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LABOUR MIGRATION FROM THE EUROPEAN PERIPHERY TO THE EU'S CORE

DEEPENING OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITIES BETWEEN THE EU AND ITS CANDIDATE STATES

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EU enlargement is once again becoming a priority for European decisionmakers and is seen as an effective foreign policy tool in challenging geopolitical times. It is, however, crucial for European leaders to understand EU accession as a complex process that can also have negative consequences for economically weaker countries, perpetuating or deepening socio-economic inequalities within the EU and in its neighbourhood in view of increased labour migration. This policy brief aims to analyse this phenomenon in light of two particular issues: the application of visa liberalisation policies under EU accession negotiations; and the negative effects of high levels of migration from the semi-periphery to the core of the EU induced by access to the free movement of people.

To do so, this policy brief first makes use of existing literature on EU enlargement and labour migration into the EU, followed by a focus on the case of Croatia, the most recent EU member state, and its labour migration flows to Germany. Through the case considered, it is possible to see that emigration rates increased as EU accession progressed, contributing to multi-layer challenges, which impacted on Croatia's demographics and ability to provide social and welfare services. Moreover, it demonstrates that accession to the EU did not move Croatia up in the economic hierarchy, maintaining the structural inequalities between countries at the EU's core and those in its semi-periphery.

This policy brief puts forward policy recommendations to be implemented at three levels: the EU; the origin country; and the destination country. At the EU level, EU bodies must ensure the full implementation of and abidance by the European Pillar of Social Rights, both in the transformation of recommendations into binding regulations and in its enlargement policy and accession negotiations. With regards to origin countries, the EU must turn its focus to developing strong and resilient labour markets through increased funding before opening the EU's labour market to migrants from said countries, while ensuring that key sectors (such as healthcare and education) are not susceptible to shortages or brain drain. Lastly, the EU should work with destination countries to tackle the purchasing of migrant labour on the grey/black market, while promoting circular migration and the integration of migrants to empower them and assure full knowledge of labour and social rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of EU enlargement is once again on the European agenda. The discussions have been reignited by the launch of a full-scale war by Russia on Ukraine and Ukraine's application to join the bloc in 2022, which saw it, as well as neighbouring Moldova (and eventually Georgia), swiftly being recognised as candidates for EU membership. While the discussions focus on the positive aspects of the additional security guarantees that EU enlargement would bring to its eastern neighbours, they fail to consider the potential negative impacts of EU membership for economically weaker countries, and how best to mitigate these.

The EU's previous eastward enlargement has led to an unprecedented level of labour migration from East to West compared to previous enlargement rounds (Meardi 2012). At the same time, there is a growing dependence on the labour of migrant workers within the EU, particularly in the wealthier Western EU states (Leiblfinger et al 2020, Heindelemeier and Kobler 2022, Plomien and Schwartz 2023) – both "internally mobile" EU citizens and those coming from outside of the bloc. The visa liberalisation agreements and the freedom of movement of labour, coupled with differences in economic performance, pay, working conditions, social safety nets and public services between EU member states and between the EU and its neighbours, have, in some cases, caused significant challenges to the economies of former candidate states and the EU's current neighbours through the creation of labour market shortages and brain-drain effects (Engbersen et al 2017, Curie 2008), a breakdown of social cohesion, and a loss of public investments in the education and skills training from which the migrant workers may have benefitted. In addition, the depopulation of what are already some of the continent's poorest regions poses a challenge to regional cohesion and development in the EU (European Commission 2023). This dynamic also has implications at the individual level, whereby in (wealthier) destination countries, migrant workers are often segregated into the secondary labour market,[1] where pay and working conditions are poor and which often offers employment below their qualifications (Felbo-Kolding et al. 2019).

While national-level dynamics and policies in both origin and destination countries have been studied extensively (e.g., Lutz 2011, Bahna and Sekulová 2019, Österle and Bauer 2016, Safuta et al. 2022), this policy brief aims to analyse how the process of EU enlargement and, in particular, (1) the application of visa liberalisation policies (adopted within the framework of EU accession negotiations); and (2) accession to the freedom of movement within the EU can negatively affect joining countries by inadvertently promoting (excessive) emigration from the EU's semi-periphery to its core.[2] This policy brief poses the following research question: to what extent do socio-economic inequalities between the origin and destination countries deepen (or decrease) as accession negotiations progress/ inclusion into the freedom of movement of labour takes place?

This policy brief uses the case of the EU's newest member state, Croatia, as an illustrative example, with a specific focus on labour migration from Croatia to Germany. This policy brief is structured as follows: the first section outlines the theoretical framework; the second provides an overview of existing literature on the topic of EU enlargement and labour migration in the EU; and the third presents the methods and materials used. This is followed by a presentation of the case study and a conclusion discussing the findings. Based on the analysis, recommendations are made for policymakers on how to address and mitigate the effects of excessive emigration in the process of the EU's further Eastern enlargement.

2. THEORISING GLOBAL LABOUR MIGRATION FLOWS

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There are multiple factors and drivers behind migration flows. Only after we explore the theories that make sense of migration can we understand the specific role which EU enlargement, as an overarching process, plays in enabling migration flows from poorer countries into the EU's wealthier member states.

Representatives of classical political economy (e.g., Smith 1776 and Mill 1848) were among the first to attempt to study international labour migration. These theorists saw the international division of labour as a precondition for the accumulation of capital, as higher wages would provide a pull factor for migrants, contributing to economic growth and poverty reduction (Kreager 2017).

Neoclassical economic theory developed these ideas, suggesting that labour markets and economies strive to maintain long-term equilibrium. At the macro-level, this means that international labour migration is motivated by unequal economic development between countries, in particular gaps in wages; increased emigration from the countries of origin should thus gradually lead to a reduction of this gap and, in turn, decrease emigration flows (Harris, Stark, Todaro 1970). Consequently, at the micro-level, labour migrants act as purely rational subjects and move from countries where the labour force is abundant but wages are low to countries where there are labour shortages and wages are high (Haugh and O'Connell 2020).

Critics of neoclassical theory, like Veblen (1919) and Nelson (2001), claim that it ignores the social, cultural and political aspects of migration, which vary depending on the circumstances, and the conditions of decision-making to emigrate. Moreover, neoclassical theory ignores the way the current neoliberal capitalist regime[3] dismantles welfare states and demands the deregulation of controls on capital, which may create push factors for emigration. The demand for a migrant labour force might therefore better be explained through structural demands of modern industrialised economies. Such economies all possess a secondary labour market segment that is unattractive to national workers due to the low skills it demands and poor working conditions it offers (Piore 1979), which is thus often filled by (temporary) labour migrants coming from countries with even lower wages.

To analyse labour migration flows in a more complex manner and beyond simple "rational choice" motivations, it is thus useful to employ Wallerstein's world-systems theory (as cited in Chirot and Hall 1982). For Wallerstein, countries are located within different strata within the world economic system: the wealthy core; the less affluent semi-periphery; the resource-rich but financially poor periphery; and isolated states that are outside of the system. According to world-systems theory, resources, including the human resource of labour power, flow from the semi-periphery and the periphery to the core, where the centre of production and goods processing is to be found. In turn, the semi-periphery and periphery import processed goods from the core, which traps them in a deeply unequal and exploitative relationship.

Milanović's (2016) global inequality theory helps deepen our understanding of labour migration as a consequence of the attraction of the core countries in relation to the semi-peripheral, peripheral and isolated ones. Milanović makes a distinction between "location-based inequality" and "class-based inequality": the former relates to inequality between countries, taking into account the differences among mean income in different countries; the latter has to do with inequality within

each country, between the richest and the poorest in country A, the richest and the poorest in country B, the richest and the poorest in country C, and so on. Global inequality is, therefore, "the sum of all national inequalities plus the sum of all gaps in mean incomes among countries" (Milanović, 2016: 3). While both dimensions are important to understand global inequality as a whole, in this policy brief, we focus on the first dimension, as we assess the rising (or deepening) inequality between the countries of origin and destination countries.

EU enlargement and labour migration

Ukraine's application to join the EU, in the wake of the full-scale Russian military aggression on the country in 2022 and subsequent war, revived the political will to enlarge the bloc. This means that there are currently nine countries in line for EU membership: Turkey (since 1999); North Macedonia (2005); Montenegro (2010); Serbia (2012); Albania (2014); Moldova (2022); Ukraine (2022); Bosnia and Herzegovina (2022); and Georgia (2023). Kosovo is a potential candidate for membership. All of these countries are to be found east of the EU's current borders, and have (aside from Turkey) previously been socialist countries, as part of the Soviet bloc or the non-aligned movement (as in the case of Yugoslavia), facing similar challenges to those of Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, which joined the EU in its previous eastern expansion (Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004; Bulgaria and Romania in 2007; and Croatia in 2013). These countries have, in many cases, undergone drastic economic transformations from state-planned to market-based economies and have substantially different levels of GDP per capita and availability of social safety nets from those of their Northern and Western EU counterparts.

In view of this, it is pertinent to analyse the lessons learned from the previous eastern enlargement to attempt to prevent some of the negative impacts that EU accession may have on prospective new members. Currently, the revived enlargement discussions focus predominantly on two aspects: security; and the EU's institutional setup (e.g., Tocci 2023, Tudzarovska 2023, Bechev 2023, Meister et al., 2023). The first relates to the geopolitical implications of the EU's potential eastward enlargement – strengthening the security of the states in question and widening the EU's sphere of influence (and diminishing that of Russia), as well as the potential new threats to the EU itself as a consequence. The second discussion focuses on the potential need to reform the EU's governance mechanisms to ensure the smooth functioning of an enlarged EU. While the enlargement process is likely to last several years and face various formal hurdles, it is imperative that the intervening discussion also considers how to prevent possible negative consequences of this process.

Interestingly, in the context of debates on a potential reform of the EU's single market, the "dark side of open borders" has been recently brought up by former Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta, now president of the Jacques Delors Institute. Letta pointed out that freedom of movement has, in the case of some countries within the EU, had disastrous impacts in terms of brain drain, and called for the single market to be reformed in a way that allows for a "right to stay" in one's home country (Barigazzi and Faggionato 2024). However, similar attention is rarely provided to the existing structural and economic inequalities between the EU and candidate countries, or to the fact that inequalities within the EU are likely to deepen as a result of their accession. The fact that the CEE member states, which have now been EU members for between 10 and 20 years, are still in a structurally weaker, semi-peripheral position compared to core Western EU states (e.g., Bârgăoanu, Buturoiu et al. 2019, Drahokoupil and Piasna 2020) should serve as a warning in this regard, and provoke discussion among policymakers to design pre-emptive measures. However, apart from rare instances (e.g., Maugeais 2023, Emerson and Blockmans 2022), this is not yet the case – a gap that this policy brief aims to address.

Intra-EU emigration from CEE

CEE states' admission into the EU's area of freedom of movement of labour, coupled with the significant income and socio-economic differences between

the core and semi-peripheral member states, led to unprecedented levels of labour migration from East to West. This was even despite derogation periods, which most EU member states applied to delay CEE citizens' access to their labour markets (Meardi 2012). The expectation of a higher salary is the most frequently cited motivation of CEE workers entering the core labour markets (Österle and Bauer 2016). High levels of unemployment between neighbouring countries also contribute to the cross-border flows of workers (Bahna and Sekulová 2019). The differences in income and socio-economic conditions within the EU and between its member states are thus a crucial underlying factor in workers' decisions to emigrate and the threshold of (poor) working conditions that they are willing to accept, provided they are paid better than in their origin country (Heindlmaier and Kobler 2022). As a result, labour migration towards core markets continues to increase, as does these countries' reliance on the availability of this cheap labour force in key sectors (ibid.).

The EU's principle of the free movement of people plays a crucial role in facilitating internal mobility. Following the principles of neoclassical economic and rational choice theories, it is designed to even out labour supply and demand in different countries and regions in the EU purely based on supply and demand; as such, the principle of EU internal mobility is wilfully ignorant of the negative consequences to which it may lead (Engbersen et al 2017). Indeed, in host countries, despite being EU citizens, mobile workers are often, in reality, excluded from public services and the use of social rights (Ulceluse and Bender, 2022), with access to social benefits and residence permits being conditional upon work (Heindlmaier and Blauberger 2017; Shutes 2016). This situation is made possible by the profound economic integration that takes place in the EU with the simultaneous absence of a harmonisation of social policy (Dølvik and Visser 2009; Wagner 2018). This suggests that EU policy favours inter-country and inter-regional competition, while specifically allowing unfairness of competition between different systems of social protection and levels of minimum wages, as a result deepening inequalities within the bloc (Saraceno 2019).

Arnholtz and Leschke (2023) describe the resulting phenomenon as "hierarchised mobility". This concept suggests that "mobility opportunities – understood both as the opportunities to move and the socioeconomic drivers and effects of mobility – are unequally distributed in ways that reflect hierarchies between countries, between educational and occupational groups and between different categories of mobile workers" (ibid., 7). Indeed, empirical research demonstrates that CEE labour migrants are more likely than other EU mobile workers to be segregated into secondary labour markets (Felbo-Kolding et al 2019). The fact that these workers are often, in reality, excluded from public services due to their unstable work contracts and lack of residency in the destination countries makes them "second-class" EU citizens (Ulceluse and Bender 2022). The situation of labour migrants coming from outside of the EU is often even worse (e.g., Rijken 2018).

High levels of emigration also impact the origin countries, which suffer from depopulation and workforce decline, youth drain, demographic ageing and a loss of the resources spent on professional training or education of the emigrants (Bruzelius 2021). This serves to reinforce the placement of these countries in a systemically weaker economic position: the availability of labour migrants as a cheap labour force deepens inequalities between states, as it limits expenditure for host countries not only by allowing them to make savings on cheaper salaries and low or no social security payments, but also as they are able to avoid significant additional investments in social infrastructure in the case of migrants replacing state care or social provision (Uhde and Ezzedine, 2020). Some research suggests that, across the EU, a division of labour along occupational and industry lines, alongside wage differences, is taking place, contributing to the reproduction of inequalities across the bloc (Felbo-Kolding et al. 2019).

Certain scholars oppose this view as overly negative, suggesting that temporary or circular migration can benefit both destination and origin countries. The former would thus benefit from a reserve of labour that can be called upon in the case of labour

shortages; the latter from remittances and newly acquired skills of returning migrants (Markova 2016). A circular migration model stresses the benefits of flexibility and does not perceive integration into host societies as necessary (ibid.). However, it has been argued that this model, rather than empowering migrants, decreases the agency of all workers. Temporary labour migrants are expected to take on the burden of economic and labour market uncertainty, but quietly return to their countries of origin (and be supported by their social security systems) when no longer required (Meardi 2012). Thus, by design, they lack a "voice" in the form of representation, the capacity to strike and to take part in political life (ibid). The availability of external workers who are politically inactive and usually not unionised undermines the bargaining power of organised labour, thus serving the needs of capital and eroding labour rights (Wagner 2018).

3. METHODS

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This policy brief adopts a cross-disciplinary approach in its methodology, applying different methods to strengthen its theoretical assumptions. As such, we take a case study approach that relies on sources found through literature review (primary and secondary data) and apply critical discourse analysis (CDA) to primary sources, notably EU and member-state communication materials.

The choice of analysing a case study allows for "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon *in depth* and within its *real-life context*, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin 2009,14, italics used by the author). This policy brief thus attempts to offer a fresh perspective that defamiliarises certain taken-for-granted discourses around a complicated issue such as migrations since the case study method allows us “in-depth, multi-faceted explorations of complex issues in their real-life settings” (Crowe et al. 2011) by focusing on one case with significant details. With this methodology, this policy brief aims to describe how global inequalities and the political economy of the EU affect a particular group of people and their country at several levels.

The case of Croatia was selected since it illustrates well how Croatian migrants and Croatian society and economy were impacted by persisting inequalities in the accession process and as a member of the EU. Croatia is the EU's most recent member, having joined in 2013. While temporary derogations were put in place by some member states to restrict Croatian workers' access to their labour markets following this date, Croatians have since progressively gained access to the EU's labour market. Prior to Croatia's accession to the EU, Croatian workers already migrated to core EU countries for work, in particular to Austria and Germany (European Commission, 2015). This policy brief looks at labour migration from Croatia to Germany over the period of 2001-2022 – since Croatia's first signature of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU, until nearly a decade after its membership and the expiration of any derogations on access to the EU's labour market. In the case study, we analyse relevant primary sources (available statistical data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics) and secondary sources, such as existing grey literature (think tank, EU and government analyses and studies) and academic research.

CDA was used to detect which "hegemonic processes" (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000, 449) the EU and the German government engaged in to reproduce unequal power relations within migrations. These hegemonic discourses are often hidden and implied; therefore, CDA, the methodology to find out the underlying messages behind the text, was used. CDA allows researchers to maintain the critical point of view that can detect the underlying "relations of power and inequality in language" (ibid., 447). This methodology allows hidden unequal power relations to be exposed. To figure out how the EU and the German state, each being social and political actors, engage in this reproduction of structural inequalities, we analyse the texts that can be understood as their official stance, such as relevant announcements, promotional materials or any relevant texts that show how they frame such migration in their official communications. Since this policy brief aims to call for a change in EU policy in the contemporary context, we not only analyse official statements of both the German and Croatian governments, but also the writings from recent (2010-onwards) materials that reflect the EU's stance to a degree, such as those produced by the European Labour Authority (ELA), one of the decentralised agencies of the EU that assists enforcement of EU rules on labour mobility and social security coordination, and its job-matching network, the European Employment Services (EURES). After extracting the relevant quotes from the official website and reports of

ELA and EURES and official press releases from both the German and Croatian governments that address this migration flow within the EU, we look at how each social actor frames migration in a way that normalises unequal power relations between EU member states or that hints at complicity to maintain the problematic status quo.

4. EMIGRATION FROM CROATIA

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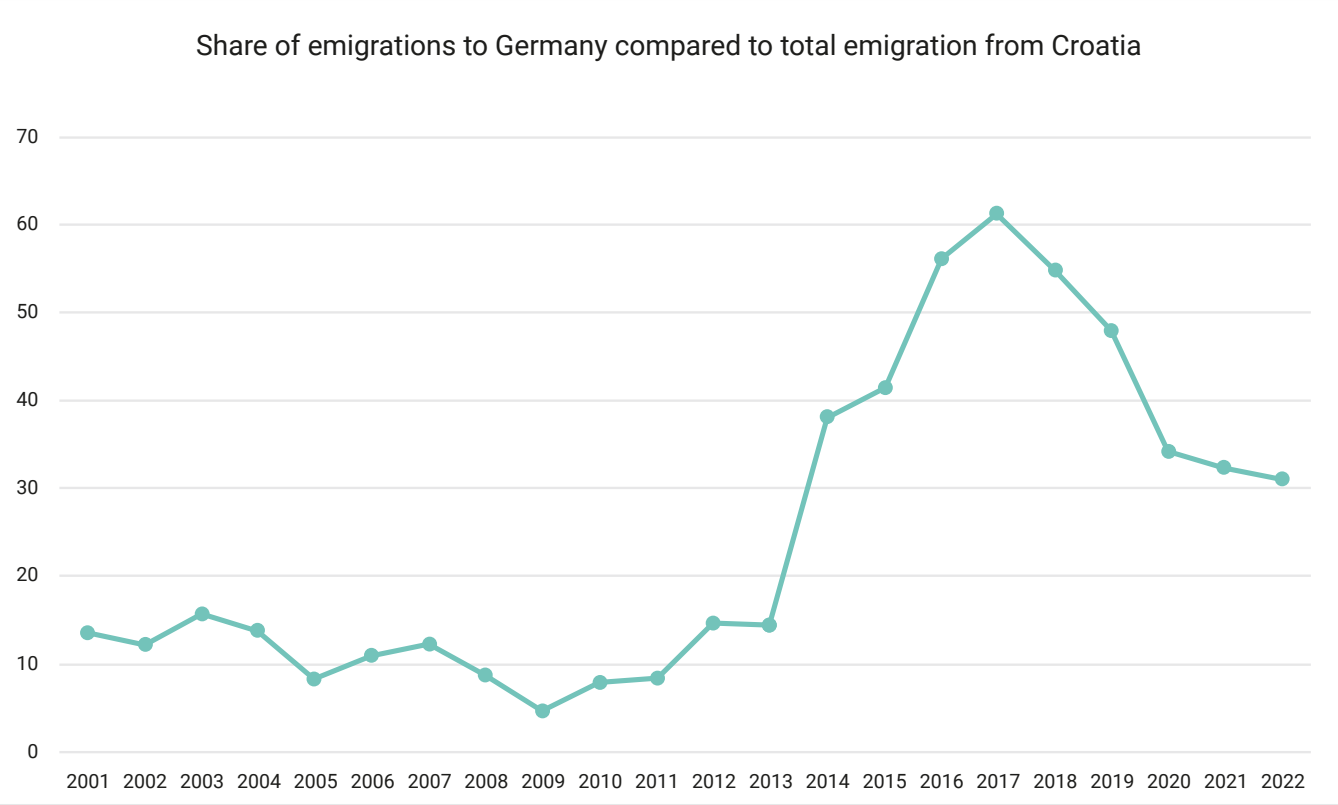
Historic and contemporary perspectives

Croatia has traditionally been a country of emigration, driven by a combination of economic and political reasons (Župarić-Iljić 2016). However, emigration in the 1960s and 1970s did not cause a demographic decline in Croatia, as it was mostly temporary, with migrants being mainly men, couples without children or couples who left their children in Croatia, usually with their grandparents (Jurić, 2017).

Emigration continued and deepened after the 2000s, especially with the global economic crisis in 2009. This became even more pronounced after Croatia acceded to the EU in 2013, as can be seen in Figure 1. Indeed, emigrants from Croatia mostly opted for EU member states as destination countries, in particular Germany, which represented the destination for 31.1% of all emigrants from Croatia in 2022 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2023). While Croatian workers' mobility after EU accession has been small compared to the size of the population and labour force of receiving countries and the population of the EU, it was significant from Croatia's perspective.

Figure 1. Share of emigration to Germany compared to total emigration from Croatia.



Source: Croation Bureau of Statistics.

According to Jurić (2017), the most numerous emigrants in 2016 were Croatian citizens between the ages of 20 and 40. In the total contingent of emigrants from Croatia to Germany, there is also a large number of minor children (below 18 years of age), which suggests that entire families are emigrating. The share of young, reproductive- and working-age people (in some instances, young families) that leave the country, sometimes permanently, represents a significant demographic and economic loss for the country. Research by Peračković and Rihtar (2016) showed that, in 2014, almost a third (31%) of younger people (up to 40 years old) often thought about leaving or planned it more seriously.

Župarić-Iljić (2016) demonstrates that the deepening of migration flows results from the interconnection of several push factors in migrants' home countries and several pull factors in the destination countries. The most significant economic parameters that have motivated individuals to emigrate include low economic growth, high unemployment rates, a decreasing standard of living, difficulties in finding a job that matches individuals' education levels, poor wages, and the perception of corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency. On the other hand, Croatian citizens have been lured by the availability of vacancies, higher wages and a more favourable business climate in wealthier countries (Župarić-Iljić 2016).

Impact of emigration in Croatia

In contrast to earlier emigration waves, recent emigration trends from Croatia are likely to have far-reaching demographic, economic and social consequences (Jurić 2017). Indeed, it is already visible that as a result of the decreased working-age population and border demographic ageing trends, the country's pension, health and welfare systems are under pressure due to tax revenue losses (Župarić-Iljić 2016). The disturbance of the labour market caused by emigration may include the destabilisation of the labour force, a decrease in the number and share of the working-age population, a decrease in the employment rate, and an accompanying decrease in productivity and GDP growth (Županić-Iljić 2016). There is also an impact on Croatia's educational structure and education system (ibid.). In contrast to previous emigration waves, most emigrants are now young people with higher education. In Croatian society, their departure is a double loss: the demographic potential of the population decreases; and there is a loss of those demographic and professional groups that should be most invested in the development of the Croatian state and society (Čipin, 2014). Therefore, Croatia, its economy already vulnerable enough that a large amount of its population emigrates for better chances, is left in a repetitive cycle of vulnerability resulting from emigration.

In concrete terms, the reliance on labour migration can be seen in German construction sites, which depend heavily on foreign construction workers; meanwhile, in the same sector, the Croatian construction industry is experiencing considerable shortages of labour (Ceric and Ivic 2020) as a result of these migratory movements. In turn, the Croatian construction industry relies on labour migrants from outside of the EU to address these shortages (ibid.). For instance, Zlatko Sirovec, CEO of Tehnika and president of the Association of Construction Industry of the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, disclosed his plan to hire workers "from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia" in construction sites and said that *"just like Germany was not built by Germans, Croatia will not be built by Croats, but by the workers we can find"* ("Foreign Physicians…" 2017). Croatia, after losing its essential labour force to its wealthier neighbour (Spaic-Kovacic 2023), unfortunately repeats the mistakes that wealthier member states have made: it depends on more vulnerable people and nations by finding a relative upper hand in the unjust global chain of inequality. Breaking the chain will require the problematisation of discourses around this type of labour migration, as explained in the next section.

A similar situation is taking place in the care sector. Jurić (2021) identifies Croatia as a key origin country of healthcare workers in Germany. As a result, every fourth nurse emigrated from Croatia to Germany between 2011 and 2021, which resulted in Croatia having a shortage of 12,000 nurses ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic (ibid.). In addition,

"3180 nurses and technicians went abroad directly from the system from 2013 to 2018 alone, most often to Germany" (Jurić 2021,3); the number is likely to be underestimated due to those who left immediately after finishing their education, who are not accounted for in the statistics (ibid.). Croatia is currently experiencing a critical shortage in the healthcare workforce; Jurić warns that "despite these warnings and although these trends are against the proclaimed values of the European Union and cohesion policy itself, no concrete measures have been taken at the EU level" (Jurić 2021, 4). Since then, the Croatian government has been recruiting foreign workers to the healthcare industry, laying out a plan to hire foreign physicians and doctors ("Foriegn Physicians…" 2017).

Croatian labour migrants in Germany – win-win?

Croatian labour migrants contribute significantly to the German economy and society. This is openly recognised by the German government. For instance, when announcing the relaxation of restrictions to be applied to Croatian migrants – in a celebratory manner – the German government frames the Croatian contribution to the German labour market as a migration that "fill[s] gaps" in the sectors in which the German economy is experiencing that "demand for workers is increasingly outstripping supply", such as those in manufacturing and construction, the health service, and social services (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, 2015). Croatian migration is thus presented as something necessary and beneficial for Germany.

The German government praises Croat workers as a group that is "well integrated" (ibid.), likely due to the assumption that EU citizens would have no difficulty in blending in, as their successful integration is taken for granted, regardless of reality. The government also frames labour migration as a mutually positive social phenomenon for both destination and origin countries by stating that such emigration can help the Croatian economy and how Croatian companies can exercise increased flexibility when posting their employees to Germany (Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, 2015). This stance is summarised in quite a straightforward manner: "Croats who work abroad are a boon for the Croatian economy too" because "the remittances they send home improve the income of their families at home, and thus strengthen the domestic market" (Ibid.).

Jurić (2017) argues that the German state believes Croats are ideal workers for the needs of the German economy because their educational level and cultural proximity means they can quickly adapt to German society and the labour market even before moving. The integration of Croats into German society is perceived as "less costly" than immigrants from "other" cultural circles, such as Arab countries, since the imagined cultural proximity between Croatian migrants and Germans is believed to guarantee a smoother integration of Croatian migrants to German society than that of Arab migrants (ibid.). The German state paints the picture of warmly welcoming Croatian workers, while such a welcome is only possible through the state's comparative rankings of "Others" in terms of their preconceived notions of "cultural proximity". Specifically, the German state creates the impression of being welcoming to (some) migrants while, in fact, privileging particular demographic groups over others by describing them as "less costly". This exposes the German state's perception of migrants in purely economic terms and not as human beings.

Interestingly, the Croatian government's discourse on labour emigration does not point towards the negative impacts this has on the country. For example, during the meeting of EU ministers on employment and social policy in December 2019, Croatian Minister of Labor and the Pension System Josip Aladrović stressed the need to prioritise a social rights agenda in regard to employment and industrial relations (Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2019). In a later statement, he shared:

"I am pleased to say that our EPSCO priorities have well identified key issues in the area of labour and social policy, namely skills development, the impact of demographic

trends and the need to strengthen legal and social protection of all employees and all EU citizens."

(Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2020)

However, the labour market structure and emigration dynamics, as well as their negative impact on demographic trends have not been brought up by the minister (Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2019). A similar approach can be detected in the minister's January 2020 meeting with the Secretary-General of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), where Mr. Aladrović stressed the importance of collective bargaining in the social rights agenda and the necessity to keep up with wage increases. However, according to the press release, the significant outflows of Croatian workers abroad was not touched upon during the meeting (Ministry of Labor, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, 2020). This suggests that origin countries may consider it to be more in their interest to maintain a good relationship with their Western EU counterparts than to point out the harms caused by the excessive labour migration flows on their economies and societies.

These examples demonstrate that there is a pattern of structural inequality that both originates from and results in emigration and labour drains within the EU. Far from a win-win scenario, labour migration can entrench a pattern of semi-peripheral countries losing significant parts of their workforce to core countries and, in turn, encourage them to rely on labour migration from further afield to plug the labour market gaps, extending the chain of dependencies. However, this pattern is presented only in a positive light by EU institutions. For example, EURES argues that "cross-border labour mobility in some adjacent countries contributes to an alleviation of labour market imbalances", emphasising the benefit of the labour migration flow within the EU (European Labour Authority, 2022). Furthermore, the ELA only promotes such migration flows by offering up individual "success" stories of a Croatian labour migrant as an example of the positive outcomes of internal labour migration within the EU (e.g., European Labour Authority, 2018), which comes with various narratives that are nothing but positive. For instance, in its promotional material, the ELA frames the story of a Croatian migrant worker who found a vocational training opportunity in Germany via the EURES job scheme exclusively in positive terms (European Labour Authority, 2018). The website presents this as the EURES job scheme "saving" a man who had a difficult past in his home country of Croatia, where he had to juggle "between various different jobs – as a plumber, a salesman, a promoter, and even leading workshops at an aquarium", by giving him "a good chance for the future" (ibid.). While the article's title mentions that the man found his "career" in engineering in Germany, he had, in fact, only started his "long-term training" in a German company at the time of writing (ibid.). However, the ELA frames this in an exclusively positive manner, writing that he "is set on a path of long-term training that will significantly improve his future job prospects" (ibid.). The article emphasises how the man is grateful to the new scheme, quoting how he is "very happy" about receiving long-term training in Germany and how it changed his unfortunate situation (ibid.). Such framing can give the impression that promoting such labour migration is the best solution to address the situation of people living in less wealthy member states. At the same time, this arrangement is presented as a win-win situation for all parties involved, such as by mentioning Germany's low unemployment rate and low interest in vocational careers among native youth. This leaves little room for debate about whether such promotion of migration policies may prove to be problematic at social or economic levels in origin countries and how it may ultimately affect those who emigrate.

Indeed, on a micro-level, people can experience significant benefits through job mobility to wealthier EU member states. In this policy brief, we are not arguing in a normative connotation that people should stay in their home country, nor arguing that migration is a bad thing. Being able to move across the border to enhance one's life is a possibility that should be open to everyone. Instead, we attempt to expose the normalisation of *exclusively positive* framing of discourses regarding the *repeated* migration patterns within the EU member states,

where it is taken for granted that there is nothing problematic about people having to move to a wealthier member state for a better life. If it is almost a must for individuals to relocate to a new country for a better life, how can we expect all EU member states to have equal opportunities in socio-economic development and to have equally sustainable living standards across the EU? Or, what about those who cannot take the chance to move across the border for "a better life"? Furthermore, with the rosy depiction of such migration by the destination country and the ELA that migration is simply a good chance for which semi-peripheral member states should be grateful to the core member states, where is the room for discussion of the struggles that Croatian labourers are dealing with in the German labour market?

And most importantly, where is the room to address the problematic stagnancy of certain nations and their people maintaining their wealth, while certain nations and their people continue to suffer from state-level precarity and vulnerability? Are we hiding behind the band-aid called migration, too afraid to address its core cause? An individual relocating to the wealthier, Western member states should not be the only and primary solution to issues that workers deal with within their semi-peripheral countries' weaker economies and labour conditions. Our analysis aims to counter such short-term, individual-based perspectives. We believe that, to achieve cohesion and equitable development in the EU and between it and its future member states, EU and member-state policymakers cannot remain blind to the challenges of large-scale emigration from the semi-periphery to the core.

5. CONCLUSION

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The data presented in the case study section of this policy brief shows the impact that Croatia's accession to the EU has had on its emigration rates, which both increased and changed in nature, likely becoming more permanent, as well as for migration to include younger, more highly educated workers and entire families. This, aside from having negative implications for the country's demographics, limits its ability to provide essential services, such as education, healthcare and other social programmes, due to the shrinking tax base. Despite Croatia's inclusion in the EU in 2013, the country did not "move up" in the global economic hierarchy into the group of core countries, rather maintaining its place within the semi-periphery, as an exporter of resources – in this case, the migrant labour workforce.

As we have seen, rising emigration has created labour shortages in Croatia, which, in turn, need to be compensated for by waves of immigration into the country. While this does not necessarily prove the deepening of socio-economic inequalities between the origin and destination countries as the accession processes take place, such cycles bolster the negative effects they have on origin countries, perpetuating the structural inequalities between semi-peripheral and core countries.

Such a dynamic – whereby, despite their membership of the EU, some countries remain in a weaker semi-peripheral position, as suppliers of a cheap labour force to wealthier core countries – is, in the long term, detrimental not only to the origin countries but also to the overall cohesion of the EU, its relationships with its neighbourhood and enlargement prospects. The new-found political momentum for enlargement from within the EU, in parallel with the desire of candidate countries to become members of the bloc, may lead to potential negative consequences being swept under the carpet rather than tackled head-on and prevented – this policy brief aimed to highlight the dangers of such an approach. It is therefore important to highlight that the EU's merit-based approach to enlargement might be attractive to EU member states, but one that is based on fairness and reciprocity could, in turn, prevent many of the negative consequences for candidate countries and preserve the attractiveness of EU membership to these countries.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

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To ensure that future EU enlargement rounds do not result in the challenges described in this policy brief, notably excessive emigration deepening socio-economic inequalities between (future) EU states, we recommend actions to be taken at the levels of origin countries, destination countries and the EU.

At the EU policy level, the EU should:

- Take further steps to ensure a set of minimum social rights available to all workers across the EU. To this end, ensure the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, including the transformation of its recommendations into binding regulations, as per the example set by the Minimum Wage Directive.

- Ensure that enlargement policy and accession negotiations abide by the priorities established in the European Pillar of Social Rights, prioritising the protection of social and labour rights over demands to deregulate markets.

  - Instruments, such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance III, must prepare accession countries to implement measures that build stronger and more effective welfare systems.

  - EU Association Agreements and accession negotiations that relate to freedom of movement should go beyond security and institutions strengthening by taking a holistic approach towards the needs of ordinary citizens and following a "human-centred" approach, ideally through a dedicated chapter.

- Gather relevant data on the impacts of emigration on poorer member and candidate states and promote regular discussions involving policymakers and experts from all relevant fields (e.g., migration, employment, social affairs, education) within EU institutions and between member states on the topic of labour migration, labour market drains and emigration.

At the origin country level, the EU should:

- Ensure greater focus and provide increased EU funding for developing strong and resilient labour markets. To this end, national-level labour market reforms that benefit local workers should be promoted. Accession countries' social policies should be strengthened before opening the EU labour market to workers from these countries.

- Promote policies which ensure that critical sectors (e.g., healthcare, education) are strengthened and not susceptible to brain drain towards the EU. This may take the shape of promoting and funding the establishment of accessible and quality services and infrastructure, such as early childhood education and care, education and training, healthcare and long-term care, affordable housing and cultural services, transport, energy supply, and access to the internet.

- Expand programmes such as the Youth Guarantee in the Western Balkans to all candidate and potential candidate countries, to empower younger generations through employment and other opportunities in their countries, while protecting the principle of freedom of movement.

In destination countries, the EU should recommend that:

- State governments ensure sufficient funding to and availability of key public sectors in the EU that currently employ higher than average

rates of migrant workers (childcare, healthcare, long-term care) to avoid individuals resorting to purchasing migrant labour on the grey/black market.

- There are regular and controlled migration pathways available, which promote professional development and circular migration patterns, especially within key sectors with a high demand for workers (IT, tourism, hospitality, childcare, healthcare, long-term care, etc) to avoid and mitigate labour shortages in origin countries.

- Migrant and mobile workers are integrated into host labour markets and societies to empower them to secure decent working conditions, through unionisation, language courses and other initiatives to raise awareness of their rights.

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ENDNOTES

1 We define the secondary labour market as one that is characterised by low skills and poor working conditions, unattractive to local workers, and often filled by temporary labour migrants with lower reservation wages given their different frame of reference (Piore 1979).

2 As Chirot and Hall (1982: 85) put it, "societies [in the semi-periphery] stand between the core and periphery in terms of economic power"; when looking to the EU and its periphery and semi-periphery, we see that the EU's geographical centre is also where the strong economic centre lies, as this study shows.

3 Under the neoliberal capitalist regime, the authors of the study consider the definition of Kotz (2015) as "dismantling remains of the regulationist welfare state. Deregulation of businesses, privatisation of public activities and assets, elimination of social welfare programs, reduction of taxes on business. In the international sphere, neoliberalism calls for free movement of goods, services, capital and money across national boundaries".

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