populations a lot. As a result, they might need to adapt their labour market training policies to better accommodate for the needs of both immigrants and the labour market. Better assessing the formal and informal competencies and improving their recognition will likely contribute to a better utilisation of the skills of immigrants.

Immigration flows result from a multi-layered mechanism in which political regulations in sending countries as well as self-selection processes of potential labour migrants in these countries play an important role that needs to be considered.

However, introducing more quality-selective policies to attract high-skilled labour to tackle labour shortages will most likely increase the brain drain in sending countries. This might provoke policy responses in origin countries that limit investment in skill formation and the supply of skilled labour. As a result, receiving countries whose economies increasingly depend on (skilled) migration need to be aware about the impact of adopting more selective immigration policies.

Emigration countries should recognize the positive human capital externality when considering policy options. This will guide answers to questions like whether to increase or reduce public expenditure on education in general, and whether to prioritise public expenditure on country-specific or internationally transferable skills. The origin countries will require policies that compensate for the negative brain drain effect. Overall, cutting down spending on education or limiting it to not internationally transferable skills should be avoided, while investment in the extent and quality of education encouraged.

Options such as student loans or graduate taxes that are repayable depending on income and/or actual emigration might be introduced. Encouraging people to attain a qualification abroad may also be a viable policy option. This will likely increase permanent emigration and brain drain but it may also stimulate foreign investment and drive remittances.

The need for comprehensive information of high quality is a reoccurring problem. Building on initiatives like the OECD`s international migration database[5], a data infrastructure that monitors important characteristics of labour migrants and encompasses more countries and individual characteristics should be established. Immigrant inflows and emigrant outflows should be recorded according to both the origin and destination country as well as the nationality of the mover, along with a host of sociodemographic information (sex, age, education and occupation). The information should then be made readily available to policy makers, researchers and the wider public to allow for informed policymaking and news media content as well as high-quality research.

4. Poland, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic and Hungary
5. https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=MIG# (17.02.2019).

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