

# Working Migrants Valued for Their Economic Contribution:

A Summary of the Findings of an Online  
Study Carried out in France, Germany, Italy,  
Poland, Romania, Spain and Sweden

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## Synopsis<sup>1</sup>

Understanding how EU citizens perceive working migrants is important for policymakers aiming to manage labour migration both from without and within the bloc. To inform the debate, the Martens Centre commissioned the Verian Group to conduct a study in seven EU countries on the public's views of working migrants. The present summary draws on the technical report produced by Verian.<sup>2</sup> The summary includes a number of formulations adapted from the technical report.

The main findings are as follows:

- Despite being preselected to achieve a balance of views on migration in general, respondents across the countries surveyed expressed positive views about the economic contributions of working migrants.
- Many respondents expressed distinct perceptions of 'working migrants' compared to 'migrants in general'.
- Respondents believe working migrants contribute to the labour market, national economy, social integration and cultural diversity although there were some who pointed out problems with assimilation, crime and security.
- There was a split across political values, with a large proportion of respondents with supranational values<sup>3</sup> expressing the belief that working migrants contribute positively to the national economy, while among those with national values only a smaller majority did so.
- Irrespective of their general views on migration, a large majority of respondents believe that migrant workers fill jobs that the locals do not want to perform, as opposed to taking jobs away from natives. This is because job conditions can be unattractive, migrants are ready to accept lower wages, and some sectors face labour shortages.
- Most respondents believe that migrant workers are not their competitors because language barriers, high qualifications requirements and sector-specific knowledge limit migrants' ability to compete for the same jobs.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the Martens Centre's Policy Director Peter Hefe for helping to develop the present project from beginning to end and for guiding me through the tendering process. Alban Versailles and Antoine Mourier provided invaluable feedback on the present Summary. Rainer Münz, Jemal Yaryyeva, Andris Petersons and Claudia Masi kindly participated in shaping the project at various stages.

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to the report for more detail and for examples of verbatim views expressed by the respondents.

<sup>3</sup> The supranational-national values scale was computed based on respondents' answers to questions about EU membership and protection from globalisation.

- Respondents with higher education levels were more likely to say they had a positive view than respondents with lower levels of education. In addition, respondents with lower levels of education were more likely than respondents with higher levels of education to think that working migrants were their competitors.
- Majorities of respondents across the countries surveyed viewed both EU and non-EU migrants as presenting more of an opportunity than a problem, although those coming from outside the EU were more likely to be seen as a problem.
- There were marked cross-country differences in opinions with regard to regularising migrants staying without a legal status.
- Majorities of respondents across the countries surveyed supported the idea of granting work permits to migrants who have qualifications in sectors that are suffering from labour shortages
- On average, a small majority of participants felt positive about general government policies to encourage labour immigration, although beliefs on this matter varied significantly between countries.

The findings are not statistically generalisable to the broader population due to the sampling methodology and limited sample sizes. Findings should be strictly interpreted as pertaining to the focus groups involved in this research. Nevertheless, the findings can be considered illustrative of actual perceptions that exist in the respective national populations.

## General views on migration

Respondents for this research were preselected according to quotas to ensure diversity across key demographic and attitudinal variables, including general views on migration. Thus, as a function of the sampling, 54% of respondents across all the countries had both positive and negative views of migration, while 24% held a generally positive view of migration and 22% held a negative view. The research found that respondents with higher education levels were more likely to say that they had a positive view. Respondents aged over 45 years were more likely to state that they had negative views. Respondents with supranational values were more likely to have a positive view than those with national values.

**The economy, culture and social integration were cited as factors in arguments by both the proponents and opponents of immigration.** Whereas those with positive views tended to hold that migrants fill labour market gaps, those with negative views tended to think that some migrants do not want to work. Cultural variety was seen as beneficial by some, whereas problems with assimilation were cited by others. In addition, those who thought migration was a negative phenomenon expressed concerns over crime and security.

A common trend across the surveyed countries was that respondents perceived **migrants to often be employed in precarious or low-paid positions, particularly in manual labour**. Some respondents, for example, those in Spain, referred to jobs in the service industry. Only few respondents mentioned high-skilled professions such as doctors and engineers. According to the respondents, the reasons for immigrants coming to their countries are a better quality of life, escaping poverty and conflict, and job opportunities. In France, Germany, and Sweden, however, particular emphasis was placed on the **availability of social housing and healthcare**.

## Unprompted perceptions

In response to an open-ended question about the geographical origins of immigrants in their country, participants revealed which regions or countries they most commonly associated with the word ‘migrant’. Many respondents across the countries surveyed felt that foreigners working in their country typically came from poorer regions or countries in conflict. Frequently mentioned origins included Africa (especially in France, Spain and Italy); the Middle East, Syria and Afghanistan; Türkiye (Germany); Latin America (Spain) and Ukraine (in Poland). In addition, a number of respondents believed that migrants labouring in the EU work in precarious or low-paid positions, notably in manual occupations. High-skilled positions were sometimes mentioned alongside low-skilled ones. Most respondents believed that immigrants come to Europe for a better quality of life, to escape poverty and conflict, for the EU’s welfare systems or for family reunification.

## Legal versus illegal

Respondents were asked about their views of the differences between legal and irregular (illegal) migration. They tended to view integration as a key difference between legal and illegal migrants—the former are viewed, in general, as willing to integrate into society and contribute positively, whereas the latter are considered less likely to do so. Some respondents viewed those without a legal status negatively, others more positively. Many respondents thought that irregular migrants take jobs away from local workers, although others mentioned that these workers are often exploited. Those with more positive views of illegal workers thought that the latter do jobs that are not attractive to indigenous workers. In addition, several respondents mentioned that irregular migrants are willing to integrate because they work, whereas many legal migrants are not willing to work or study.

There were marked **cross-country differences in opinions with regard to regularising those staying without a legal status**. In France (53%), Italy (51%), Sweden (56%) and Germany (59%), a majority of respondents indicated that all irregular migrants working illegally **should leave the country**. In contrast, relative majorities in Poland (39%) and Spain (41%) preferred to **regularise these persons**. In Romania, perception was evenly split between these two options (34%). Additionally, across the seven countries surveyed, minorities among the respondents thought that only migrants working in sectors where there is a shortage of labour should be regularised.

## EU versus non-EU

Majorities of respondents across the countries surveyed viewed **both EU and non-EU migrants as presenting more of an opportunity than a problem**. Those majorities were larger with regard to EU migrants, ranging from 69% in Sweden to 91% in Germany. Only small minorities saw EU migrants as a problem, although remarkably, 75% of young respondents in France (aged 18 to 30) did view them in this way. Respondents generally believed that EU migrants fill job vacancies and bring new skills to their country.

Despite the generally positive views across the countries surveyed, some respondents saw EU migrants as a financial burden; other pointed out the cultural differences between these migrants and the indigenous population.

When asked about non-EU migrants, majorities of participants in all the countries surveyed also expressed the view that these migrants present more of an opportunity than a problem. These majorities ranged

from 54% in France to 73% in Italy. Compared to the views on EU migrants, the proportions of those that saw non-EU migrants as a problem were larger, but **still equated to less than 50% across the countries subject to the research**. The respondents with positive views thought that non-EU migrants provide a valuable economic contribution. The respondents with negative views often saw working illegal migrants as taking jobs from locals. Many, especially among those respondents in Germany who saw non-EU migrants as a problem, pointed to the cultural differences that lead to problems with integration. Others mentioned the economic burden created by those migrants.

## Economic contribution of working migrants

Despite being preselected to ensure a balanced mix of views on migration in general, respondents across the countries surveyed expressed positive views about the economic contribution of working migrants. From this point onward, the analysis focused **exclusively on perceptions of legal immigrants from outside the EU**, as clarified during the online discussions.

On average, 75% of the respondents saw this contribution as somewhat or very positive. In the individual countries, these majorities ranged from 63% in France to 88% in Romania. There were no variations across age groups and only small variations based on sex (men being slightly more positive than women) and education (the more highly educated, the somewhat more positive than those with lower education levels).

However, there was a split across political values: **86% of respondents with supranational values felt that working migrants contributed positively** to the national economy, while only **51% of those with national values did so**. The split was also marked for respondents with progressive values versus those with traditional values: the percentages were 91% and 71% respectively. When weighting the responses by the respondents' self-positioning on the left–right political scale, 80% of those on the centre–left, 72% in the centre and 71% on the centre–right had favourable general views of working migrants.

As for the reasons for their positive views, the respondents stated that migrants were hardworking and willing to perform jobs that are in demand. They also noted that working migrants (those with a legal status) paid taxes to the state, thus supporting public services. Many respondents drew a connection between migrants' legal status and their willingness to integrate into society.

Those respondents who saw migrant workers' contribution as negative highlighted the increased competition for jobs, wage competition and strain on public services, including health, education and social welfare. In addition, for these respondents, the presence of working migrants may cause social tensions.

There were differences in the respondents' answers across the countries included in the research as to which sectors of the economy benefit most from working migrants. The respondents were most likely to believe that **construction and manufacturing** were the biggest beneficiaries of migrant workers, with 81% supporting this view. These sectors were followed by accommodation, food services and retail (59%); domestic services (50%); and agriculture, forestry and fishing (also 50%). Construction and manufacturing were the highest ranked in all countries but Spain, where agriculture was seen as the sector benefiting most from migrant workers. Healthcare and education were mentioned more frequently in Sweden (63% of the respondents) than in any other country.

## Labour market competition

Irrespective of their general views on migration, **a large majority of respondents believed that migrant workers fill jobs that locals do not want to perform**, as opposed to taking jobs away from the natives. This positive view was supported by majorities ranging from 69% of respondents in Poland to 88% in Germany. On average, 21% of the respondents thought that working migrants take jobs away from local workers. Contrary to expectations, these responses did not depend on the level of education of the respondents. Those who viewed migrant workers as filling jobs that the locals do not want noted that these jobs are unattractive because of poor working conditions and low wages.

Most **respondents did not consider working migrants to be their competitors** on the job market. The responses supporting this view ranged from 47% in Italy to 84% in Germany. Conversely, only a minority of respondents believed that migrants were their competitors, with the individual percentages ranging from 15% in Germany to 53% in Italy, the only country where a majority of the participants thought this. On this question, the responses **did correspond with the level of education of the respondents**: 42% of respondents with lower levels of education thought that working migrants were their competitors, as opposed to 25% of respondents with higher levels of education.

Those who did not consider working migrants to be their competitors believed that **the sector in which they worked required higher qualifications or specialist skills that migrant workers would not normally have**. Some felt that the language proficiency required to do their job and their local knowledge protect them from migrant competition. Those who believed migrants to be their competitors, cited the likelihood of migrant workers accepting lower wages, and their level of motivation and willingness to work in undesirable conditions.

## Demographic challenge in the EU

When asked whether labour immigration could help address the problem of demographic ageing, **majorities in all the countries surveyed answered yes**. These majorities ranged from 50% in Sweden to 76% in Spain. The age group that supported labour immigration the least in this regard, was those aged 46 to 65. Another divide emerged along the political values spectrum. Those with supranational values were much more likely to support this proposal (71%) than those with national values (28%).

Those in favour of bringing in working migrants cited the workers' support for public services and paying taxes. Those against mentioned resource concerns, competition for jobs and a preference for a local workforce.

When faced with the choice of welcoming migrant workers or increasing the state retirement age to offset the effects of demographic ageing, there was **no significant change in the respondents' views on migrant workers**. Only a small majority of respondents agreed that **increasing the state retirement age** was a good alternative policy. However, there was a country split on this question. In Sweden, France and Germany there were majorities in favour. In Italy, Poland, Romania and Spain, the majorities of respondents did not support the option of working longer. In all countries except Germany, a large majority (76% on average) supported the option of **getting inactive people back into work**.



## Labour shortages, qualifications and skills

Large majorities across the countries surveyed supported the idea of granting work permits to migrants who have qualifications in a sector that is suffering from labour shortages. On average, 85% of respondents **supported the granting of such work permits** and in every country, this proposal was supported by at least 80% of respondents. This strong support corresponded with the fact that, earlier in the sessions, respondents had spontaneously mentioned that migration for work purposes could be a solution for labour shortages in specific sectors, ensuring the survival of the national economy and individual businesses. Some respondents highlighted the need to regulate immigration flows to ensure that only those with the right qualifications and in the sectors with shortages are granted permits.

Respondents in Poland and Romania were asked about their support for the proposal to grant temporary work permits to meet the needs of the labour market: 70% in Poland and 76% in Romania were in favour of this.

Respondents were asked whether **working migrants had the required skills**. Majorities of participants in most countries responded positively, ranging from 66% in Romania to 91% in Spain. Sweden was an exception, with only 41% saying they were very confident or fairly confident. When asked about how to ensure migrant workers have the best qualifications and skills, respondents mentioned the need to **verify skills**, collaborate with the home countries, and provide practical assessments and internships. **Language proficiency** was a recurring concern.

When faced with a choice of **selecting migrants with the right skills or reskilling the migrants already living in a country**, respondents were, on average, almost evenly split, with 43% preferring to attract and select new migrant workers and 41% preferring to invest in reskilling in the countries of destination. The respondents in Sweden were clearly in favour of reskilling, whereas the respondents in other countries preferred to attract and select new skilled migrants. (Poland and Romania were not included in this particular question.)

## EU versus national level on work migration decisions

Whereas the majorities of the respondents in France and Italy favoured decisions on migration for work purposes being taken at the EU level, majorities of respondents in the other countries surveyed would prefer decisions to be taken at the national level (ranging from 53% in Spain to 75% in Poland). Those respondents in favour of the decision being made at the EU level mentioned the benefit of uniform and standardised policies, efficiency and coordination. The reasons given by those in favour of decision-making at the national level were local knowledge, sovereignty, and an understanding of the economic and social impacts of labour immigration.

## Restrictive or open policy

Despite largely positive views on the role of working migrants, respondents were more evenly split when asked whether they would prefer governments to restrict or encourage migration for work purposes. Majorities of participants in Germany (73%), Romania (65%), Spain (64%) and Poland (58%) mentioned that they would prefer governments to encourage migration for work purposes. In France (60%), Italy (56%) and Sweden (54%) respondents tended to feel that they wanted to restrict migration for work purposes. Despite largely positive views of the economic contribution of working migrants, respondents in all countries were split when asked whether they prefer governments to restrict or encourage migration for work purposes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hypotheses that the research did not test would be that, for example, some respondents have a positive view of the economic contribution of migrants but still do not want to welcome more migrants for cultural reasons; or that some respondents feel that with even more migrants, the costs to the national economy would outweigh the benefits.

## Appendix: methodology

This research was based on a digital focus group platform using Remesh software. Remesh is designed to conduct research through real-time, text-based conversations with multiple participants. Participants respond to both closed-ended questions, which provide measurable data, and open-ended questions, which generate qualitative input that is analysed in real time to identify the themes and distribution of views across the surveyed group. Participants engage in real-time discussions through a moderated chat. After submitting their own answers, respondents have the opportunity to rank the responses of others from the subgroups generated by the closed-ended questions. The technical report includes quotations and the percentages of respondents in the national sub-samples that agreed with those quotations. The anonymous nature of participation encourages candid responses, helping to mitigate the risk of social desirability bias.

To ensure the views from a variety of participants were collected, quotas were applied to ensure diversity across key demographic and attitudinal variables. Each country's group included a balanced mix of participants with positive, neutral and negative views on migration. The study covered France, Germany, Italy, Poland Romania, Spain and Sweden. In each country, between 32 and 37 participants were recruited. The Remesh-based focus groups took place in January 2025.



## About the author

**Vít Novotný** is a Senior Research Officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. He specialises in migration, asylum and border management. He has postgraduate degrees in politics, public administration, European studies and clinical pharmacy.

## Credits

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