
LABOUR MARKET INTEGRATION OF THIRD COUNTRY WORKERS IN THE EU: A RESEARCH OUTLINE

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Abstract: In this paper we argue that integration of third-country workers into the EU labour market is a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted process that requires analysis at three levels simultaneously: micro, meso, and macro. Traditional integration paradigms often focus only on the host society. However, recent theoretical advancements emphasize transnational, transcultural, and transsocial dimensions (Pries, 2016; Mau, 2007; Faist, 2000; de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). Moreover, forms of transsocialization as argued by Kaiser (2003) expand the theoretical lens by considering not only "here" (host country) and "there" (origin country), but also the "in-between"—the plurilocal nevertheless societal embedded life projects that migrants develop across different social and economic spaces. The increasing mobility of people, ideas, values, and knowledge in an interconnected world challenges state-centered models of integration (Noller, 2000). Integration takes place into the host societies and translocal migrant communities simultaneously varying significantly between different migratory and host society figurations. Migrant labour integration is no longer confined to national territories but occurs within fluid transnational social spaces, where migrants navigate multiple memberships in both their home and host societies. These perspectives reshape how we understand state-migrant relations, institutional policies, and individual agency in the labour market integration process (de Haas, 2024). At the micro-level, integration is shaped by individual migrants' experiences, their legal status, education, social capital, and cultural adaptation. Migrants are not passive subjects of integration policies but active agents who construct their own social and professional trajectories. This challenges fixed national identities and highlights multi-layered belonging and flexible participation in different social spheres. At the meso-level, institutions, labour market structures, and migration policies shape third-country workers' integration. The EU's migration governance framework (the Blue Card Directive; the 2024 EU Migration Pact, etc.) is characterized by tensions between national sovereignty and supranational coordination. Employers, trade unions, and civil society organizations mediate labour market access by advocating for equal rights, skill recognition, and fair working conditions. The sectoral demand for migrant labour in healthcare, construction, tourism and agriculture creates fragmented labour integration paths, where some workers experience rapid inclusion while others remain in precarious or informal employment. At the macro-level, labour market integration is shaped by global demographic shifts, migration policies, and economic interdependencies. The EU faces a paradox: On the one hand, aging populations and labour shortages create a demand for migrant workers, leading to policy initiatives like the EU Global Gateway, which invests in human capital development in origin countries. On the other hand, border controls, restrictive visa regimes, and externalization policies (such as agreements with transit countries to limit migration flows) complicate the labour integration process (ICMPD, 2024). The transnational nature of migration disrupts traditional state-centric frameworks, as migrants build economic and social networks that transcend national boundaries (de Brouwer, 2024). Transsocialization and transnational labour markets highlight how migrant workers participate in multiple economic systems simultaneously, challenging fixed categorizations of "immigrant" and "native." Future empirical studies on the labour market integration of third-country workers in the EU should adopt a multi-level and mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys to assess employment patterns, legal status, and economic mobility with qualitative interviews exploring migrants' experiences of plurilocal life strategies, and transnational social space interactions (Pries, 2016). A comparative approach across different EU countries and sectors would provide insights into how institutional frameworks, employer policies, and individual agency interact in shaping migrant labour integration within both national and transnational contexts.

Keywords: third country nationals, migration theory, integration; transsocialization

1. PURPOSE

This paper examines how integration of third-country nationals (TCNs) into Bulgaria's labour market, a topic of increasing importance due to socio-economic, demographic, political, and cultural factors can be studied in sociological perspective. Bulgaria is an interesting case as it was not a country of immigration until 2020. Negative demographic trends, such as a declining and aging population, have led to a deterioration in the quantity and quality of the labour force, exacerbating regional disparities and impacting labour market functionality. Despite a pool of

unemployed individuals, Bulgaria has struggled with shortages of both skilled and unskilled labour, as indicated by studies from organizations like the Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the OECD. We see Bulgaria as a case turning from a sending country into a recipient country in recent times lacking policies as well as infrastructure. The relative low wages in an EU perspective constitute an additional obstacle. This paper argues that integrating TCNs is not only an economic necessity to address labour shortages but also a social imperative to enhance social cohesion and reduce xenophobia and discrimination. Understanding migrants' life trajectories and experiences is essential for informing policy reforms aimed at facilitating effective integration processes. The integration of third-country workers into the EU labour market is a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted process that requires simultaneous analysis at three levels: micro, meso, and macro. Traditional integration paradigms often focus solely on the host society; however, recent theoretical advancements emphasize transnational, transcultural, and transsocial dimensions (Pries, 2016; Mau, 2007; Faist, 2000; de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). Pries (2016) emphasizes the importance of transnational social spaces in understanding migration, highlighting how migrants maintain connections across borders, influencing both their origin and host societies. Mau (2007) discusses the concept of transnationalism and its impact on social cohesion within the EU, exploring how cross-border interactions challenge traditional notions of national integration. Faist (2000) introduces the idea of transnational social spaces, focusing on how migrants create and sustain social ties that span multiple countries, affecting integration processes. In "The Age of Migration," de Haas, Castles & Miller (2020) provide a comprehensive analysis of global migration patterns, emphasizing the role of transnational networks and their implications for integration policies. Forms of transsocialization, as described by Kaiser (2003), expand the theoretical lens by considering not only the "here" (host country) and "there" (origin country), but also the "in-between"—the plurilocal, yet socially embedded life projects that migrants develop across different social and economic spaces. The increasing mobility of people, ideas, values, and knowledge in an interconnected world challenges state-centered models of integration. Therefore, the main research question of the paper can be summarized as: *How can the integration of third-country nationals (TCNs) into Bulgaria's labour market be effectively analyzed and facilitated, considering the country's recent transition to an immigration destination, existing socio-economic challenges, and the applicability of multi-level theoretical frameworks that encompass micro, meso, and macro perspectives, including transnational, transcultural, and transsocial dimensions?* This question aims to explore the complexities of TCN integration in Bulgaria by examining individual experiences, institutional structures, and broader socio-economic factors, while also incorporating contemporary theoretical advancements in migration studies.

2. METHODOLOGY

Future research should adopt a multi-level and mixed-methods design to comprehensively understand the integration of TCNs into Bulgaria's labour market. Quantitative approaches could involve analyzing employment patterns, legal statuses, and economic mobility of TCNs. Qualitative methods should focus on personal narratives and biographical paths of migrants to establish frames of reference that contain individual and collective meanings of migrants from different geographical areas and countries. Targeting research efforts at sectors heavily affected by staff shortages, such as services (tourism, hospitality) and industrial production (manufacturing), will help highlight factors that may dynamize them in terms of human resources, as well as relevant structures at supranational (European), national, and local levels, such as legislation, regulations, institutional constraints, education, and cultural communities. This comprehensive approach aims to delineate the "social field" of economic activities most affected by the lack of personnel. Our collaborative research project proposes a multi-level and mixed-methods research design for empirical studies on the labour market integration of third-country workers in the EU. This approach combines quantitative surveys to assess employment patterns, legal status, and economic mobility with qualitative interviews exploring migrants' experiences of plurilocal life strategies and interactions within transnational social spaces. A comparative approach across different EU countries and sectors is recommended to provide insights into how institutional frameworks, employer policies, and individual agency interact in shaping migrant labour integration within both national and transnational contexts.

3. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND EXPECTED RESULTS

Recent data from Eurostat (2023) indicate that third-country nationals (TCNs) in the EU continue to face significant challenges in labour market integration. In 2023, the employment rate for non-EU citizens aged 20–64 was 63.0%, compared to 76.2% for EU nationals, highlighting disparities in labour market access. Overqualification remains a pressing issue, with 39.4% of non-EU citizens employed in positions requiring lower qualifications than they possess, compared to 20.8% of nationals. This suggests difficulties in job matching and potential non-recognition of foreign qualifications. Wage expectations according qualifications might also be significantly higher, esp. in

countries with comparatively low wages. Bulgaria reports a lower proportion of TCNs, with non-EU citizens comprising approximately 1% of its population, against the EU average of 6.1% suggesting a high proportion of onward migration. This discrepancy warrants further investigation into factors such as economic attractiveness, migration policies, and historical migration patterns. The integration of TCNs is influenced by various demographic, economic, legal, social, and cultural factors. Social and cultural dimensions present significant challenges, often due to differing interpretations of norms and values between migrants and host societies. Contemporary integration theories, including assimilationist and transnational perspectives, offer diverse frameworks for understanding these dynamics. Assimilationist approaches view migration as a social integration issue, focusing on the absorption of migrants into the host society. In contrast, transnational theories conceptualize migration as a structural phenomena, emphasizing migrants' experiences, identities, and cross-border connections. Measurement tools like the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) and the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Multidimensional Integration Measurement Toolkit provide valuable insights into integration policies and outcomes (ICMPD 2024). MIPEX evaluates integration policies across multiple countries, while the IOM's toolkit assesses integration across dimensions such as social, political, economic, and linguistic factors. These findings underscore the complexity of integrating TCNs into the EU labour market and society, highlighting the need for multifaceted strategies that address employment disparities, overqualification, and socio-cultural integration challenges. At the micro-level, integration is shaped by individual migrants' experiences, legal status, education, social capital, and cultural adaptation. Migrants are active agents who construct their own social and professional trajectories, challenging fixed national identities and highlighting multi-layered belonging and flexible participation in different social spheres. Recent investigations and studies have highlighted the evolving complexities of migrant integration within global labor markets. De Brouwer (2024) examines the role of migrant networks in facilitating participation across multiple economic systems, challenging traditional categorizations of "immigrant" and "native." This perspective underscores the fluidity of economic identities and the importance of social networks in economic integration. Pries (2016) advocates for a multi-level and mixed-methods research approach to study the labor market integration of third-country workers. By combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, this methodology captures the complexity of migration phenomena, offering a more nuanced understanding of integration processes. Such an approach allows for the examination of individual experiences alongside broader structural factors, providing a comprehensive view of integration dynamics. Noller (2000) discusses the implications of increasing mobility in a globalized world for state-centered integration models. He argues for more flexible approaches that account for transnational dynamics, suggesting that traditional models may be inadequate in addressing the realities of contemporary migration patterns. This perspective calls for a reevaluation of integration policies to better accommodate the fluid nature of modern migration. De Haas (2024) analyzes how transnational migration reshapes state-migrant relations and the effectiveness of institutional policies in facilitating or hindering integration. His work highlights the need for adaptive policies that consider the transnational ties of migrants, as these connections significantly influence integration outcomes. Recognizing the impact of these transnational networks is crucial for developing effective integration strategies. Collectively, these studies emphasize the importance of adopting flexible, multi-dimensional approaches to understand and facilitate the integration of migrants into labor markets. They highlight the significance of social networks, advocate for comprehensive research methodologies, and call for adaptive policies that reflect the complexities of contemporary migration. Our proposal for a research outline is based on these advanced theoretical concepts and empirical findings and includes the following highlights at the macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro-level, labour market integration is influenced by global demographic shifts, migration policies, and economic interdependencies. The EU faces a paradox: aging populations and labour shortages create a demand for migrant workers, leading to policy initiatives like the EU Global Gateway, which invests in human capital development in origin countries. Conversely, border controls, restrictive visa regimes, and externalization policies complicate the labour integration process. The transnational nature of migration disrupts traditional state-centric frameworks, as migrants build economic and social networks that transcend national boundaries. At the meso-level, institutions, labour market structures, and migration policies influence third-country workers' integration. The EU's migration governance framework is characterized by tensions between national sovereignty and supranational coordination. Employers, trade unions, and civil society organizations mediate labour market access by advocating for equal rights, skill recognition, and fair working conditions. Sectoral demand for migrant labour in healthcare, construction, and agriculture creates fragmented labour integration paths, where some workers experience rapid inclusion while others remain in precarious or informal employment. At the micro-level, individual experiences of TCNs in Bulgaria are influenced by legal status, education, social capital, and cultural adaptation. Migrants actively construct their social and professional trajectories, challenging fixed national identities and highlighting multi-layered belonging and flexible participation in different social spheres. At the meso-level, institutions, labour market structures, and migration policies significantly impact TCNs' integration. Bulgaria has

implemented policies to ease access to its labour market for TCNs, as reflected in amendments to the Labour Migration and Labour Mobility Act. However, challenges persist, including complex administrative procedures and limited recognition of foreign qualifications. At the macro-level, global demographic shifts and economic interdependencies influence labour market integration. Bulgaria's negative demographic trends and labour shortages necessitate the inclusion of migrants to sustain economic growth. Nonetheless, the country has not fully utilized the potential of migrants, many of whom view Bulgaria as a transit country rather than a destination. The European Union's migration and integration policies require Member States, including Bulgaria, to adopt comprehensive strategies for the integration of TCNs. Research on the migration and integration processes of non-EU citizens is essential to inform policymakers, academics, and the public on the effectiveness of current policies and the need for legislative reforms to facilitate integration processes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Integrating TCNs into Bulgaria's labour market is both an economic and social necessity. Successful integration can strengthen social cohesion and reduce xenophobia and discrimination. Addressing the challenges at micro, meso, and macro levels requires comprehensive strategies that consider individual experiences, institutional frameworks, and broader socio-economic trends. Bulgaria's evolving role from a transit to a destination country for migrants necessitates adaptive policies that facilitate effective integration and capitalize on the potential benefits of migration. Integration occurs within both host societies and translocal migrant communities, varying significantly. Migrant labour integration is no longer confined to national territories but occurs within fluid transnational social spaces, where migrants navigate multiple memberships in both their home and host societies. These perspectives reshape our understanding of state-migrant relations, institutional policies, and individual agency in the labour market integration process.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Future empirical studies should adopt a multi-level and mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys to assess employment patterns, legal status, and economic mobility with qualitative interviews exploring migrants' experiences of plurilocal life strategies and interactions within transnational social spaces. A comparative approach across different EU countries and sectors would provide insights into how institutional frameworks, employer policies, and individual agency interact in shaping migrant labour integration within both national and transnational contexts. To enhance the integration of TCNs into Bulgaria's labour market, the following changes are expected:

At the level of policy reforms administrative procedures should be simplified. The recognition of foreign qualifications should be improved to facilitate TCNs' access to employment.

At the scientific level a targeted research has should be conducted. Future studies must focus on sectors with significant labour shortages, such as tourism, hospitality, and manufacturing, to identify factors that can enhance human resource dynamics and address institutional constraints.

At the level of services more development is needed in order for them to provide comprehensive support, including language courses, cultural orientation, and legal assistance, to aid TCNs in their integration journey.

At the level of community engagement initiatives must be promoted that foster interaction between TCNs and local communities to build mutual understanding and social cohesion.

At macro level much more monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to regularly assess the effectiveness of integration policies and programmes, ensuring they adapt to emerging challenges and opportunities. Implementing these recommendations requires collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, employers, and migrant communities to create an inclusive environment that benefits both TCNs and Bulgarian society

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