Better legal labour migration to reduce illegal immigration

MEPs are calling for better legal labour migration channels to reduce irregular arrivals and meet the needs of the economy.

Update: since this article was originally published, the European Commission has proposed new legislation. Learn more about the reform of work permits for people from outside the EU.

To respond to Europe’s demographic challenges and effectively match immigrants’ skills with labour market needs, Parliament is demanding new EU rules on legal labour migration by the
end of January 2022. The report - which most notably calls for an EU-wide talent pool, improved mobility and new migration channels - was adopted by Parliament on 24 November 2021.

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While the integration of irregular migrants is a challenge, it should be seen as an opportunity, the report says. Encouraging labour migration via legal channels would boost employment among migrants and refugees, thereby benefitting the EU by contributing to tax revenues and accelerating economic growth and innovation.

Curtailing irregular immigration channels

The EU’s migration policy is defined by a focus on strict border controls and effective returns, while very little has been done to promote safe and legal pathways to Europe.

Research conducted by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) found that 77% of irregular migrants had experienced persecution or conflict in their country of origin and may have been forced to come to Europe irregularly due to a lack of regular alternatives.

In a resolution adopted in May 2021, Parliament said: “Enhancing proper legal migration channels would help to reduce irregular migration, undermine the business model of criminal smugglers, reduce trafficking in human beings and labour exploitation, enhance equal opportunities for all workers and offer a legal path for those considering migrating to the Union”

Meeting the demands of the labour market

The Covid-19 pandemic underlined the role of essential workers in sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing and health care in keeping economies and societies alive. MEPs are calling on the European Commission to implement an ambitious admittance scheme for low and medium-skilled non-EU nationals to complement the revised Blue Card Directive for highly-skilled migrants.

The report proposes establishing an EU-wide talent pool for legally migrating workers, as well as a platform that pairs applicants’ profiles with the needs of EU-based industries, allowing member states to overcome labour shortages.

According to Abir Al-Sahlani (Renew, Sweden), who was responsible for guiding the report through Parliament, “The voluntary matching platform would serve as a helpful tool for those who wish to apply for work in member states and for EU-based employers to search in [non-EU] countries for potential employees.”

Recognising migrants’ qualifications in the EU

MEPs are also calling for greater harmonisation of rules for the recognition of qualifications of migrant workers at EU level. The recognition of migrants’ qualifications currently depend on national rules, which vary significantly across the EU, and highly-skilled migrants often find
themselves accepting jobs that require lower qualifications in their destination country. In 2015, the OECD reported that “those who enter the EU as asylum seekers are especially at risk of over-qualification”.

In 2019, about 48% of highly-skilled migrants worked in low or medium skilled jobs, compared with just 20% of EU citizens. Strikingly, among highly-skilled migrants, the most common form of occupation is as a cleaner or domestic helper, while 62% of computer programming firms and 43% of construction companies are reporting labour shortages.

“A strong and competitive Europe needs legal migration to properly address the demographic and economic challenges that the Union is facing,” said Al-Sahlani.

Immigrant entrepreneurs

As countries around the world ease the visa application process for foreign entrepreneurs and freelancers, MEPs are calling for new EU-wide multiple entry visas for the self-employed.

At present, EU migration laws focus on attracting employees under fixed-term labour contracts and although national schemes exist, few have proved successful. This is mainly due to territorial limits: entrepreneurs entering the EU via national schemes are not always guaranteed free movement or access to the single market.

The proposed measures would also help to combat the exploitation of seasonal workers, whose residence permits would no longer be tied to a single employer. They would have three months to find alternative employment after leaving a job before having their permits revoked.

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